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BANAL NATIONALISM AND SOAP OPERA

by

SANTANU CHAKRABARTI

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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by SANTANU CHAKRABARTI

Dissertation Director:
Dr. Deepa Kumar

As Michael Billig (1995) argues, nationalism does not die with the establishment of relatively stable nation states- it changes from a ‘hot’ to a ‘banal’ form. In this multidisciplinary and multiperspectival study, I study nationalism (specifically Hindu nationalism or *Hindutva*) in its banal form within popular culture, specifically prime time television soap operas colloquially known as the K-serials. Through a conjunctural analysis, I show how banal Hindu nationalism played out on the K-serials in multiple ways. That is, these serials had an important role in the ongoing project of remaking of the Indian nation under the ideology of *Hindutva*, creating not just a Hindu nation but a Brahminical nation.

This dissertation makes a number of contributions to different bodies of research. One, it examines how the changes in the political economy impact the way audiences are rounded up and how that influences the content of the soaps. I show how the structural limitations of the audience measurement system and the changing focus on the ‘bottom of the pyramid’ consumer influenced the arrival of *Hindutva* inflected content on television. (I show also, in passing,

how the currency of television, TRPs, can themselves be gendered).

Two, I show how the debate over secularism and religious nationalism in the political sphere get reflected in the cultural sphere, especially in texts that less obviously have anything to do with national politics.

Three, I show how the agency and empowerment that other scholars have read into these soaps is derived largely from the discourses of the women's wing of Hindu nationalism, and is therefore highly problematic, ahistorical, and limiting.

Four, I show how the very structure of soaps, especially its 'open' ness, periodicity and everydayness can play a significant role in spreading banal nationalism.

Five, I show how the operations of banal Hindutva disrupt the relationship between folk and Sanskrit practices, contributing to the homogenizing of Hinduism.

And finally, I have shown how by going beyond the texts themselves, we find a bridge between the studies of soaps that look at the micropolitics of gender and those that look at macropolitics of national identity.

Dedication

To the memory of my father

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In July 2000, India's TV environment underwent the most decisive transformation since the introduction of private television in 1991. One multinational—Rupert Murdoch's NewsCorp, operating in India under the name Star—emerged as an overwhelmingly dominant player in the media marketplace, largely through the sudden and astonishing success of its Hindi entertainment channel Star Plus. This success was initiated by what I call its 'Hindi turn'—the move from a mixture of English language and Hindi programming into exclusively Hindi language programming. Star's masterstroke was in appointing Bollywood superstar Amitabh Bachchan, then in the grip of severely declining fortunes, as the host of the Hindi language version of *Who Wants to be a Millionaire*, titled *Kaun Banega Crorepati*¹ (KBC). The success of the show turned around the fortunes of both Bachchan and Star, which till that time had been struggling to compete seriously against the home-grown Zee Network. But while this success was initiated by KBC, it was still just one show. Star's success was actually built on and sustained by a number of prime time soap operas, all of which were produced by one production house Balaji Telefilms, and which became known in popular parlance as the K-series (because their names all started with the letter K) or *saas-bahu* series (because they concerned themselves with family politics,

¹ A crore is the Hindi term for 10 million. A crorepati therefore is technically a ten-millionaire. A popular anecdote in the offices of Star, where I worked for a number of years, has it that it was Murdoch himself who suggested that it be a 'Crorepati', as that sounded much grander than the exact Hindi term for a million.

especially that between the mother-in-law, or *saas*, and daughter-in-law, or *bahu*). These serials were extremely popular with the viewing audience, especially the first two that were launched *Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi* ('Because the Mother in Law Was Once a Daughter in Law Too', Balaji Telefilms, 2000-2008, henceforth *Kyunki*) and *Kahaani Ghar Ghar Ki* ('The Tale of Every Home', Balaji Telefilms, 2000-2008, henceforth *Kahaani*). To say these serials were popular is an understatement. No other show on Indian television has come close to matching the combination of huge reach and sustained viewership that these shows managed, before or since. This in itself would make these serials important objects of study. But these serials brought to the fore a very different kind of television content, featuring opulent settings and wealthy joint families, which marked an obviously radical departure from the television content of the first few years of private television, which mostly featured 'middle class' settings and nuclear families. Even more significantly, these shows emerged at a time when the political power of Hindu nationalism had just reached its peak, with the Hindu nationalist party BJP governing at the center for the first time in India's political history.

Hindu Nationalism or *Hindutva*

The rise of Hindu nationalism, as expressed in the political ideology of *Hindutva* (loosely, Hindu-ness), has been the most significant political development of the last three decades in India. Starting off as Hindu revivalism in the late 19th century, it was ascendant throughout the first half of the 20th century, went into

relative decline for about three decades after that; and finally made a triumphant and spectacular return to the political scene in the early 1980s, capturing the seat of government at the national level in the late 1990s. The objective of Hindu nationalism was nothing less than redefining the very 'idea of India' (*pace* Khilnani, 1999). This idea of India as a secular nation state, driven towards modernity by a technocratic elite developing a centrally planned economy, was born largely out of the vision of the leaders of independent India India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and the chief architect of its constitution BR Ambedkar. This idea of India as a secular state was anathema to Hindu nationalists who primarily conceived of India as a Hindu nation, and believed that the unifying feature of India was the Hindu religion practised by a majority of Indians. In other words, if a nation is an 'imagined community' as Benedict Anderson (2006) would have it, then Hindu nationalists were asking Indians to imagine themselves first and foremost as a community of Hindus. For Hindu nationalists, the establishment of a Hindu *rashtra* (nation), bound together by a Hindu culture, preceded and was more important than the establishment of a Hindu *rajya* (state), which would be a natural consequence of the successful establishment of the Hindu *rashtra*. Central to the ideology of Hindutva was the stigmatization and alienation of minorities, particularly Muslims, who were depicted as the 'threatening Other,' responsible for almost all that ailed India.

The fount organization of 20th century Hindu nationalism was the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS, The National Volunteer

Organization) set up in 1925. The RSS then gave birth to a series of other Hindu nationalist organizations, each with a specific target audience and specific activities, including eventually the political arm of Hindu nationalism, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP, Indian People's Party), founded initially as the Jana Sangh (People's Organization) and under the control of the RSS since 1954. However Hindu nationalists (and the BJP) had to wait till the early 1990s to taste political power, either at the state or federal level. With the rise of the BJP, for the first time on the Indian political scene there was a party apart from the centrist Congress (the party of Nehru and Gandhi and the Indian freedom struggle) that could justifiably claim to be a *national* party.

This rise to political power of Hindu nationalism in the 1990s was paralleled by the introduction of economic liberalization by the Congress government, occasioned by a balance of payments crisis. Though this was not the first move away from a state capitalist model, this was the moment when India's movement away from a state capitalist to a free market model of the economy and then towards a neoliberal model became irreversible. It was also in the early 1990s, accompanying economic liberalization that India's television explosion took place.

About neoliberalism. I will be using the term 'neoliberal' in many places in this dissertation. Before proceeding any further, I want to make a few clarificatory comments about the way I use the term. The term does not really have a commonly agreed definition. Here I

will be using it to refer to a set of practices that aim to reduce significantly (if not eliminate) the role of the state and regulation of industry under the assumption that any such intervention reduces the efficiency of the marketplace and a related move away from a Keynesian macroeconomics to monetarism, usually of the kind propounded by economists of the Chicago School, the most famous of whom is Milton Friedman. What is important here is the phrase “set of practices.” As David Harvey (2005), argues, neoliberalism is not as much a “complete” political ideology as a “theory of political economic practices” (p.2). As he suggests:

Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices...But beyond these tasks the state should not venture. State interventions in markets (once created) must be kept to a bare minimum because, according to the theory, the state cannot possibly possess enough information to second-guess market signals (prices) and because powerful interest groups will inevitably distort and bias state interventions (particularly in democracies) for their own benefit (p.2).

As Kumar (2008) says, though, “this attack on government interference, however, is more rhetorical than real, since governments all over the world have played an active part in promoting neoliberal policies” (p.18). Because neoliberalism is in fact a set of practices or policies, it is a broad church accommodating within it many different types of adherents from classical liberals to Randian libertarians and Chilean dictators. In India, too, advocacy of neoliberal practices has

come both from classical liberal economists like Jagdish Bhagwati as well as the libertarian S.S. Anklesaria Iyer, consulting editor of *The Economic Times*, and author of the popular weekly economics column ‘Swaminomics.’ Importantly, the proponents of neoliberal practices have emerged from the left-leaning and centrist Congress party as well as the right-wing Hindu nationalist BJP. Yet, the trajectory of neoliberalism in India has not been as smooth as its adherents would have wanted; nor has it been as overwhelmingly dominant as its opponents sometimes claim. Voices against neoliberal trajectories have been raised both within the BJP and the Congress; not to mention the organized political left. In general, though, the trajectory of neoliberalism in India has been towards becoming ‘common sense’ (Gramsci, 1971)—a historically specific set of ideas and beliefs which are taken to be universal.

With the introduction of liberalization, the television environment was transformed from one in which there was a single staid and sometimes propagandistic state run channel into a vibrant, dynamic, and often confusing multi channel environment. The lure of the Indian market brought a number of media conglomerates into the country and gave birth to a couple of home grown ones. For about a decade or so, these conglomerates, most important among whom were Sony, Newscorp/Star, and the homegrown Zee, fought bitterly for market share till July 3, 2000 when the same day launches of KBC and *Kyunki* put Star firmly in the lead—one they would hold on to uninterrupted for the next seven years. But while *Kyunki* and *Kahaani*

were enormously popular with many audiences, they were equally unpopular with contemporaneous critics and commentators who decried their 'regressive' nature in dealing exclusively with family politics. Later critics, writing more recently, however have argued that these serials were in fact exemplary in showcasing the strength and agency of women.

In this dissertation I argue that both of these viewpoints are incomplete because they miss a key aspect of the K-serials: their emergence, success, and construction are critically influenced by Hindu nationalism, especially in the form that it was starting to take by the mid 1990s. By the mid 1990s, as I will show, Hindu nationalism had moved from a movement of spectacle and violence to a movement of everyday banality. It was this banal form of Hindu nationalism, I argue, that prominently influenced the K-serials, and these serials are chronologically one of the first cultural sites in which this influence is so prominently seen. The strength and agency of women which later critics praise these serials for are rooted in Hindu nationalist constructions of women, gender, and family—a factor that cannot be separated from the particular constructions of femininity we see on these serials. Furthermore, even those who reject these shows as 'regressive' are not always sensitive to the ways in which the language and doctrine of Hindu nationalism have shaped these serials. Till date, though, these serials have largely been examined as sites of gender politics, as many other domestic dramas around the world have been. But as I will show there is a lot more at work in and

around these cultural products which are closely linked with the larger political and economic contexts in which they emerge. I argue that an examination of these serials as sites of Hindu nationalism is long overdue, especially given their influence as cultural products.

Roger Silverstone (2003), in a preface to a recent edition of Raymond Williams's seminal *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*, writes, "Television emerged...as a technologically synthetic response to a set of newly emergent and radical social, political and economic needs" (p.viii). I argue similarly that the K-serials were a response to a set of social, political, and economic needs. As I will show, these needs were mostly articulated at the intersection of Hindu nationalism with free market economics, especially as applied to the functioning of advertising supported private television in a competitive free market environment; and in prime time television soap opera was found the marriage of form and content that enabled these needs to be addressed.

The Reach and Success of the K-Serials

As I have described above, the K-serials were enormously successful in viewership terms; this holds true even when we compare this to the viewership of near universally watched television shows of the monopoly Doordarshan era. For example, even though *Hum Log* (India's first ever televised serial) and the mythological epic *Ramayan* (generally considered the most widely watched Indian television show of all time) attracted at times as much as 80 or 90% of the television viewing audiences, each of these shows each aired for just about a

year or so. Significantly, they also aired just once a week. In addition of course, the total pool of television viewers was also smaller in the early-mid 1980s than it was in the early-mid 1990s. *Kyunki* and *Kahaani*, on the other hand, ran without a break for eight continuous years (from 2000 to 2008,) and were at the top of the television viewing charts for most of those years, day in day out, week in week out. And these shows aired four days a week to start with, shifting to a five days a week schedule from mid 2005. In other words, no television show has ever had a greater cumulative reach (that is, a combination of number of viewers reached plus the weekly frequency with which they were reached).²

These viewership figures were so strong that Star Plus remained an unchallenged leader in the television market in this period, delivering every week at least forty-five of the top fifty shows and sometimes all fifty out of the top fifty shows (Krishna, 2004). Plus's leadership in the period between 2000 and 2007 (what I call the 'middle satellite era') was near absolute with an overwhelmingly large share of the viewership in the Hindi television space, sometimes going up to even around 76% compared with 12% each for its two nearest competitors Zee and Sony (Chougule, 2005). A year later, Star Plus was showing "50 on 50 of the top shows in its space week after week

² All viewership data has been compiled using software from the official television ratings agency in India, TAM. This is done by running the TAM software on a computer, inputting the parameters according to which ratings reports are to be generated. I will explain in detail how the ratings system works, as understanding it is crucial to my argument, but a sense of how the ratings *software* is used to generate ratings is available at <http://www.tamindia.com/tamindia/Presentations/xpressall.pdf>.

with almost boring regularity,” as the industry publication *Indiantelevision.com* commented in 2003.

This dominant position in viewership naturally translated into business success. Star Plus also commanded by far the highest advertising rates among all channels in the industry including Doordarshan, even though the latter had greater reach than any of the private satellite channels. Naturally, the other players commissioned a slew of imitative shows as they tried desperately to replicate Plus’s success formula in rising from distant laggard to dominant no.1. Even more than the impressive (and sustained) viewership numbers was the significant shift that occurred within the industry. The locus of interest for advertisers, viewers and entertainment journalists shifted quite decisively to Star Plus, even if C&S (i.e. cable & satellite television) as a whole continued to trail Doordarshan in terms of reach.

The shift in industry dynamics happened because media planners and advertisers had some evidence of the success of the shows to go with the viewership figures that were being delivered by the TAM ratings system. In fact there is significant anecdotal evidence to suggest that these shows became cultural phenomena. As Munshi (2010) describes:

Tulsi of *Kyunki* and Parvati of *Kahaani* became the ideal wives and bahu. They, along with the negative women characters, set fashion trends in saris, blouses and jewellery. Even the men got their share of fan following. When Mihir, Tulsi’s husband in *Kyunki*, was killed, women took to the streets in protest (p.10).

Reports around the significant cultural impact of *Kyunki* were a dime a dozen. For example, in a report in the Indian daily *Indian Express*, a representative of a market research agency argued that Tulsi and Parvati had touched millions because they were “seen as achievable role models...The feeling is that here are women like me (sic)” (Sumita Hattangadi, quoted in Shah, 2003). In the same report there was a description of delayed starts to the celebrations around the most significant of Gujarati religio-cultural festivals in order to accommodate the prime time viewing of these shows. Another report about the end of *Kyunki* noted that men were expressing in matrimonial ads a desire for prospective brides to be like Tulsi (Biswas, 2008). And if imitation is indeed the greatest form of flattery, the K-serials were flattered no end as every rival channel commissioned shows in the image of these ones, without however managing to make any dent in the viewership figures of the originals (Chougule, 2002). Interviews with Ekta Kapoor, the creator and producer of these shows, were to be found across the media; and her public profile was raised almost as much as that of Smriti Irani (who played Tulsi in *Kyunki*). She became known to most of India’s consumers of popular culture by her first name as Ekta—hitherto an achievement restricted largely to the likes of actors, cricketers, and the occasional politician. In sum, then, the shows were extremely successful. In fact, in terms of a combination of cumulative number of viewers reached across the life of the shows and the number of years

these shows ran for, they were certainly the most successful shows in the history of Indian television.

In addition, though, it is safe to say that whatever the impact of these two shows taken together, it was greater than the sum of their individual impacts. Not only do both these shows uphold familial relationships as the normative ideal and are set in very similar milieus, they share the same DNA. In fact, the name that is most significant during the opening credits sequence is not that of the director or even screenwriter but the first credit that comes on screen (under the header 'Concept'): Ekta Kapoor. Daughter of 1970s and 1980s Bollywood film star Jeetendra, Ekta Kapoor was only 25 when *Kyunki* and *Kahaani* made their debuts. And while the auteur theory of film has rarely been applied to Bollywood film, leave alone Indian television, there is good reason to acknowledge Ekta Kapoor as the auteur behind the K-serials. As a contemporary Reuters report detailed, it was Ekta (officially the creative director of her production company Balaji Telefilms) who herself wrote the plot outlines for the shows, working with a loose team of 25 odd freelance writers. With the assistance of associate creative directors, Ekta would even supervise the minutiae of editing for around 25 episodes before she turned a new show over to an individual producer (Madhavan, 2001). As an employee of Balaji Telefilms averred, "not a single episode goes on air without Ekta Kapoor's permission, unless Ekta herself might have handed over charge of production to a senior deputy creative head" (Quoted in Munshi, 2010, p.50). Given her tight control over

nearly every aspect of her shows, perhaps the best way to understand her role would be to consider her as the ‘showrunner’— the person who conceives a show, and brings it to fruition, takes hiring and firing decisions with respect to the cast and crew; and guides the overall trajectory of the show. However, in the case of Kapoor, she was also the producer of the shows, giving her almost unheard of power as a television personality. With the success of these shows, Kapoor became known as the ‘Queen of Soaps’ (Munshi,2010).

But it is not so much Ekta Kapoor and her position in the hierarchy of the television industry that interests us, but the fact that this common parentage of the two shows *Kyunki* and *Kahaani* enables us to study them as almost an unified text, crafted out of the same ideological underpinnings. In fact, Ekta Kapoor and Star Plus went out of their way to emphasize the fact that these two shows operated in the same universe. At key moments in the narrative arcs of one of these show, there would be references to the characters of the other show. Sometimes, there were also so-called ‘crossover’ episodes in which the characters from one show would appear in the other, sometimes as *deus ex machina*. In fact, the last ever episode of *Kyunki* has Parvati from *Kahaani* making an appearance at the very end to tie up a dangling thread of the narrative (Munshi, 2010).

It is not only their common parentage that enables us to read these two shows almost as one. *Kyunki* and *Kahaani* were consciously twinned right from the start. *Kahaani* was telecast (to start with) at 10pm Mondays to Thursdays, and *Kyunki* followed immediately

afterwards at 10:30pm. (*Kyunki* debuted on July 2000, while *Kahaani* followed in October of that year). With transitions between the shows often non-existent and no commercials intruding between the end of one show to the start of the next to retain viewers who might be lost in the advertising break, the two texts were indeed almost one. It makes sense, therefore, to study these two texts as component parts of a single unified text. When I use the phrase “K-serials” subsequently in this dissertation I will therefore be referring to this single unified text. Otherwise I will use the terms *Kyunki* and *Kahaani* to refer to the individual texts.

Critical Response: Then and Now

Critics who commented on the K-serials at the time of their launch too tended to see little difference between *Kahaani* and *Kyunki*, which together with the imitative shows on other channels, were all clubbed together as *saas-bahu* shows—and the term was almost always used pejoratively. For practically the entire lifespan of the soaps, the adjective used most often to describe them- especially in the English language media- was ‘regressive’. An editorial in the leading English language daily *The Times of India* opined that the K-serials were “some of the most conservative—some would say regressive—fare ever dished out on Indian television” (‘Bye Bye KBC’, 2002). Writing in the *Indian Express* newspaper, the journalist Amrita Shah (2003) expressed concern that “there is a real danger of regressive attitudes assuming new attractive forms, particularly in a modernizing society.” A report in the industry publication

indiantelevision.com carried a remark by a viewer who said, “I think Ekta portrays a lot of regressive characters” (Quoted in Lalwani, 2003c). Even when *Kyunki* was on its last legs, the newspaper *Daily News and Analysis (DNA)* quoted a ‘former fan’ as saying, “...The young audiences could not connect with these regressive plots” (Bangera, quoted in ‘*Kyunki...It had lost the plot*’, 2008).

In general, the critical attitude towards these soaps ranged from mild embarrassment and grudging admiration to patronizing putdowns and outright hostility. Shobhaa De, one of India’s most popular English language commentators, was scathing about the K-series in a 2003 interview contending that “the protagonists’ mindsets were 50 years behind the times [and] the ‘saas-bahu’ themes [were] extremely insulting and degrading” (Quoted in Kotian, 2003). Television critic Poonam Saxena was almost celebratory in 2009 about the dethroning of Star Plus from the no.1 position after eight long years. She was glad to see the end of the K-series which were typified by “over-madeup [*sic*]scheming vamps, the multiple marriages and extra-marital affairs, the scripting gimmicks (amnesia, time jumps etc), and the crude special effects (jarring zoom-ins and zoom-outs)” (Saxena, 2009).

Activists and academic researchers were equally critical of the K-series. A 2001 report by the non-governmental Centre for Advocacy and Research (CFAR) expressed concern at the negative portrayal of women on these shows. It criticized the increased depiction of emotional violence, especially the portrayal of women as aggressors

against other women, and the distortion of male-female relationships (Shivdasani,2001). In a 2003 paper in the respected journal *Economic and Political Weekly*, the Centre for Advocacy and Research argued that there was in these serials a ‘fairly rigid gender characterisation along the expected stereotypes of women and men’ (CFAR,2003).

Munshi’s (2010) work is the most significant defence of K-serials and similar soap operas against the charges of being ‘regressive’. As she explains:

My analysis of prime time soaps will show how the chief women protagonists are represented not only as strong, but indeed, at times superhuman in their strength and fortitude. What might fell others in real life only seems to give greater strength and fortitude in reel life as they overcome crisis after crisis. This comes in the face of sustained criticism, from many scholars and activists that the urban family soaps face for their so-called “regressive” portrayal of women. My argument is more to the contrary (p.26).

For Munshi, the K-serials are sites of contestation, instead, and should be commended for their portrayal of “strong women and real issues” (p.181). Another scholar, Ipsita Chanda has found evidence to indicate that women often feel empowered by these soaps (Chanda, 2007). Even the writer Shobhaa De has come around in recent years approvingly noting the fervent appeal that these serials had ‘everywhere,’ even in Pakistan (Munshi, 2010).

The K-serials: A Significant Departure

These shows marked a departure from the ones that had come before them in a number of different ways. But what was most critical was that they were set in the milieu of the urban joint or extended family. For our definitional purposes a joint family is one which is

marked by more than two couples—in the case of the K-series many more than two—linked by kinship, living together under one roof marked by commensality (i.e. a common kitchen), co-parcenary financial arrangements and regular common worship of family gods, with the living unit consisting of at least a common living room, a common entrance, a common dining hall and (if feasible, but not always) separate bedrooms for each married couple (Chakraborty, 2002). This depiction of the joint family was a departure from the shows both on Doordarshan in its monopoly days and the shows on private television from 1992 to 2000, what I call the ‘early satellite era’. In both the Doordarshan and the early satellite era, the settings of television shows was in nuclear or extended nuclear families (i.e. a nuclear family with one other relative staying with it). With the emergence of the K-series, urban joint families became the norm on television, not just on Star Plus, but on other channels that tried to imitate the success of Star Plus. But these were not just urban joint families, but extremely successful business owning joint families. Again, this was a marked departure from the shows of earlier eras, which explicitly focused on ‘middle class’ families. Almost every episode of these shows were set within the four walls of the family mansions, and they largely featured women in expensive saris, bedecked in expensive jewellery, plotting against each other, manipulating other women, and shedding copious amounts of tears. As Munshi (2010) notes these shows were marked strongly by the presence of Hindu rituals, iconography and representation. But after

receiving assurances from her respondents (the producers of these soaps) that 'there is no deliberate attempt...for this predominance of Hindu identities' (p.179), Munshi does not problematize this any further. Nor did any of the commentators in the popular media at that time, apart from one exception. Writing in the Bollywood trade publication *Screen*, A.L. Chougule (2003) observed:

[P]rime time television programming is a grand spectacle of religion, festivities and rituals... The House³ may get divided often over debates on secularism and communalism but the undivided families of soaps are always united in their religious beliefs, practices and rituals...[T]he question is, why are stories and characters overdosed with religion and religious practices than faith? But what's difficult to understand is this narrow interpretation of cultural symbolism. Does cultural symbolism comprise only religion or is religion just one sub-text of culture?

But Chougule's was the lone voice, and perhaps not widely noticed since he was writing about television in a film publication. I would argue that this lack of problematization of this aspect of the K-serials in the academic literature arises from two oversights. One, there is an insufficient appreciation that the representations of women on the K-serial were a significant departure from depictions of women in earlier eras of television, especially the early C&S era. The majority of families on Doordarshan shows, as on early C&S shows were urban, upper caste Hindu families, as were the ones on the K-serials. As a studio head tells Chougule (2003), *Hum Log* and *Buniyaad* were both stories of Hindu families and they were both hits. Similarly, Mankekar (1999) observes that women protagonists on Doordarshan were almost exclusively Hindu and coded as such. Clearly, the representation of

³ That is, the Parliament.

Hindu women as protagonists on television has been so normalized that the K-series are not recognized as a qualitative step further. But as I will illustrate later, while the characters on shows of the Doordarshan and early satellite era were indeed Hindu, their Hindu-ness was not central to the serials, nor were they inundated with religious overt religious symbolism like the K-series were.

But almost from the moment they were launched, the one adjective that was usually used in any discussion of the K-series was 'traditional.' Some commentators used this pejoratively while others (mainly from the industry) did so celebratorily. In a 2004 study of how the K-series had managed to retain their leadership position for four successive years, the television analyst Shailaja Bajpai was quoted as saying, "Ekta Kapoor managed to fuse in tradition with certain elements of modernity" even as other analysts suggested that their success was because of the "cultural message" of the show which "celebrated large joint families and traditional women propagating traditional values" (Krishna, 2004). A contemporary industry report has the then head of programming for Star Plus stating that *Kyunki* was "*Amanat* x 4, a family soap where the key character is portrayed as sticking to traditional values" (Katial, quoted in 'The birth of a Star', 2002). Similarly, another of a slew of media reports trying to make sense of the success of Star Plus argued that "the traditional joint family value system that *Kyunki* and *Kahaani* brought on satellite television where extra-marital affairs [and] bedroom and boardroom wars were the order of the day created an instant appeal

and connectivity with viewers” (Chougule, 2002). In yet another piece, a viewer is quoted as saying, “If the older generation is flexible, then they can strike a rapport with the young and infuse traditional values in a subtle way....India needs this desperately since today because our youngsters are not proud of our culture” (Khemlani, quoted in Lalwani, 2003c). Even a recent report critical of the shows in general states without further explication that “[d]espite their rich milieu, the soaps spoke of middle class values and the ethics of a traditional Indian woman” (Bhirani, 2010). Another critical report, written in the leading news magazine *Outlook* shortly after these shows launched, observed: “While DD [i.e. Doordarshan] has never had reservations about its *desi* [i.e. indigenous] roots, it’s the private upmarket channels that have turned to...the saas-figure in a bid to go traditional with a vengeance” (Joshi, 2001). Even academic papers that were extremely critical of the K-serials did so on the grounds that on these shows “the traditional values of the Indian family system ha[d] been renewed in a number of ways” (CFAR, 2003, p. 1686). But if tradition is invented, as Hobsbawm & Ranger (1983) would have it, where did these ‘traditional values’ come from, and whose ‘tradition’ is being uncritically talked about in these various reports?

The other oversight regarding the Hindu-ness on the K-serials, though, has also to do with the fact that observers have not detected expressions of the most virulent, vitriolic kind of Hindu nationalism that came to a boil in India in the early 1990s. There were certainly no overt discussions of Hindu nationalist philosophy, and not a single

explicit mention of the central ideal of Hindu nationalism (India is a *Hindu* country) in the debates and discussions around these shows. Yet, I argue, Hindutva was writ large across these shows. To grapple with this better, I use the idea of 'banal nationalism,' a concept introduced by Michael Billig (1995) to understand the nationalism of established nations, that is, nationalism when it 'cools.'

Banal Nationalism

Billig (1995) defines banal nationalism thus:

In the established nations, there is a continual 'flagging' , or reminding, of nationhood....However, this reminding is so familiar, so continual, that it is not consciously registered as reminding. The metonymic image of banal nationalism is not a flag which is being consciously waved with fervent passion; it is the flag hanging unnoticed in the public building (p.8-9).

He goes on further to argue that nations, once established, tend to remember and venerate their supposed antiquity, but they choose to forget their recent origins. Analysis of nationalism, he posits, involves a "sociological forgetting" which fits an "ideological pattern in which 'our' nationalism is forgotten...disappearing into the 'natural' environment of societies" (p.39). In this, academic analysts of nationalism are as culpable as popular commentators. For both, 'nationalism' is something that happens in other parts of the world, in other cultures, but not in 'our' nations; at most, there might be patriotism in 'our' nations, but nationalism is something found in 'their' nations. Yet, Billig argues, nationalism does not die with nations becoming established and relatively stable nations states forming; it changes, going from a 'hot' to a 'banal' form. That is, the

spectacular displays of nationalism usually associated with nationalist movements—the marches, the exhibitions, the gatherings, the vigorous flag wavings— change form to become more banal and everyday. As he says, “The symbols of nationhood, which might once have been consciously displayed, do not disappear from sight, but instead become absorbed into the environment of the established homeland. *There is, then, a movement from symbolic mindfulness to mindlessness*”(p.42, emphasis added). There is a process of routine formation which aids and abets banal nationalism to get entrenched: “Patterns of social life become habitual or routine, and in so doing embody the past. One might describe this process of routine-formation as *enhabitation*: thoughts, reactions and symbols become turned into routine habits and, thus, they become *enhabited*” (p. 43-44, emphasis in the original).

Society is now understood by default to be the nation-state. That is, when commentators speak about ‘our society’ they are assuming that both they and their readers know that they are talking about the nation state. The typical expression of banal nationalism is no longer the violently waving flag but the limp, unwaved flag that stares out from public and private buildings. But, as Billig argues, “the limp, unwaved flag and the embossed eagle [on American coinage] are not sufficient to keep these assumptions [about nationhood] in their place as habits of thought. Those assumptions have to be flagged discursively. And for that, banal words, jingling in the ears of the citizens, or passing before their eyes, are required” (p.94). In this

fashion, then, the “sacral...become(s) part of everyday life, instead of being confined to a special space of worship or particular day of celebration” (p.52). This is how nation-states are reproduced daily as nations.

Billig’s (1995) stated ambition in *Banal Nationalism* is to investigate how nation-states are daily reproduced as nations. Similarly, in this dissertation, I will investigate *how the Indian nation-state is daily reproduced as a nation*. I will show that the *nation that is reproduced in this fashion is not just a Hindu nation, but a Hindutva nation*. By this I mean that the nation as reproduced on the K-series is built on the foundations provided by the ideologies of right wing Hindu nationalism. I will investigate this reproduction of the nation *on one primary site-that of prime time television soap operas*. But while this may be just one site, for the reasons of reach and influence I have discussed above, it is a critical site. One of the key sites of Billig’s (1995) investigations was a day’s coverage of the news in daily newspapers. In the Indian context, soap operas become really important to study as the site of production of the nation, given the low literacy levels in India and greater consequent reach of audio visual media rather than print media.

As I will show in chapter 4, in the 1990s Hindu nationalism went through the process of a nationalism of spectacle transforming into a nationalism of banality. It was, I will argue in this dissertation, this banal nationalism that is evident in the construction and content of the K-series. But as Billig (1995) cautions, ‘banal’ does not mean

‘benign.’ In fact, I would argue, that it is the banal forms of nationalism that are almost more dangerous than the spectacular forms. Banal nationalism implies that nationalism becomes absorbed into the fabric of the everyday, and is not identifiable as nationalism anymore. It then becomes more difficult to prevent nationalism from metastasizing into cancerous forms which lead to oppression, violence, and even genocide.

In this particular case, though, I am exploring a slightly different situation from that investigated by Billig (1995). What he does not really touch upon is the process of how ‘hot’ nationalism cools or for that matter how one of two competing nationalisms might become dominant well after the establishment of the nation state. That is, the nature of the banal nationalism itself can change over time. In the Indian case, clearly, that is what has happened over the last three decades, with a movement from banal secular nationalism to Hindu nationalism in its banal form. Meera Nanda (2010) traces the explosion of Hindu religiosity in the second half of the 2000s and is the first to use the term ‘banal Hindu nationalism’ adapted from Billig. But she focuses mostly on the second half of the 2000s, and studies overt expressions of Hindu nationalism in the nexus between the state, temples, and corporations. She does not at all look at popular culture. In this dissertation, therefore, I intend to show that we can see expressions of banal Hindu nationalism as far back as the year 2000, and that too in the enormously popular cultural form of the K-series.

From Billig, we can draw the following conclusions about the conditions necessary for banal nationalism to operate. First, there has to be a movement from a spectacular form of nationalism to a 'cooler' form of nationalism. This happens of course when the nation-state that is the fruit of nationalist struggle is established; but it does also happen in the life of a nation-state when a different idea of the nation replaces the one prevalent at its birth, a process I will track in this dissertation. Secondly, banal nationalism operates through ubiquity and repetition. As Billig argues there is a 'continual flagging' or reminding of nationhood. Unless there is this repeated flagging, we cannot justifiably say that banal nationalism is in operation. To take Billig's example again, the United States is the paradigmatic example of rampant banal nationalism: notice the ubiquity of the American flag all across the American states. It is repetition and ubiquity that mark banal American nationalism. This ubiquity of the flag in the established homeland signals also the movement from "symbolic mindfulness to mindlessness." The flag can then become, at least in the American case, anything from underwears and bikinis to luggage and lunch boxes. I would argue, therefore, that the ubiquity of a nationalist symbol, especially in the non-original form of the symbol is a key marker of its banality. Newly established nation-states, for example India, are much more restrictive about the usage of their flags than older established nation-states, for example the United States. (India in fact has laws prohibiting the use of the national flag as anything other than a flag, and it was only recently that flags were

allowed to be flown on private, non-government buildings). Third, banal nationalism works itself out and contributes to creating a specific identity and subjectivity through the everyday. In other words, the very effectiveness of banal nationalism is in the fact that it is found also in spaces that are not recognized as political or nationalist by definition. Fourth, and related to the third, banal nationalism is about the habitual and the routine. Thoughts, reactions, and symbols are turned into routine habits, and soon are not regarded as being anything out of the ordinary. Finally, banal nationalism is about language and articulation. The ubiquity of symbols is necessary but is not in itself sufficient to perpetuate the sense of nationhood, keeping the assumptions underpinning that sense as unquestioned and habitual. Those assumptions have to be flagged discursively, using “banal words, jingling in the ears of the citizens, or passing before their eyes” (Billig, 1995, p.94). These words do not need to come from politicians or ideologues anymore. As Skey (2009) argues, “While the impassioned speeches and actions of political leaders and nationalist ideologues are important in articulating a wider sense of who ‘we’ are (or at least, should be)... it is through everyday language and practices that identities gain credence” (Skey, p.334).

As might be obvious by now, the choice of prime time soap operas as the key site of investigation of banal nationalism is not dictated by their reach alone. Daily soap operas fulfill many of the conditions I just argued were critical to the entrenchment of banal nationalism. Their structure ensures that they provide ubiquity and

repetition; they are everyday, habitual, and habit forming in nature, and form a perfect medium for the banal words of Hindu nationalism to jingle in the ears of the citizenry or pass before their eyes. Of course, this can happen only once the primary condition of spectacular nationalism ‘cooling’ has been met. And we still need to investigate why the banal form of Hindu nationalism, and not the banal form of secular nationalism, get flagged discursively on prime time soap operas. In this dissertation, we will probe all of these aspects.

I will use the terms ‘hot nationalism’ and ‘spectacular nationalism’ interchangeably, as I will the terms ‘banal Hindu nationalism’ and ‘banal Hindutva’, even though in practice ‘Hindu nationalism’ and ‘Hindutva’ are not completely coterminous. While mainstream Indian nationalism (read Congress nationalism) during the independence struggle had a strong strain of Hindu nationalist sentiment within it, ultimately it lost out in the post-Independence power tussle with the more secularist elements (Guha, 2007). Since then, Hindu nationalism has almost entirely been identified with the ideology of Hindutva peddled by the RSS and its affiliates, and in the arena of electoral politics, with the BJP. So, while at a point in time, it was fair to say that Hindu nationalism and Hindutva were not the same things, while discussing contemporary politics, there is no loss of understanding in using the two terms interchangeably.

In chapter 2, I examine the form and genre of televisual text under study—television serials and soap operas. I first survey a few

key studies of American, British, and Australian soaps (broadly, Western soaps), and then go on to look at some key studies of Latin American and Arab soaps. I show how there is a marked difference in the basic analytical focus as far as these studies of Western and other soaps are concerned: while the former are largely concerned with issues of gender and identity politics, in understanding the pleasures viewers drew from soaps, and in studying soaps as sites of contestation of patriarchal discourses (thereby reclaiming them from the ghetto of critical opprobrium), the studies of both Latin American and Arab soaps are very keenly concerned with questions of nationhood, the nation-state, national identity, and national politics.

I also discuss in some detail the questions around structure of and organization of narrative in serials and soap operas that have concerned scholars of television, before moving on to a survey of academic studies of Indian soaps and serials. Given that the literature on Indian soaps is rather thin, I survey studies of television serials in general. I find, somewhat counterintuitively, that a significant number of studies of Indian soaps deal more with the micropolitics of gender and identity (like Western studies of soaps) than with broader themes of nation and national politics (like Latin American and Arab studies). I find also that Indian studies of television are often as critical of secular nationalism as of the reactionary and divisive Hindu nationalism. This is a result of the strong influence of postcolonial theories which view *all* nationalisms (seen as a matter of representation) with disdain. This can sometimes leave the analyst

insufficiently sensitive to the real ideological differences between various nationalisms and their very real material consequences, such as the violence, discrimination, and exclusion that Muslims have had to face in independent India. This kind of analysis can sometimes also slide into culturalism, which dovetails neatly with the arguments of Hindu nationalists. I discuss how the state has gradually disappeared from Indian studies of television, and suggest that the state remains important for analysis of television to acknowledge. I end finally by exploring the gaps in the understanding the role played by the form and structure of soaps themselves in the work of industrial capitalism. I find also that one of the other gaps in studies of soaps on private television is that they have not in general explored questions of nationalism, either in the spectacular or banal forms.

In chapter 3, I argue that while the K-series seemed to mark a sudden departure from what had come before, it was in fact the culmination of a series of changes in the political economy in the three odd decades before that. Though a lot of the analysis of television of the early satellite period starts from 1991 when private television got its start in India, I argue here that the developments on private television are a continuation of the trajectory set in motion in 1984 when commercialization was first introduced into state television. Almost since that time, Indian television has been closely wrapped up with the imperatives of capital as well as national politics. The discussion here sets the base for the discussion in chapter 4, where I show how the 'Hindi turn' of Star Plus (from an English to a

fully Hindi language channel) became also a 'Hindu turn'. This happened when three significant shifts in the three different spheres of marketing, politics, and television, occurring in parallel, intersected in the year 2000. I identify and analyze these shifts before very briefly talking about the trajectory of Hindu nationalism as well. This adds to the discussion of political economy (of the nation and of television) and helps further contextualize the next section of this chapter: a comparative textual analysis of the representation of women in four popular television serials from four different eras. Since the objective is to discern the changes in the representation of women over the years rather than to do an exhaustive comparative analysis, the analysis is conducted on the opening credits of each of these serials. I show, therefore, that the changes in the political economy have always influenced the content of Indian television, though not always in predictable ways. I throw light also on one of the apparent paradoxes of representation: the more 'modern' representations of women seem to have come on shows that were chronologically earlier whereas intuitively one would have expected the reverse to occur.

This then provides the bridge for the next chapter in which I investigate in detail the ideology of Hindutva, tracing in further detail its historical trajectory. I show that at its core Hindutva is an ideology that is centrally concerned with culture. Hindu nationalism has always viewed the creation of the Hindu nation (*rashtra*) as a task of primary importance even preceding the creation of the Hindu state (*rajya*). As one Hindu nationalist tract has it the Hindu rashtra is

neither a religious or a political concept but a “cultural and emotional one eternally asserting itself.” Therefore, “rashtra is eternal and state is transitory” (Rao, quoted in Bacchetta, 2004c, p.19). In fact the RSS has continually claimed that it is primarily a cultural organization. As Mathur (2008) argues, commenting on this insistence by the RSS of the primacy of the cultural, “The strategies of the Hindu Right parallel, in ways that are deeply disturbing, anthropological understandings of culture” (p.32). This strategy of making culture the locus of control is obviously not unique to the Hindu right in India.

Raymond Williams describes the general process:

From a whole area of past and present, in a particular culture, certain meanings and practices are selected for emphasis and certain other meanings and practices are excluded. Yet, within a particular hegemony, and as one of its decisive processes, the selection is presented and usually successfully passed off as ‘the tradition’, ‘the significant past’ (1976, p.114-115).

I show how this focus on culture by Hindu nationalists is an attempt to bridge the deep divisions of caste, class, and gender present in India. I engage in depth with some of the key texts of Hindu nationalism, outlining the constituent elements in the Hindu nationalist imagining of India, paying particular attention to understandings of gender and the family. I show also how the gender politics of Hindutva are complex and complicated, managing to incorporate agency and power in the understanding of womanhood, yet building in exclusion and control. I investigate the dynamic and shifting nature of Hindu nationalism—the manifestations, in short, of Hindu nationalism shifting from a ‘hot’ or spectacular to a ‘banal’

condition. I will specifically look at two manifestations of this shift—one, the dialing down of spectacular mobilizations, partially connected to the political compulsions of the BJP and two, the way in which agency and power of women was first unleashed in spectacular fashion and then sought to be controlled. But before delving deep into the ideology of Hindu nationalism, I outline the basic difference in worldview between secular nationalism and Indian nationalism. I also quickly sketch the outlines of the very rich secularism debate, so as to highlight just what is at stake here. Finally I end up with some key markers or constitutive elements of banal Hindu nationalism, which provide the basic parameters for the textual analysis of the shows in chapters 6 and 7.

But before proceeding to the textual analysis, I take a long and detailed look at the political economy of television. In chapter 5, I try to unearth why the ‘Hindi turn’ of Star Plus became in effect a ‘Hindu turn.’ I start by looking at the terminological and ideological messiness around the term ‘middle class’, a term that has been central to television’s understanding of its audiences ever since the first days of commercial television. I outline how this lack of clarity was related to another emerging transition in the way capital understood consumers—the move to a ‘bottom of the pyramid’ approach, a way in which consumers at the very lowest rung of society (economically speaking) could also be invested with a consumer subjectivity. I move then to a sustained discussion and critique of the SEC system of segmenting consumers in India and

show how the structural limitations of this system contributed to particular strategies of targeting television audiences. I examine the reasons for the Hindi turn by Star Plus and argue that in-built characteristics of the SEC based audience measurement system together with the emergence of the 'bottom of the pyramid' approach were critical in pushing Star Plus in the direction it went in. I then show that the search for audiences by Star Plus and consumers by marketers intersected in the key markets of Hindu nationalism/ the BJP, illustrating also how critical the 'middle class' was for the BJP in this period. I argue finally that banal Hindu nationalism could get entrenched on the K-serials partly because neither capital nor television could imagine Muslims as being part of their core audiences.

In the sixth chapter, I conduct a textual analysis using content from 110 episodes of the two serials. I start by looking at the opening credits of the two shows, which give us an excellent idea of the preoccupations and concerns of the shows and indeed the ways in which banal Hindu nationalism is weaved into the very sinews of the shows. Along the way I make some comments about the sociology of Indian *saas-bahu* relationships since these are central to these two serials. I then argue that the expressions of banal Hindutva on the K-serials can be classified into three separate but related components: 1) the highlighting of religious *practice* and doing so in great frequency 2) the plethora of religious symbols and religion inflected talk within the spaces of the shows and 3) the Brahminical nature of the

discourse offered. (1) is further subdivided into three types 1a) personal 1b) familial and 1c) social. (2) occurs in two types of spaces 2a) religious and 2b) non religious. I discuss each of these in detail, making a strong case that what we see on the K-series is not mere expressions of religiosity or Hindu piety, but banal Hindutva. In analyzing the work of the ideology of Hindutva in these serials, I use Billig's (1995) understanding of 'banal nationalism,' Stuart Hall's (2003) understanding of 'naturalization,' and Gramsci's (1971) understanding of 'commonsense.' In a subsequent section I argue that what are posited by the creators and producers of the K-series as 'middle class values' are actually Hindu nationalist, and in fact Brahminical, values. I detail a particular visual strategy geared at creating aspiration and developing a specifically Hindu consumer subjectivity; and discuss the role of the K-series in the broader economy. I end by explaining in detail how the K-series contribute to the exclusion of Muslims, mirroring the larger socioeconomic exclusion in the outside world.

In the chapter 7, I move on to a detailed discussion of gender on the K-series, noting how strongly the construction of womanhood on these serials is influenced by Hindu nationalist discourses of gender. In particular, I show how the anxieties around the dissolution of the family stem from long standing concerns of Hindu nationalism, and detail the work that the *bahu* is expected to do in keeping the family together. I then detail a few instances within the K-series that apparently depict an ambivalent or even subversive attitude towards

patriarchy, but show how they are worked out within the serials using what I call a ‘having your cake and eating it too’ strategy. I then argue that within the serials, it is men who almost always happen to be the founts of wisdom and sagacity; and it is therefore difficult to credit these shows with depicting ‘strong women’ as some contemporary critics have argued. I show how even the commodity of television is gendered. I argue ultimately that the K-serials therefore represent the ideal Hindu nation of the ideologues of Hindu nationalism made real on television.

I conclude by summing up some of the key findings and situating them in light of the secularism debate. I end by discussing the contributions made by this work and offer a few recommendations for future work.

Chapter 2

Serials, Soaps, and Others: A Review of the Literature

This dissertation is chiefly concerned with the articulation of culture (specifically, TV serials) with wider socio-economic processes (specifically, those of Hindu nationalism and economic neoliberalism). It tries to understand first how the preconditions for banal Hindu nationalism emerge. It then tries to understand how the elements of banal Hindu nationalism play out on prime time Indian soap operas, thus reproducing the Hindutva nation on a daily basis. But before plunging into the task at hand, I will review the existing literature on soaps in order to understand a) how soaps and soap operas have been studied so far, both Indian and non-Indian and b) within that how the depictions of ideas around nationalism in soaps have been studied. In this chapter therefore I will first look at scholarly work on Western⁴ soaps before moving on to the Latin American and Arab contexts. I will finally survey the literature on Indian soaps.

Western Serials and Soaps

Gender, agency, and pleasure. Three principal foci in the analyses of Western soaps are most salient for my purposes: gender, narrative analysis, and realism. Many of the questions posed around the issue of gender and female empowerment and the answers offered were initially quite novel, and even provocative, given that most popular commentary around soap operas had portrayed them as merely ‘women’s’ television and therefore not worthy of serious critical examination. Robert Allen, among others, demonstrated in his

⁴ The term ‘western’ does not always have a serious analytical purchase, as Neil Lazarus (2002) has convincingly argued, but I use it here as shorthand for British, American, and occasionally Australian studies of soaps, being fully cognizant of its shortcomings.

Speaking of Soap Operas (1985) that even as soap operas are some of the most popular cultural forms ever devised and consequently highly valued by advertisers and broadcasters, they are also one of the cultural forms most disdained and often dismissed by critics. However, in the words of Charlotte Brunsdon (1995), “feminist interest...transformed soap opera into a very fashionable field for academic inquiry” (p.5). Thus, it has been argued that soaps should be looked at as “a subversive genre which manages to contest the patriarchal ideologies of male power by showing how women escape the male controls operating in the official ideology of the family” (Das, 1995, p.169). Tania Modleski argued in her book *Loving with a Vengeance* (1982) that soaps made possible for women pleasures and readings very different from those they might obtain from standard male focused texts, even if these soaps didn’t do much to seriously challenge the patriarchal capitalism within which women led their own lives. Modleski has also argued, especially in the paper ‘The Rhythms of Reception: Daytime Television and Women's Work’ (1983), that women’s work of viewing soap operas replicated their work in the family as the primary interpreters of other’s emotions and anticipators of other’s needs. Therefore, coaching women in emotional work is one of the primary functions of soap operas. Even though this is an argument that is, in the words of Lila Abu-Lughod (2005), based on “a set of assumptions about emotion and personhood [which are] historically and culturally specific” (p.119), it continues to have resonance into the twenty first century. In fact this argument

resonates even in studies of Indian soap opera--as we will see later in this chapter, and in later chapters. Even as most early studies of soap operas focused on gender as one of the main axes of analyses, class was not entirely absent especially in British studies of soaps (Allen, 2004). Subsequently for the most part, though, class disappeared from all but a tiny minority of British television studies (Morley, 2009).

Another influential British study of soaps, Dorothy Hobson's *Crossroads: The Drama of a Soap Opera* (1982), argued for a social contextual reading of texts, concluding that different kinds of viewers derived different pleasures from a soap opera. This foregrounding of differential pleasures also anchors Ien Ang's *Watching "Dallas": Soap Opera and the Melodramatic Imagination* (1985), in which she takes particular note of the ironic pleasures some viewers take in denigrating the show *Dallas* even as they continue to watch it. At the risk of broad generalization, it can be said that Hobson (1982) and Ang (1985) are both concerned not so much with restoring critical respectability to soaps as with restoring agency to the predominantly women viewers of soaps, unearthing the complex relationships that women have with soaps, and demonstrating that they are anything but the passive, uncritical viewers of popular ideology.⁵ These studies spawned a wealth of other studies examining soaps and their viewers from various angles but most of them were minor riffs on the broad themes first played by Hobson and Ang, rather than landmark

⁵ These studies on soaps fit within a broader turn among feminist scholars towards the analysis of "female texts", for example Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance* (1984) which came out of the field of literary studies.

symphonies in their own right. Also in the broad category of gender analyses, and related to issues of female empowerment and pleasure but slightly distinct from it, have been analyses of soaps as sites for the playing out of the politics of family and patriarchy, particularly the presence of strong matriarchal figures in soaps (Geraghty, 2010). I will engage with the question of soaps and female empowerment in my work, but show how the central focus on these areas can be severely limiting in the Indian context.

Structure and form. If gender has been one of the key foci of analysis, another very important area has had to do with the organization of narrative. Scholars have attempted to establish the difference between various forms of television shows: series, serials, soaps, sitcoms, dramas, etc. This focus on form is visible even in some contemporary studies despite the fact that with many post 1980s TV shows borrowing elements from the soap narrative, “the boundaries that were meant to mark a key distinction between these genres have...been blurred” (Geraghty, 2010, p. 85). One of the most detailed engagements with the question of what defines a soap can be found in Robert Allen’s ‘Making Sense of Soaps’ (2004). Allen contends that the defining feature of soaps is their “distinctive serial narrational structure”. It is worth quoting Allen at some length on what a serial narrative is:

A serial narrative is not merely a narrative that has been segmented, but one whose segmentation produces an interruption in the reading, listening, or viewing process. Furthermore, that interruption is controlled by the producer or distributor of that narrative, not by the reader. In other words, the producer of the

narrative determines not only how and when the narration of the story stops and starts, but also how and when the reader's engagement with the text stops and starts (p.242).

Note that Allen is broadly talking about *serials* here in a piece entitled 'Making Sense of *Soaps*' (italics added). This begs the obvious question: are all serials soaps, then? Again, intuitively, we would say, no. Some of the most acclaimed TV shows of the recent past in the UK or the US, for example *Mad Men*, *The Wire*, *The Sopranos*, *State of Play*, *Life on Mars*, and *Prime Suspect*, to name a few have all been serial narratives as per Allen's definition of the term. These were unarguably not soaps, or at least not consumed, discussed, and critiqued as being soaps. Allen's discussion on the one hand elides the difference between 'serials' and 'soaps' but on the other makes a distinction between 'open' and 'closed' serials. Open serials are "the only forms of narrative (with the possible exception of comic strips) predicated upon the impossibility of ultimate closure [and which] trade narrative closure for paradigmatic complexity"(p.251). Open serials are also typified by their "large community of interrelated characters" (p.252) and by the fact that events in them are "less determinant and irreversible than in other forms of narrative" (p.252). Key examples of 'open' serials, then are US daytime, British, and Australian serials.

As far as 'closed' serials are concerned, the Latin American telenovela is the paradigmatic example offered by Allen, even though this 'closure' might be attained after as many as 200 or 300 episodes. Allen believes that closed serials are "inherently melodramatic in

nature,” in the very specific sense that closed serials allow viewers to “look back upon the completed text and impose upon it some kind of moral or ideological order” (p.255). Again, while Allen does not explicitly state it, it is implicit in his piece that he considers both ‘open’ and ‘closed’ serials as examples of soaps.

From Geraghty’s (2010) survey of soap opera studies, we get a sense of the terminological confusion around television shows. Authors continuously conflate the terms ‘series’, ‘serials’, ‘telenovelas’, and ‘soaps’, and there is no universally agreed definition as to what is a ‘soap’ and what a ‘serial’. Lozano & Singhal (1993) acknowledge the differences between soaps and telenovelas, but club them under the broader category of ‘serial melodrama.’ The term ‘melodrama’ in fact crops up repeatedly in analyses of serials or soaps or broadly speaking, television programming identified as viewed mostly by women, and seems to be a key characteristic of soaps.

Occasionally soaps are identified as such by their time of airing. But time of airing seems to be a weak criterion for being the defining feature of a soap. This classification would be most pertinent in the American context where the popular understanding of soaps is that they are serials that air in the daytime and are primarily viewed by female audiences. Even in the US, though, the existence and success of so called prime time soaps such as *Dallas* and *Dynasty* (which aired in the US in the 1980s) and *Desperate Housewives*⁶ (which aired in

⁶ *Desperate Housewives* did not quite start out being a soap, but rather as a post-modern ironic take on soap narratives. A couple of seasons into its telecast, there was little to distinguish *Desperate Housewives* from any conventional soap.

the US in the 2000s) weakens the argument that time of telecast is a critical component of defining what a soap is. This, of course, is even without taking into account the fact that the two most successful soaps of all time, the British soaps *Coronation Street* and *Eastenders*, both air in the evenings at television prime time. I will show in the course of the present work how the form of TV shows, and specifically soaps, plays a significant role in the ideological work that the show does.

Realism. A third relevant focus area has been on how ‘real’ soaps are, that is, how much they reflect and engage with reality. This has been particularly salient in the analysis of well known British soaps such as *Eastenders* given their reputation for “more concrete and realistic settings” and their incorporation of “substantial references to everyday rhythms, and...genuinely mundane moments like shopping and cooking” (Ellis, 2007, p.104 & 108, cited in Geraghty, 2010). Branston & Stafford (2010) contend that the ‘long-runningness’ of soaps enables social issues to be “dealt with and re-surface...over many years, as in real life” (p.59). Perhaps it is this feature that leads Geraghty (1991) to suggest that soap operas are defined by “the presence of stories which engage an audience in such a way that they become the subject for public interest and interrogation” (p.251). But reality is investigated within a fairly limited radius: even if they do deal with the ‘social’, studies of British and American soap operas rarely engage with questions of the national and the construction of national identity (Turner, 2005). This,

however, is a key concern of studies of soaps elsewhere, as we shall see below.

By the start of the new millennium, though, studies of soaps seemed to have fallen out of academic favor, certainly in the US and more intriguingly in the UK, from where some of the most complex studies of soaps had earlier originated. The situation was bad enough that one of the most respected scholars of soap opera, Christine Geraghty (2010), complained about “feelings of frustration” (p.82) that “British soaps [were] no longer discussed, or even very watched, in television and media studies” (p. 82-83). She argued that this lack of interest extended to the “broader television culture online and in the British press” (p.83). As evidence of the academy’s loss of interest in soaps, she pointed to the fact that there were only *three* articles about soaps published across three leading journals in the first ten years of the new millenium even though soaps such as *Coronation Street*, *Eastenders*, and *Hollyoaks* remained “essential to television culture” (p.83). She argued that soaps, therefore, had become “invisible television” (p.82). More significantly, she argued that “within television studies the over-determination of work on soap operas has led to the rehearsal of old questions and approaches rather than the search for new ones” (p.89). My research takes up this call to look at soaps afresh in the Indian context and studies soaps through the lens of banal nationalism.

Latin American and Arab Serials and Soaps

Questions of nationalism and national identity have been examined in greater depth in studies of soaps elsewhere, though, particularly in Latin America and in the study of Latin American telenovelas.⁷ While issues of gender, narrative structure, and realism have certainly been present in these studies, they have also been preoccupied with broader questions of national identity and cultural authenticity, especially in the era of globalization. Even though quite a bit of this work has been in local languages, the work that is readily available in English indicates the continuing vitality of soap opera or telenovela analyses in Latin America. It is quite possible that this is partly because the telenovela form continues to be the most popular as well as culturally salient form of television, unlike in the American and British contexts where ‘quality’ television such as *Mad Men*, *The Wire*, and *The Sopranos* have staked a stronger claim to cultural salience. Irrespective of the reason for this continuing vibrancy of soap opera studies in the Latin American context, as opposed to the moribund state of it in the Western context, it is interesting to note that even the questions asked in the former are somewhat different from those in the latter. This difference is evident, for example, in a special issue of the journal *Television and New Media* that came out in end 2005 and can stand as a fair representation of it.

⁷ Note here that in the Latin American understanding --and I am of course glossing over enormous geographic, cultural, and sociological differences within and across the nation states of the continent by using the term ‘Latin American’-- the term ‘telenovela’ is used more or less synonymously with the term ‘soap’; or at least there have not been too many efforts to distinguish between the two.

Here, for example, we see Mauro Porto (2005) arguing that the Brazilian telenovela *Terra Nostra* played an “ ‘orientation role’, providing interpretive frames that were often applied by viewers to current political issues” (p.342). In fact, he contends, while discussing the work of other scholars, that telenovelas have “played an active and important role in the discussion of political themes and events in different periods of the country’s history” (p.342). Not only that, Porto argues that “telenovelas have become key to understanding the dilemmas and perspectives of democratic politics in Brazil” (p.342). The mild essentialism in that last statement apart, note the rather expanded scope of contextualisation of soap operas and their siting in the macro world of national politics. This becomes even more striking when compared to the rather more micro focus on gender, identity, and the politics of domesticity and family that a large number of Western soap opera studies have been concerned with.

This engagement of Latin American studies of soaps with national politics, or at least an orientation towards examining questions of the national, has quite a long tradition. As is evident from Straubhaar’s (1988) early paper on Brazilian television, this was in large measure due to the strong influence of the state on domestic television, both in creating the infrastructure necessary for its spread, and in the conscious use of the medium as a vehicle for creating a national identity. For that matter, issues of class have also featured in Latin American analyses of soaps, largely because the soaps themselves have engaged with class, even if in the attenuated sense of

the poor aspiring to wealth or working class characters discovering long lost wealthy fathers (see for example, Pearson, 2005). Even as much of Western media scholarship was taken with globalization and convinced about the impending end of the nation state from the early 90s onwards, with the postmodernist and fiercely unmaterialist theorizing of Arjun Appadurai (1996) and Homi Bhabha (1994) providing some of the intellectual ballast, the nation state continued to be a strong site of investigation in Latin American studies of soaps well into the twenty first century. For example, Straubhaar (2006) argued that “globalization theorists sometimes underestimate the continuing power of the nation-state to structure the circumstances within which most media industries still operate” (p.681). More significantly for our purposes, he asserted that the soap opera was “a prime vehicle for creating elements of a ‘national’ culture and spreading them among localized and regionalized audiences that had not always shared a great deal of common culture between them despite being within common national boundaries” (p.691). Jesus Martin-Barbero (2001) also argues that “the heart of the [Latin American] model [of television] lies in the tendency to constitute, through television, a single public, and to reabsorb the socio-cultural differences of a country to the point that one can confuse a higher degree of communicability with a higher degree of economic profitability” (p.650).

Similar questions of identity and the construction of the “imagined community” (*pace* Benedict Anderson, 2006/1983) of the

nation through television are prominent in discussions of Arab television as well, particularly Lila Abu-Lughod's *Dramas of Nationhood* (2005). These dramas are often pedagogical and almost always political, explicitly dealing with issues of nationality and national identity, though not necessarily with nationalism in its spectacular form. Many of the studies of Arab television are also understandably concerned with issues of censorship and repression given the long history of extremely repressive state regimes in the region. It is interesting however to see that the term 'soap' or 'soap opera' is not quite as salient in discussions of television programs of these regions. To take the example of *Dramas of Nationhood*, while many of Abu-Lughod's reference points are feminist studies of soap operas, the term most salient in her book itself is 'serial'--or 'drama' as in the title--and not 'soap' or 'soap opera'. (This is perhaps also a tacit acknowledgment of the slippage between these two terms, a slippage that we have seen occurs in broad swathes of the media studies literature). Tellingly, a search of the Communication and Mass Media Complete database of EBSCOHOST using the keywords "Arab" and "soap opera" or "soaps" (or for that matter when the keyword "Arab" is substituted by "middle east" or specific country names such as "Morocco" or "Egypt") throws up no results of significance.

If we are, then, to quickly summarize the key observations from this sweeping look at studies of soap opera across the world, what do we see? First, there is no clear consensus on the boundaries of the term 'soap' and therefore what distinguishes it from other terms such

as ‘serials’, ‘dramas’, and ‘telenovelas’ that have also been used to discuss a particular kind of television programming. It is generally accepted though that these shows are broadly ‘melodramatic’ and are primarily viewed by women. This brings us to the next point: a significant proportion of Western studies of soap opera are concerned with issues of gender identity, and in analyzing soaps as sites of female empowerment and pleasure. While some of these issues do crop up in studies of soaps from Latin America and the Arab world, it is issues of national identity which predominate there, particularly the role of soaps in the creation of a national identity and a ‘national’ culture. And finally, while it is more or less absent in the analysis of British and American soaps, the analysis of Latin American soaps are often highly invested in unearthing linkages of soaps with the macro political sphere. We now move on into surveying the studies of Indian serials and soaps, starting with those of the Doordarshan era.

Indian Serials and Soaps

Indian serials and soaps of the Doordarshan era. Any survey of studies that aims to focus only on Indian soap opera might end up being rather limited. I will instead look at studies of Indian television serials in general, looking critically at the particular questions that have animated these analyses. We will also primarily engage with the most significant--and most widely cited--book length studies of Indian television.

A survey of the literature shows that the amount of published academic work on Indian television serials is not as voluminous as

one might expect given that it is (at the time of writing) almost thirty years since the first serials were aired on Indian television. Given its chronological primacy, however, *Hum Log* might well be the Indian TV serial that has had the most amount of academic ink spilled over it. Much of this writing has made the state and the television bureaucracy central to analyses, particularly in critiquing its efforts of pedagogy through mass media and its attempted creation of a 'national culture'. Everett Rogers and Arvind Singhal, in particular, have written a number of books and articles about *Hum Log* in which they have attempted to comprehensively take stock of the place of this show in Indian television history, and the role it played both as an instrument of the state and as a facilitator of the newly emergent capitalist economy (see for example Singhal & Rogers, 1988, 1991, 2001). In a 1991 paper, they provide evidence that exposure to *Hum Log* had a statistically significant and positive correlation with attitudes towards freedom of choice and equal opportunities for women. In addition, if the anecdotal evidence of letters written by viewers to the producers is considered reliable, there were positive prosocial effects such as an influence on organ donation and the reporting of crimes against women. In sum, even though they argue that much of the show's prosocial intent was diluted in the execution of its original aims, Singhal and Rogers conclude that "there is enough research evidence to suggest that *Hum Log* met at least some of its educational development goals" (p.23). What Singhal and Rogers in their various writings implicitly see as a positive developmentalism,

though, many other authors see as a paternalism that is to be seriously interrogated, if not condemned outright. Veena Das (1995), for example, focuses on the middle class family setting of the show and criticizes the fact that “[t]he everydayness of the middle-class family was...seen as raw material on which the state could bring about an effective transformation through the mediation of television in order to aid the tasks of social and economic development” (p. 172).

Das distinguishes *Hum Log* (a show overtly modelled on telenovelas), from Western soap operas. For Das, *Hum Log* differs from Western soap operas in a few key aspects a) its limited duration, running for just over a year, when Western soap operas continue to run for decades; b) its airing during prime time while typical soap operas air in the afternoon, with this prime time airing a consequence of its bureaucratic origin and controls and not potential for attracting sponsors; c) its “quotidian conception” (that is, its setting in a lower middle class family and the generally muted treatment) unlike the “melodrama and florid exaggeration” (p.174) of other soaps; d) the specialisation of characters..to convey values perceived as ‘correct’ in accordance with the needs of the state; and e) the lack of anxiety around the perceived decline of the family and the perception of social problems as being family problems, which animated North American television culture of the late 1970s. *Hum Log*, then, was not really a soap opera but in the academic (and even popular) discourse it is often referred to as India’s first ever soap opera.

Another illustrative feature of *Hum Log* was of course its position as the hitherto unprecedented carrier of private sector commercial advertisements with Nestle's *Maggi Two-Minute* noodles becoming a household name through the show (Roy, 2008); and its location in an emergent state-market axis tilting inexorably towards the market side of the spectrum. Rajadhyaksha (1990), while not directly engaging with *Hum Log*, critiques the beliefs and ideologies that eventually led to the state's attempts at marrying message with melodrama. In particular, he situates *Hum Log* and its ilk in the context of the emergent development of a national market, and contends that its form followed this function. As he argues, "an articulation of a national market depends on geographically defined distribution oligopolies; and such oligopolies need, in turn, quite explicit definitions of a cultural indigenism" (p.37-38). What is implicit in this argument is that the state's attempts at pro-social entertainment were not entirely innocent of the need to serve the interests of capital. This kind of conjunctural analysis, with the dynamics of capital placed at the heart of the analysis, is not all that common in the studies of Indian television shows; and it is the kind of analysis that I carry out in the present work. In fact, we can discern a transition from asking questions about the state and its intent to asking questions about gender and identity in the two works about pre-satellite era Doordarshan shows that are possibly the most well known studies of Indian television: Purnima Mankekar's *Screening*

Culture, Viewing Politics (1999) and Arvind Rajagopal's (2001) *Politics after Television*.

Mankekar's (1999) book is (as the subtitle says) "an ethnography of television, womanhood, and nation in postcolonial India." It analyzes a set of Doordarshan serials aired before the advent of private satellite television. Among its many strengths, her work is most valuable in understanding how lower middle class women engage actively with the content of television shows which were for the most part targeted at the middle class. She argues that these television shows were used by the state to create a pan-Indian national culture, a project she clearly does not approve of. She shows how even as these serials "enforced dominant ideologies of gender, community, and nation, they sometimes opened spaces for subversive readings, and by creating opportunities for women to engage in social critique, enabled moments of rupture that forestalled ideological closure" (p.19). But the greatest significance of this work for my own research is in how Mankekar upholds the "*political* significance of texts dismissed by many social scientists as fictive and therefore inconsequential, as 'mere entertainment'" (p.11, emphasis in the original). While I differ substantially in epistemological orientation from Mankekar, I too insist that television soap operas be studied for their political significance.

Arvind Rajagopal's *Politics after Television* (2001) has the subtitle "Hindu nationalism and the reshaping of the public in India.' He seeks to understand how the telecast of the Hindu mythological

Ramayan generated symbols and icons that were cleverly appropriated by Hindu nationalists in their creation of a ‘retail Hindutva’ (i.e. the commodification of ritual objects and their distribution and sale). This retail Hindutva, Rajagopal argues, was used to suture a public “split” by differences in language, culture, and most importantly, by “languages of politics” (p.25). The term ‘split public’ has become one of the most salient in Indian media studies and according to Rajagopal this split emerges from the “historical cleavage between English as the language of command and the indigenous languages [which] was accentuated with independence and the new elite” (p.16). The English language, Rajagopal argues, “by virtue of being subsumed as the Nehruvian language of command, continued a colonial practice of aloofness and unfamiliarity with local traditions” (p.16). Unlike English newspapers, though, indigenous language newspapers were capable of engaging with “sentiments emerging in the course of debates among the majority population” (p. 16). So was created a “deep cultural faultline” which the Hindu nationalist party BJP was able to exploit. Rajagopal focuses on the state broadcaster’s airing of the *Ramayan* in a monopoly environment and tries to understand the work on Hindu nationalism in and around this obviously Hindu mythological. I too try to do the same, but in the case of non-mythological or secular serials in a competitive market driven environment, even though my approaches are very different from his.

Indian television of the early satellite era (1992-2000). The analyses of Indian television of the early satellite era are most concerned with the debates around cultural identity that erupted in India with the advent of satellite television in 1991. Interestingly enough there is still no book length study which deals exclusively with the soaps or serials of this era.

Most of the works focusing on television of this period deal with soaps only in part, but also engage with other television content. In these works, the analysis is anchored by discussions of globalization, and mostly engage with questions about the shifts in cultural identity taking place in the context of increasing globalization. Page & Crawley's (2001) book is somewhat of an outlier in that it takes a South Asia centric view even if much of the discussion is in the context of India— and India remains omnipresent as a regional economic and cultural hegemon in the discussions of the media of other South Asian countries. The book situates the development of television content in a context where “personal choice has become a new ideology” (p.141). But it is concerned above all in understanding audience responses to new types of television programming which “broke with the traditions of Indian cinema and offered the public bolder themes, franker treatment of personal relations, and fewer happy endings” (p.142) and the adoption of particular spectator positions in response to these depictions.

Melissa Butcher's (2003) intentions are similar and clearly spelt out in the title of her book *Transnational Television, Cultural Identity*

and Change: When Star Came to India. She seeks to measure “cultural change” by “looking at changing perceptions of Indianness, or the understanding of what it means to call oneself an Indian, and the role of transnational television in the process of defining, creating and maintaining that identity” (p.16). She contends that she finds support for the ‘active audience’ hypothesis even as she argues that the clashes around the cultural permission for the dissemination of different kinds of images signify a “struggle for the control over the direction of change defined by cultural strategies of identity, be it a religio-cultural or a secular state” (p.276-77). The relationship between globalization and newer forms of television content is seen to be fairly linear, even if mediated by and often expressed in the language and idioms of the local. The analysis focuses on understanding how the ‘global’ intersects with the ‘local’ in creating ‘hybrid’ texts which are then read by ‘resisting’ audiences taking up subject positions that indicate new forms of ‘Indianness.’ This resistance is largely textual resistance and globalization is a term that is taken for granted here, one whose meaning is self-evident without any detailed explication. Not too much attention is paid to understanding how this process happens and the power relations in play during the globalizing or hybridizing process.

Though very different in the objects of its analysis, this attempt at tracking shifting notions of ‘Indianness’ is also present in Shanti Kumar’s (2006) analysis of television of the early satellite era. Kumar does not really engage with serials or soaps but other television forms

such as talks shows, and his chief analytical concern is the changing representations of national identity on television. His study examines the differing representations of Mahatma Gandhi on Doordarshan and the Star network in its early years. Kumar also analyzes advertisements of television sets to illustrate the changing importance of the television set as a cultural commodity and show how the appeals encoded in these advertisements moved from nationalist to globalized ones. As he states, “The colonial distinctions of print-capitalism—such as the colonized and the colonizer, inside and outside, us and them—have been blurred by the rapid growth of electronic capitalism, and a new generation of media elites have mobilized television to articulate (i.e. link) hybrid imaginations of identity and difference to idealized notions of Indian nationalism” (p. 2). He concludes therefore that the community organized around the intersection of television and the national is ‘unimaginable’, unlike the one organized around print capitalism that Benedict Anderson describes in his famous work *Imagined Communities*.

Gokulsing’s (2004) book is the only one in which we find some discussion of the soaps from this era even if it deals with a number of soaps from the Doordarshan era as well. It is valuable in understanding the aspects of *Amanat* (a significant soap in Indian television history, as we will see later) that appealed to urban audiences of in 1998-1999. For these audiences, it was the “positive depiction of a close-knit family” (Gokulsing, 2004, p.68) that was a particular reason for appreciation of these shows. We see also viewers’

positivity towards particular characters, such as Chaudhary from the serial *Aashirwad*, who had “faith in Indian traditions and particularly the Indian family system” (p.69). Viewers also claimed that they believed in gender equality ⁸ yet at the same time they also asserted that ‘Women taking decisions against the wishes of their husbands/ in-laws’ was a change that was “harmful to society” (p.74).

Significantly, Gokulsing notes, “The image of the new Indian woman on satellite channels is of someone who exercises choice. Women are portrayed as liberated, career-conscious and independent...[and] treatment of sexuality is quite candid.” (p.89).

Indian television of the middle satellite era (2000-2007). At present, the only substantial study of the K-series is Shoma Munshi’s *Prime Time Soap Operas on Indian Television* (2010). For starters, her book is chock-full of qualitative and quantitative data not easily available elsewhere. Two chapters in particular – ‘Milieu of Production’ and ‘Key Elements of Production’ – offer richly detailed depictions of the contexts and environments in which these shows are conceived and how they are then brought to life. Munshi does a salutary job in detailing the features that make these shows distinct from soap operas elsewhere, even as she takes care to situate her analysis in the context of by now seminal studies of soap operas, like those by Charlotte Brunsdon (1995) and Christine Geraghty (1991). A chapter on ‘The Male Voice’ is also an interesting intervention, highlighting the

⁸ One of the questions that measured this aspect was decidedly oddly framed by the researcher: ‘A woman is capable of taking responsibility for the family *when such a need arises*’ (Gokulsing, 2004, p.72, emphasis added)

role that males (and male lead actors) play in these women centric (and women targeted) soaps and showing how women are central protagonists even as the naivete´ and poor choices of the men drive the narrative forward. Significantly, Munshi also reads these soaps as enabling a ‘taming’ of Indian masculinities (p.165). Her work, though, is chiefly concerned with reading the K-serials as sites of contestation and giving them due praise for portraying “strong women and real issues” (p.181). Munshi admits that this reading is in opposition to those many critics who had called these shows ‘regressive’. She asserts instead that “the unflinching, uncompromising capacity to suffer endlessly and follow the right moral path...even when faced with familial displeasure-permits soap heroines [of the K-serials] to assume a strong and powerful position that, in fact, questions patriarchal authority” (p.217-18). In the formulation of its problematic in Munshi (2010), and the terms these are engaged in, this work is closest to the Western works on soap opera which we encountered earlier in this chapter and which were centrally concerned with the issue of the pleasures women derived from these soaps, for example the works of Hobson (1982), Modleski (1982) and Ang (1985). The discussions around various modes of Indianness which were central to earlier works like those of Butcher (2003) are only of marginal importance here, replaced by questions of gender. In the present work, I will argue that this reading is limiting, and entails an ignoring of the deep political implications of these serials. In the next section I will discuss in more detail two aspects of the literature on Indian

television that are of importance in situating my research: a) Nationalism, the nation, and the state and b) The limits of a culturalist approach.

Nationalism, the Nation, and the State

Almost all of the works on Indian television that I have discussed engage at some level or the other with the question of nationalism or national identity. Almost all of them also do touch upon the impact of Hindu nationalism in Indian society, with Rajagopal's (2001) work the most overtly engaged with it. Almost all of them, though, are skeptical of nationalism, and understand it discursively. Mankekar (1999) for example, sees nationalism as "a discursive practice that had material effects on the everyday lives of women" (p.7). She also argues that there isn't that much difference between Indian nationalism and Hindu nationalism, given that both borrowed ideas from Orientalist scholarship about India. She concludes that the differences between Indian nationalism and Hindu nationalism was very significantly blurred in the 1980s when Hindu nationalists borrowed elements of Gandhian nationalism. As a result, "from being one of several contending nationalisms before the 1970s, Hindu nationalism grew into one of the dominant forms" (p.180). She does not take a position on whether one form of nationalism might, in certain cases, be preferable to the other. Naturally enough, when she discusses viewers she clubs Hindu and mainstream Indian nationalism⁹ in the same bracket. As she says "instead of assuming

⁹ I expand on these differences in the next chapter.

that viewers unproblematically accept the subject positions created by dominant ideologies such as those of Hindu/Indian nationalism, I have tried to highlight some of the fissures intrinsic to hegemonic discourses” (p.255). In this statement the term “Hindu/Indian nationalism” is indicative of this lack of differentiation between the two.

For Mankekar (1999), the nation is not a benevolent entity, and the nationalism of the Indian state is throughout criticized. In fact, she avers that she wants to use ethnography “as a strategy for constructing a political critique of the unspeakable violence carried out in the name of the nation” (p.20). The nationalism of the post-independence Indian state, successor of mainstream pre-independence Indian nationalism, is considered as problematic in its agenda as Hindu nationalism. In Mankekar’s book, the work of the state in creating national identity is viewed chiefly through the lens of postcolonial studies unlike in Latin American studies of television where the term ‘nation’ is salient, but ‘postcolonial’ is not. This lens of postcoloniality implicitly, if not explicitly, views the dynamics of transition from colonial to independent rule as being very significant in constituting the shape of the new nation-state of India; and therefore understands all socio-cultural processes as being very significantly mediated by that transition. In general, ‘nationalism’ is treated as a category that is deserving of skepticism at best and disdain at worst. The best modes of analysis, then, are assumed to be those that approach the nation through its “fragments” (Partha

Chatterjee's coinage, 1993a). In Mankekar's case, for example, the fragment of concern is obviously, women, and the analysis naturally does not aim for a comprehensive or total understanding.

This emphasis on nationalism as a mode of representation is implicit in Arvind Rajagopal's *Politics after Television* (2001) as well, which, as the subtitle indicates, is concerned with 'Hindu nationalism and the reshaping of the public in India.' For Rajagopal too, the state itself is a problem. He argues therefore that the rise of Hindu nationalism was a partial result of the "shedding of the state's progressive aspect in favor of its more authoritarian functions" which combined with "the inability of laissez-faire capitalism to deliver on its promises" accentuated a "crisis of legitimation" (p.18). Hindu nationalism was apparently a response to this crisis of legitimation, and it was both "a diffuse protest against injustice and simultaneously an attempt to shape or harness this protest to a new conservative orthodoxy" (p.18).

This analytical focus is heavily "post" in its orientation: post-Marxist, post-modern, and post-colonial. I believe though that while this outlook on popular culture undoubtedly yields useful insights, it misses out on something very critical. As Lazarus (1999) convincingly argues a postcolonial analysis of culture is incomplete when it ignores the criticality of capitalism and/or is skeptical of *all* projects of nationalism. In most such studies, Lazarus avers, there is a "culturalist emphasis on nationalism as a mode of representation [and consequently] the ideological differences between various (and often

competing) nationalisms-and the material consequences that follow from these differences-are downplayed in favour of an argument that all nationalisms are alike to the extent they involve the attempts to secure consent for their claims to representativeness” (p.108-109).

This approach to understanding nationalism and the nation-state also results in the gradual disappearance of both nationalism and the state in later analyses of Indian television. The state is undoubtedly the most dominant presence in analyses of Doordarshan shows like *Hum Log*, *Mahabharat*, *Udaan*, etc. in the works of Singhal & Rogers (1989) and Mankekar (1999) for example. It is present still, though as the significant other in opposition to which Hindu nationalism operates, in Rajagopal’s (2001) exhaustive study of the politics around the telecast and reception of *Ramayana*. It is still visible in studies of early satellite era television, such as those of Kumar (2006) and Page & Crawley (2001) but as a point of comparison with private television. Questions around nationalism, even Hindu nationalism, begin to fade away from view in other studies of early satellite era television (1992-2000) as does the state, in studies such as those of Butcher (2003). By the time studies of middle satellite era television (2000-2007), such as those of Munshi (2010) appear, the state is not even present as a shadow and Hindu nationalism is not gestured to even in passing.

A partial explanation for this is that a lot of this work emerges out of the Western academy, and often self-identifies as post-colonial, and the dominant sentiment in both the Western academy and in the

world of postcolonial studies seems to be that the nation-state is dead-and good riddance to it.¹⁰ As Chatterjee (1993b) exclaims, “What else can the state do but coerce?” It also seems that an absence of a thoroughly multidisciplinary analysis of cultural products leads to the dissemination in Indian media studies of trendy ideas like “the state is dead” without sufficient historical analysis of the idea. Linked to this is perhaps a more overarching explanation: that the entrenchment of free market discourse is often accompanied by the rhetoric of inconsequentiality of the state. As Ha-Joon Chang, the contrarian (but firmly capitalist) economist argues in his recent book *23 Things they Don't Tell You about Capitalism* (2010), there is no such thing as a free market simply because “government is always involved and those free-marketeers [who claim to be defending the market from politically motivated interference by the government] are as politically motivated as anyone” (p.1). The state, in other words, is integral to the workings of capitalism and for that matter to the workings of post-industrial capitalism or ‘post-Fordism’, even if the rhetoric would have it otherwise. Neil Lazarus cites an illustrative passage from Chris Harman’s (1991) discussion of the relationship between capital and the nation-state in contemporary times. The link between these two, Harman (1991) suggests:

...does not disappear with multinationalisation. The giant company does not end its link with the state, but rather multiplies the

¹⁰ While I exaggerate the tone, this is the tenor in works such as those of Appadurai (1996) and Chatterjee (1993a) which have proven to be extremely influential in Indian media studies. For exegeses of this strand of thinking see Lazarus (1999) and Vanaik (1997); and for how the ‘politics of location’ might affect the object and conclusions of one’s study see Ahmad (1992).

number of states-and national capitalist networks- to which it is linked. The successor to state capitalism is not some non-state capitalism (as is implied by expressions such as “multinational” or “transnational capitalism”) but rather a capitalism in which capitals rely on the state as much as ever, but try to spread out beyond it to form links with capitals tied to other states- perhaps best described as trans-state capitalism....The functions that the state has fulfilled for capital in the past continue to be important to each individual capital (Harman, quoted in Lazarus, 1999, p. 72).

It is interesting, then, that there seems to be a movement away in studies of Indian soaps from the kinds of questions asked in studies of Latin American soaps and towards the kinds of questions asked of British and American soaps (at least in the heyday of such studies). This trajectory is especially intriguing since it is Latin American countries, particularly Brazil, with which India is clubbed most often in contemporary popular media discourse in terms of their comparable prominence in the global economy and similar trajectories, from a state driven to a free market economy.

In this dissertation, then, I will argue that the ideological differences between secular Indian nationalism and Hindu nationalism are profound and there are very clear material consequences that follow from the ideological dominance of one over the other. I will take the position that secular Indian nationalism, with all its faults, is still preferable to Hindu nationalism as set of guiding principles for a nation to chart its course. I will also argue that the state remains central to the workings of television even in the satellite era, particularly in its actions in the spheres of politics and economics. I will also argue here that understanding the articulation

of culture with wider social processes remains incomplete if the understanding of the market remains superficial, seen as an ever present and eternal backdrop to the socio-cultural processes sought to be understood.

Beyond Culturalist Analyses

All of the works on Indian television discussed offer interesting insights about Indian society and culture. In almost all of them popular culture is understood discursively as a “site of struggle between dominant discourses and forces of resistance” (Mankekar, 199, p.29). For Mankekar, woman’s agency is defined “in terms of their ability to actively engage with, appropriate, challenge, or subvert the hegemonic discourses of Doordarshan” (p.28). This, she argues, is not just “an intervention against the dominant conceptions of audiences of mass media as passive consumers; it is also an intervention against the representation of Third World women as helpless victims of a totalizing patriarchal system” (p.28-29). Women’s agency, then, is constructed primarily through a discursive lens, rather than through material resistance in the real world—leaving us an unexplored terrain to plough. Similarly, when she talks about the “material effects of Doordarshan’s representational practices” (p.10), Mankekar is referring to how acts of violence by the state (in combating secessionist movements) were “erased in televisual narratives of national integration, thus indexing Doordarshan’s complicity with the state’s repression of all dissent” (p.11).

Rajagopal (2001), who discusses politics at the macro level, also approaches the study of culture from a similar standpoint. As we have seen, the cleavage most important in his analysis is that between different cultures or languages, with English the language of the elites and indigenous languages the language of 'local traditions' and the 'majority population.' The terms 'communal' (used in India to refer to inter-religious tension) and 'secular' line up alongside the terms 'majority' and 'elite' respectively. For Rajagopal, then, "the opposition of 'communal' and 'secular' sentiments is...a discursive one, susceptible of mediation between what is otherwise an unyielding polarity" (p.28-29). He thinks, therefore, in terms of a "split public, inhabited by different languages of politics, so that the salient question is of the terms of translation between them, in the reproduction of a structured set of misunderstandings" (p.25). Retailing Hindutva therefore becomes a way to bring together this split public by "offering discrete forms of Hindu affiliation via multiple modes of participation consumption" (p.26). That is, the creation of an easily disseminated, consumerist and merchandised expression of Hindutva, makes it possible for this split public to come together.

Rajagopal's 'split public' formulation is anchored in the tension between English speaking cultural elites who are alienated from the majority population and indigenous tradition. This formulation owes a debt to thinking of one of the most influential postcolonial scholars, Partha Chatterjee, and his books *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?* (1986) and *The Nation and its*

Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories (1993). Chatterjee's influence in fact is quite marked in most of the works of Indian media studies we have discussed. In his various writings, Chatterjee sees colonialism in discursive terms, arguing that mainstream Indian nationalism was a derivative discourse, borrowed by the middle classes from West and insufficiently grounded in the Indian soil. The inevitable result of this, he argues, is that the nationalist project, even when it succeeds, ends up replicating old colonial discourses and structures. Colonial discourses are associated strongly with 'modernity' and ultimately in Chatterjee's works, the modern bureaucratic state ends up becoming almost the sole source of oppression. The mainstream project of nationalism, then, is as pernicious as colonialism, while authentic resistance to it comes from indigenous community. Other binaries such as material-spiritual are invoked to analyze the interaction of outside forces with local ones. This is extremely marked in Chatterjee's analysis of the 'nationalist resolution' of the 'women's question.' That is, the lack of attention paid to the debates around the place of women in society by late nineteenth century nationalism is not because it had been "censored out of the reform agenda" but because it was situated by nationalism in "an inner domain of sovereignty, far removed from the arena of political contest with the colonial state" (p.117). According to Chatterjee, the liberal historiography of India is mistaken in terming the the reactionary response to attempted colonial social reform as 'conservatism.' Instead, it was (at least in nationalist discourse) an

example of a “failure to colonize the inner, essential, identity of the East, which lay in its distinctive, and superior, spiritual culture” (p. 121). For Chatterjee nationalism’s “most powerful, creative, and historically significant project [is] to fashion a ‘modern’ culture that is nevertheless not Western” (p.6). The spiritual domain, which is now equated with the domain of the home, is where the “marks of cultural identity” (p.6) are borne, and where this culture can be fashioned. According to Chatterjee, “the greater one’s success in imitating Western skills in the material domain, therefore, the greater the need to preserve the distinctiveness of one’s spiritual culture.” This formula, Chatterjee believes, “is a fundamental feature of anticolonial nationalisms in Asia and Africa.” If that is the case, then the philosophical differences between Hindu nationalism and mainstream nationalism are purely matters of degree. The struggle is essentially between ‘Western’ and ‘Eastern’ or ‘material’ and ‘spiritual’, thus obviating the need for a discussion of material reality, even if the terminology of this culturalist project (and indeed its very name, Subaltern Studies) is borrowed from Gramsci. As Bannerji (2000) explains, for Chatterjee, “any claim of modernity and capitalism was inauthentic to the Indian ethos [and] therefore any exploration of Indian polity and society in terms of class relations and or secular-rationalist thought was tantamount to adopting a colonial or modernist discourse” (p.908).

The tendencies towards considering all nationalisms as equally suspect; towards viewing the postcolonial state as primarily an

instrument of oppression, especially in its effort to perpetuate a secular nationalism; towards counterposing community to capital and therefore addressing power relations in society without reference to class; and towards supporting a reading of a conservative notion of womanhood as somehow an empowering one all find echoes in studies of Indian media. There are of course variations in the way these are adopted. For example, where Chatterjee (1986) deploys 'colonialism' as the external force to be resisted by indigenous culture, contemporary analysts of media and culture deploy 'globalization' as the outside force in formulations used to analyze and explain contemporary culture. But the terms 'globalization' and 'modernity' are almost always used without explanation; the assumption being that they are self-evident terms which require no further explication. Their use in studies such as those of Kumar (2006) and Butcher (2003), can create problems if their analytical tools are applied to moments different from the specific historical moment they are being used to understand. For example, the popularity of Western programming and the largely non-judgmental depictions of women's adultery on local programming of the early-mid 1990s are understood as being largely driven by the forces of globalization which intermesh with local cultural forms and idioms to create hybrid forms. Yet, in studies which focus on the shows from near the end of the early satellite period (late 1990s) and which portray a very 'traditional' picture of womanhood, globalization is now a force that local forces are antagonistic to. For example, Mankekar (2004) suggests that the

emergence of the K-serials constituted a backlash to the depictions of desire and independence in the Indian woman in television shows of the late 90s. We never really understand how or why the nature of this mediation changes from intermeshing with to antagonism against globalization in such a short period of time—a problem that I believe can be tackled by exploring the actual material circumstances of the production of television content. Divya McMillin (2003) similarly contends that private satellite television in the 1990s posed a threat to conservatives because it “entered the inner spiritual sphere of the Indian home [and] its narratives of individualism, freedom, and universalism could no longer be neatly set aside to be negotiated with in the external material sphere” (p.355). These scholars do not really engage with the actual mechanics of neoliberal globalization and its impact on media industries and on the production of cultural texts. Terms like “globalization” then get adduced to explain almost anything with little nuance or specificity. The way Rajagopal (2001) poses his central question indicates too the influence of Chatterjee and his colleagues in the Subaltern Studies group. “What if,” Rajagopal asks, “the media are introduced before the rationalization of politics and the ‘disenchantment’ of society?” (2001, p.7, italics in the original). This question and its use of the terms ‘disenchantment’ and ‘rationalization’ is obviously Weberian and is underpinned by the deployment of the term ‘modernity’ but the term is never adequately defined. Rajagopal sees capitalism as merely one of the many forces at play in the field that he investigates. He argues that there was “no

causal relation between economic reforms and Hindutva, nor any inherent shared logic” but that there was an “opportunistic alliance between them” (p.3). In his understanding, of utmost importance are the failings of the Nehruvian state and the detachment of the Nehruvian state-building elites from local cultural practices and idioms which allowed Hindu nationalists to take advantage of cultural faultlines that had opened up in modern Indian society. That is, the transition from colonial to a post-colonial form of government is of greatest consequence and the unevenness of this transition embodied in his concept of the ‘split public’. (This formulation, despite its elaborate theorization, is not miles removed from mainstream thinking in television studies, for example, that of Hartley’s contemporaneous *Uses of Television* (1999) which argues that a key role of television is to generate differentiated cultures).

Mankekar, too, touches upon the “resurgence and legitimation of laissez-faire capitalism”(p.8), but the questions she poses make it clear that this resurgence is important, but not critical to her analysis. She asks for example, “What were the consequences for the communalization of nationalism for notions of Indian womanhood?” (p10) and gestures to Althusser and Gramsci while outlining the intellectual traditions she embraces. But she insists, nonetheless, that rather than look for “hidden meanings or hermeneutic ‘truths’” her aim is to “represent women’s narratives and practices as enactments of their interpellation by television’s discourses” (p.22-23, emphasis in the original). As she argues, she

tries to “problematize (rather than efface or romanticize) women’s agency as they responded to, and participated in, the construction of hegemonic discourses” (p.29).

While each of these works (especially Mankekar, 1999, and Rajagopal, 2001) has been rightly acclaimed for its original analyses and important insights into Indian television, there are a couple of lacuna that need addressing. The first is the inadequately specified use of the term ‘modernity.’ That is, if ‘modernity’ is to be understood as a line that somehow separates what was before to what is now (or what will be), how do we determine where that line is? Or, borrowing language from Lazarus (1999), how do we account in structural-historical terms for the difference between the universalizing impetus of modernity and the universalizing impetus of any “historically prior universalizing project...such as Christianity or Islam”? (p.23). I take my cue from Achin Vanaik who has pointed out (incidentally while writing about some of the same social and political processes that Rajagopal, 2001, engages with), that capitalist industrialization would constitute “the fundamental process of modernity” (Vanaik, 1997,p. 12). Similarly, another key concern in many of these studies is globalization, but which is again not defined adequately. In this, I borrow from Kumar (2007) who defines globalization as “changes in capitalism prompted by particular and conscious strategies used by capitalists and the state to regain profitability over the last quarter of the twentieth century” (pp17-18). I subscribe to Lazarus’s (1999) argument that “the global character assumed historically by

capitalism requires that we develop concepts adequate to its systematicity, or—even more pointedly—that the Marxist concepts of ‘totality’ and ‘universalism’ are concepts of just this kind, bespeaking a social imperative that drives beyond capitalism in its historical and actually existing forms” (p.17, emphasis in the original).

These concepts are not used in any significant studies of Indian television, but are deployed fruitfully in Madhava Prasad’s *Ideology of the Hindi Film: A Historical Construction* (1998). It is worth quoting Prasad at length here for an insight first into what the culturalist modes of analysis of mass mediated popular culture miss out on. These modes, Prasad argues:

[Do] not take into account the fact that the relation between popular cinema and the cultural ‘community’ that converges around it as its privileged collective addressee is mediated by the market. It disregards the fact that the functioning of the capitalist industry which produces and markets these films is determined by a variety of factors, including the political structure and the hegemonic project of the modern state; that there can be no simple and unmediated reproduction of ‘tradition’, ‘myth’ or any other residual substance by a cultural institution that is based on modern technology and relies on the desires and interests of dispersed, anonymous audiences, some of them created by the industry itself (p.16).

Prasad’s focus is on films produced before the formal introduction of market liberalization in 1991, but this logic can be fruitfully applied to the context of post-liberalization television soaps. There does not exist, at present, any significant study of Indian television in the Marxist tradition. In fact, the approaches outlined above in this chapter seem to have set Indian television studies on a trajectory where the term ‘politics’ comes increasingly to reflect the

Western soap studies conception of politics as exclusively the politics of gender and identity; and gender and identity are investigated in the light of an epistemological paradigm that sees all representation as equally compromised since none of them can be said to be any closer to “objective” truth.

Some Avenues for Exploration

One of the noteworthy aspects of the K-series is that a significant proportion of their viewership constituted of men. In the academic literature, soap viewerships has been assumed (even by feminist scholars) to consist primarily of women, and much of the analyses, as we have seen above, talks about the particular pleasures afforded by soaps to women or by the fact that they enable women to get better at women’s work of relationship building. But it seems difficult to account for the popularity of the K-series among *men* on these terms.

The K-series also mark for the first time a transition in Indian television from ‘closed’ serials (like Latin American telenovelas) to ‘open’ serials (like British and American soaps). The literature has not quite investigated too deeply either into why it is that certain television environments host closed soaps and others host open soaps but it is rarely the case for both forms to be present in the same television environment at the same point in time. For example, the soaps on Doordarshan predating the emergence of satellite television for the most part had closed structures, whereas the soaps on Star Plus of the middle satellite era for the most part have open structures.

Why this transition occurs seems to me to be an interesting question which I will touch upon in chapter 4.

The ‘everydayness’ of soaps is also a feature much remarked upon in the literature as is the role of soaps (and broadly speaking, serials) in creating aspects of a national culture. Admittedly, though, as we have seen earlier, the latter perspective is not very common in studies of Western soap. In the Latin American contexts soaps are viewed as instruments for binding together the ‘imagined community’ but they are not so in Western contexts. Part of the reason could well be that in the US context (and at least on television news), “national identification [is] equated with personal consumption and an appreciation of free market capitalism” (Kumar, 2005, p.135). For me though, the ‘everydayness’ of soaps reflects the broader issue of a ‘national’ culture and seems to have a role to play in the naturalization of particular representations, idioms, and ideologies.

I believe that these aspects merit further investigation in the study of soaps. Slade & Beckenham (2005) assert that a soap is best defined “functionally, in terms of the role it plays in television culture and its relations to the material conditions in which it is produced” (p. 338). That is, soap’s origins as primarily a vehicle for the carriage of advertising directed towards women dictated the evolution of its particular narrative structure and consequently many of its features such as domestic settings, low production costs, and romantic themes, all in the service of the “need to maintain continuing audience attention” (p.338). Similarly, Allen (2004) suggests that in itself serial

narration is not a novelty engendered by television. He gives the examples of the emergence of literary serial novels in the mid nineteenth century, best marked in the success of Dickens, and the example of serialized radio soaps to argue that the broadcast soap opera form is not entirely novel. He points the way towards a more complex understanding of the serial form when he says, “One of the key institutional roles of the serial form has been to exploit new technologies of narrative production and distribution” (p.15).

These interventions by Slade & Beckenham (2005) and Allen (2004) seem to be very fruitful starting points for a further exploration of how the actual mechanics of neoliberal globalization impact upon media industries and on the production of cultural texts. This is not to suggest that there have been no studies of television serials situated and analyzed within the broader socio-economic context.

Dallas and *Dynasty*, the prototypical primetime soaps on US television, have been studied by Hirschman (1988), for example, as the definitive vehicles of the ideology of consumption; or Zimmermann (1985) has looked at their characters as devices through which political questions around capitalism and patriarchy can be negotiated and tamed. Allen’s seminal 1985 study of soap operas devotes significant amounts of time on the historical, aesthetic, economic and economic aspects of soap operas in addition to the textual ones. While investigating the nature of the relationship between soap operas and capitalism, he insightfully suggests that “soap opera represents a form of cultural production that has been

fully penetrated by capital since its moment of conception [but] the adversarial relationship that we traditionally assume to exist between artistic and economic interests under capitalism simply does not obtain in the case of soap operas” (p.129). Yet, this insight is not pushed further to investigate how specific developments in the broader political economy and the national political sphere, for example the conservative counter-revolution and associated market fundamentalism that emerged in the early 1970s, might (or might not) have shaped the content of these shows. Similarly Christine Geraghty’s (1991) equally renowned *Women and Soap Opera* suggested that soap operas might be used by its viewers to challenge existing attitudes and prejudices regarding class, race, sexual orientation, and feminism but did not investigate in any great depth how Thatcherism as a political and economic doctrine might have shaped the content of the British and American soaps she analysed; or how the soap form might have provided a perfect channel for such ideologies to flow through.

There have been some studies that might appear to have done exactly this. It has been argued, for instance, that the American TV series *24* was deeply influenced by--and in turn influenced-- the macho posturings and reductive ‘us vs. them’ understanding of global geopolitics that was initially peddled by the George W. Bush administration neocons and then became part of the wider political discourse (Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2009). Or as we have seen, Rajagopal (2001) has argued that the TV serial *Ramayan*, which aired

on the state broadcaster Doordarshan from 1987-1989, was successfully appropriated by the Hindu right in creating 'retail Hindutva'.

But *24* was certainly not a soap, even though it might have borrowed aesthetic idioms from soaps from time to time. And while *Ramayan* has been called a 'mythological soap' it is best described as a 'mythological serial'. Rajagopal (2001) does use terms such as "capital", "exchange value", "commodification" and "commodity images" conspicuously in the first few pages and avers that "Hindu nationalism became politically conspicuous in the context of economic liberalization and in relation to it" (p.3). But while he makes gestures towards political economy and the material reality that has shaped the discourse around nationalism, his emphasis, as we have seen, is very much on the discursive. In both of these cases the analysis is centered in the specific instance (the particular show *24* or the particular show *Ramayan*) and is not amenable to being extended to a general condition (action series on TV or television soaps on Indian television). And their authors would perhaps rightly argue that it was not what they were aiming for anyway. But part of the dominance of soaps as a cultural form in India is their ubiquity, and analyses that go beyond the specific are, I think, very much required.

In this dissertation, I will take an approach different from the mainstream of Indian television studies, especially when it comes to the question of nationalism. For me, Hindu nationalism is not something to be understood as simply another mode of representing

the nation, just as secular nationalism was. As I will touch upon again and again, the basic premises of Hindu nationalism—from the historical understanding of India to their discourses around Muslims—are objectively false. Furthermore, Hindu nationalism did not just cleverly manipulate the fissures around an English speaking and a separate Hindi speaking public. It tapped into the anxieties unleashed by the liberalization of the Indian economy since the mid 1970s and the increased assertion of rights by lower castes. And if the Indian public is ‘split’ in any strong fashion, the key split I will argue is not around language and culture, but around caste and class. This is why Cordbrige & Harris (2003) see both the Hindu nationalist movement and economic liberalisation as ‘elite revolts’—the former the revolt of the elite castes and the latter the revolt of the elite classes. In chapter 4, I discuss in detail the differences between different ideas of India and trace the outlines of the Indian debate around secularism.

In this dissertation, then, I will address the following questions using multidisciplinary approaches. First, what were the conditions in which the *saas-bahu* soaps emerged as a viable television form at a particular point in history? I mean here not just television history, but the broader configurations of politics, economics, and culture within which they emerged. Second, I will ask how, if at all, economic shifts might be crucial in terms of explaining how the television industry is structured and how culture gets commodified. For example, how did the significant changes that were occurring in the television environment with the increasing relaxation

of regulatory mechanisms and the arrival of Nielsen-type audience measurement systems impact on the content of soaps? And in turn, what role did these soaps play in the politics of the nation and within industrial capitalism? I don't limit myself here to a narrow definition of 'role' which sees soaps as a relatively inexpensive vehicle for maintaining audience (and therefore advertiser) attention or which sees soaps as providing women viewers with particular pleasures and instructions. I use 'role' in a much broader sense to ask what ideological function do soaps serve in the broader society which other forms of television perhaps don't serve, or perhaps don't serve in quite the same way? Non western studies of serials, as we have seen, have at times engaged with questions of this kind even if the texts studied have been ones in which the links between television content and macro politics are quite visible and do not need to be 'read' off the texts. So, for example Porto (2005) studies how a Brazilian serial about immigration set in the past has intersected with the broader popular discourse on immigration; Abu-Lughod (2005) discusses how Egyptian serials, often explicitly pedagogical, deal with themes of nation building, politics, and nationalism; and Rajagopal's (2001) work investigates the role of a televised Hindu religious myth in aiding the work of Hindu nationalism. But I think, and following from earlier discussions of the 'everydayness' and pedagogic nationalism of soaps- and using Billig (1995)-- it will be productive to understand how the very 'banality' of soaps makes it a potent vehicle for the naturalisation of particular ideologies. To be very specific, it is critical to investigate

how the discourses of Hindu nationalism weave their way into the elements of popular culture which are not directly associated with religion- i.e. non-religious or non-mythological programming such as the K-serials. That is, we must investigate how the very form of the soap (and as I have pointed out earlier, not its seriality alone but the frequency or periodicity) influences this ideologising function of the soap.

Third, and following my comments above, I will look at the K-serials not just as sites of localized empowerment and pleasure for women, nor as sources of cheap revenue for broadcasters, nor even as vehicles for the state's pedagogic nation building, but as an institution that is shaped by and shapes the political-ideological terrain of contemporary India. I will, therefore, place the cultural production of soap operas within the political and historical framework of the nation-state, which is still being sought to be shaped by competing nationalisms. I will use a historical materialist approach, but not an economistic or deterministic one. I will treat the spheres of culture, politics, and the economy as autonomous spheres but trace their intersections at a particular moment in time. The advantage of this approach is that it enables a multidisciplinary historical and political analysis that enables one to understand how the whole (e.g. society/culture/politics) shapes the part (e.g. television/soaps/K-serials) even as the part shapes the whole.

The analytical approach I will follow borrows from Prasad's manifesto below (1998):

It is my contention that the specific form taken by the political structure is of primary importance to the study of ideologies. In the absence of such a specification, cultural critique is condemned to vacillate between the two poles of tradition and modernity....This mode of analysis is predicated on an erasure of the political difference and an overemphasis on cultural difference abstracted from the social formulation as a whole. The attempt here, on the other hand, has been to place cultural production firmly within the political and historical framework of the Indian nation-state (p. 13-14).

In the next chapters, this analytical approach will be used to track the political, economic, and social conditions in the period between 1975 and 1999, paying particular attention to the way these were shifting. Ultimately in this dissertation, I intend to discuss what political possibilities are closed off by soaps in contemporary India, and why that is a serious problem. Ravi Vasudevan (1993) has argued in the context of Indian cinema that one cannot entirely rule out the possibility that mass culture might produce from within itself a radical practice. I will show why this possibility is practically non-existent in the case of Indian television.

Chapter 3

Tracing the Transitions: Politics, Political Economy, and Television Content

The family has always been central to discourses of nationhood and nationalism in a variety of contexts with the family often standing in as a symbol of the nation. The cultural representation of the family on Indian television has gone through a series of shifts from the lower middle class family depicted largely in secular terms on *Hum Log* in the mid 1980s to the upper class families explicitly coded as upper caste Hindus on the K-series on the early 2000s. There has been a similar, if even more complex and counter-intuitive, transition in the representation of womanhood. These shifts in the representation of the family (especially in terms of class) and womanhood are intricately tied up to the transition from a climate in which secular nationalism was dominant to one in which Hindu nationalism became so. These shifts were also connected to the shifts brought about by the implementation of neoliberal economic reforms that shaped, among others, the political economy of television, including the intricate circuits linking advertisers and audiences through media. In this chapter, I examine the complex material conditions that enabled these shifts. I track the changes in the political economy of India, in its politics, and in the changing representation of family and womanhood on Indian television. I will pay particular attention to how the nature, form, and content of television has been influenced by the state, especially in its role within

capitalist economy. This is, I argue, as true of television in the Doordarshan era as in the early and middle satellite eras. To do this, I will trace the development of neo-liberal economic policies in India and investigate how those developments, at each stage, were bound up critically with the role of television. I examine in brief the increasing influence of Hindu nationalism on the political environment. I then discuss the changing content of television serials, particularly its construction of family and womanhood, by critically analyzing the opening credit sequences (which are almost always accompanied by specially composed title tracks) of four immensely popular soaps from four different periods in India's television history. The choice of opening credits for analysis is based on the obvious assumption that opening credit sequence is a fair (if not complete) indicator of the contents and concerns of the soap itself.

I begin this story in 1973, contrary to standard wisdom that traces many of these changes in society and in media back to the moment in 1991 when—as the narrative goes—a balance of payment crisis forced the government's hands leading to the opening up (or 'liberalization') of the Indian economy, and a concomitant opening up of the television airwaves to private players. But this narrative, obsessed as it is with the moment of 1991 when (as the cliché goes) "everything changed", is often oblivious to the longer arc of history. The changes in the socio-economic context, as with the changes in television, did not come overnight even if that is how it might appear

to the casual observer. These changes came as the inevitable outcome of processes of much longer duration.

To understand these changes better, and to observe some articulation of these changes with popular culture, we need to go much further back, for a start, to 1973.

The Birth and Development of Neoliberal Economic Policies in India: 1973-1985

It was in 1973 that the first solid steps were taken to move away from the state capitalist model put in place by the founding fathers of independent India led by the new nation-state's first prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru. Nehru considered himself to be a socialist, even though the party that he led had been in thrall to the interests of bourgeois capitalism almost since the time it was founded in the late 1800s (Sarkar, 1983; Vanaik, 1990). India's post-independence economy eventually ended up as a compromise based on three competing visions: decentralized small-scale production, advocated by Gandhi; a version of socialism, largely inspired by Nehru; and liberal capitalism, which had many champions in the Congress, not least of which were the business elites (Hardgrave & Kochanek, 1986). In practice, the economy was firmly a state capitalist one, planned from the centre through the bureaucratic-scientific model of the Planning Commission instituted by Nehru in 1950. As Achin Vanaik, convincingly argues, post-Independence India is best understood as a "backward capitalist country having a number of sociological features characteristic of the poorer third world countries [even though] in

terms of its fundamental economic structure and its dynamic of growth, it is much closer to the weaker of the advanced capitalist countries” (p.31). In fact, one of the defining features of India at independence was a presence of a very strong indigenous bourgeoisie relatively autonomous from foreign capital- a feature that is almost unique to India. Yet, India’s close economic and political relationship with the USSR in the Cold War era (Vanaik, 1990) and Nehru’s sometimes self-identification as a socialist (Khilnani, 1999) ensured that India continued to be viewed from outside its shores (and often from within) as primarily a socialist country.

In 1973, though, partially in response to the eventually long-term decline in global capitalist economies that began in the early 1970s, tentative moves were initiated by the state to further open up the Indian economy. Ironically, enough, in power was the same Congress party of Nehru, led at that time by his daughter and political heir Indira Gandhi. These moves laid the base for all future economic liberalization (Girdner, 1987).¹¹ But political turbulence started soon after with the 1975 declaration of a state of emergency with the concomitant suspension of civil liberties and political rights. The emergency (or ‘the Emergency’ as it is known in India) was marked by the arrest of political opposition, the suspension of human rights including *habeas corpus*, coercive family planning practices, and

¹¹ The first significant shift away from the Nehruvian model of state capitalism/ socialism was actually in 1966 when Prime Minister Indira Gandhi devalued the currency and initiated steps to reduce trade controls and internal licensing, but these were very quickly walked back to a near status quo (Denoon, 1998). That is why I am tracing the present trajectory from 1973, rather than 1966-68.

widespread destruction of slums. Rajadhyaksha (1990) argues that the Emergency “was, in many ways, an effort to shore up, as almost a last-ditch stand, the orthodox protectionist measures of a national market in India, a promise that had been explicitly made to the Indian bourgeoisie during the freedom struggle” (p.39).

The state of emergency however was untenable for too long; and it was followed by the election of an unstable coalition government in 1977 that ruled for barely three years. It took some time, therefore, for the process of economic liberalization to gain momentum again. Indira Gandhi and the Congress came back to power in 1980, and in the last years of her rule (before she was assassinated in 1984), the first concrete moves were made towards import liberalization, with the terrain mapped out in areas such as export, fiscal, and tax policies (Patel, 1987). Needless to say, quite a bit of this was attributable to the pressure exerted by global financial agencies such as the IMF, from which the Indian government had taken a whopping \$5.3 bn loan (initiated in 1982-83). However, it was the Rajiv Gandhi led Congress government which came to power in 1985, that significantly intensified this process.

Rajiv Gandhi came to office on a huge mandate, driven by the sympathy he received when his mother Indira was assassinated. But he also represented a fresh face in Indian politics, which at that time was pervaded with the stench of institutionalized corruption emanating from the very highest echelons. In a speech at the London School of Economics in 1987, I.G. Patel, the governor of India’s central

bank from 1977 to 1982, argued that there was among the public an “anxiety for a cleaner and less arbitrary form of government” and this desire was greater than “the desire for more rapid economic progress with greater impact on poverty” (p.210). As the political scientist (and scholar of South Asian politics) Stanley Kochanek notes, the changes introduced by Rajiv Gandhi moved the “center of gravity of the traditional Congress party economic policy away from its left-of-center, socialist, and regulatory orientation toward a more centrist, private sector, market oriented approach” (1986, p.1287). Gandhi’s first economic budget (in 1985) took a number of market friendly steps such as reducing individual and corporate taxes (apparently to spur tax compliance), abolishing estate duties, lowering wealth tax and cutting duties on capital goods imports (Kochanek, 1986). In formal terms, this was an attempt to move India from an import substitution to an export production regime. Naturally, the scope of the role that the private sector was to play in this new economic regime was vastly expanded from what had been the norm in the years of centralized economic planning, enshrined in the periodic Five Year Plans of the Indian government. The first Five Year Plan under Rajiv Gandhi--the seventh since independent India’s Planning Commission was set up in 1950-- envisaged private sector investment levels up to 52% of Plan outlays. Achin Vanaik (1990) explains that this was “liberalization aimed at strengthening the hold of indigenous capital in the domestic market with the help of foreign capital” (p.15).

As with the best of Plans, though, things didn't progress as smoothly as they were intended to. Patel (1987) argues that Rajiv's so-called New Economic Policy was advocated mainly on the grounds of how efficient it would make the economy, and thus failed to resonate enough with people. And Kochanek (1986) argued presciently just a year after the policy was unveiled that Rajiv's import liberalization policy was not sustainable:

The policy will enlarge India's debt service levels as imports may not be offset by increased exports due to uncertain world demand. The resulting foreign exchange gap may not be sustainable. The problem may become compounded, moreover, by constraints on concessional assistance and the limited scope for further import substitution. The result may be a failure to meet desired growth targets and a massive resource and foreign exchange gap (p.1307).

Achin Vanaik (1990) too pointed out that the balance between state and private capital in India was bound to change very soon. He suggested:

The Indian economy has reached a stage of capitalist maturity where private capital must more and more take the lead, with the state seeking increasingly to play a supportive (if still preponderant) role. There is a solid consensus on this both inside and outside of the government which is reflected in the near complete abandonment of earlier pretenses to pursuing a socialist pattern of development (p.31-32).

These prognoses was borne out in 1991, but it is important to note that in terms of political rhetoric, this policy entrenched a very significant shift in focus from the bottom half of India's population--memorably articulated by Indira Gandhi in her early 1970s electoral slogan 'Garibi Hatao' ('Remove Poverty')--to one that concentrated on the top 10% or so of the population. The idea, borrowed obviously

from neo classical economics, was that pent up demand would unleash the engines of growth and that this top 10% of the population (around a 100mn strong at that time) would mop up enhanced production capacities being put in place. VP Singh, Rajiv Gandhi's finance minister (and future Prime Minister of India), stated in 1985, therefore, that public sector losses could no longer be justified on social grounds (Kochanek, 1986). If, as Hardgrave & Kochanek (1986) argue, India's post-independence economy had always been a compromise based on the three competing visions of Gandhian decentralized small-scale production, Nehruvian socialism, and liberal-capitalism, Singh's statement was laying down the markers for the eventual banishment of Nehruvian socialism. Despite eventual implementation problems and government backtracking that started as soon as 1986--occasioned by stinging accusations that the New Economic Policy was too pro-rich (Kochanek, 1986)--Rajiv's economic programme of the mid 1980s built the basic foundations for the eventual dominance of neo-liberal capitalism¹² and trickle down economics.

One of the core pillars of the changing stance towards the management of the economy was the New Electronics Policy initiated by the Indira Gandhi government in January 1984 (Girdner, 1987). The aim was to modernize a whole host of electronics and telecommunications industries mainly through a transfer of

¹² As noted earlier, despite the competing pulls of alternative ideologies, the Indian economy had always been essentially capitalistic, even if directed by the state. So the point being made here is that it was in this period that the pulls of alternative ideologies began to diminish significantly.

technology from the west. It was no surprise— given the strong streak of technological determinism (and even utopianism) that ran through her son Rajiv Gandhi's pronouncements —that this policy was actively continued even after Indira's death. Poverty, Rajiv Gandhi argued for example, could only be removed "through adoption of better technology and a giant leap¹³ to catch up with the rest of the world" (Rajiv Gandhi, cited in Girdner, 1987, p.1190). One of the key objectives for Rajiv's government was to extend direct TV broadcasting nationwide, especially to take it to rural communities, and the New Electronic Policy also made it easier to ramp up the production of color television in the country.

Indian Television: The Early Days

This focus on television of course was both in line with and a reaction to the initial conception of the medium in India. TV was initially conceived as purely a developmental medium that would spread the message of modernity and remove all ills, even though Nehru himself was wary of committing funds that in a poor country might have been better used elsewhere. So, while television had been present in India in some form or the other from 1959, two key developments in the 1980s propelled the dramatic growth of the state broadcaster Doordarshan. The first was the re-election of Indira Gandhi as prime minister in 1979 and her desire for closer political control, surveillance and propaganda coupled with the installation of a pro-television minister in Vasant Sathe. The second was the hosting

¹³ It isn't clear if Rajiv Gandhi was consciously channeling Mao's Great Leap Forward, but the resonances are eerie!

of the Asian Games in New Delhi and consequent decision for television to be broadcast in colour. On the 15th of August 1982, so called National Programming was instituted which, through the help of new satellites beaming down to local transponders and transmitters, enabled the same content to be seen in many parts of the country (Kumar, 2006; Mankekar, 1999; Rajagopal, 2001).

For Ashish Rajadhyaksha (1990) a third reason that was equally important in the development of television was the flooding of the Indian market in the seventies with smuggled foreign made consumer durables, particularly VCR technology which came in around 1975. The failure of the Emergency imposed by Indira Gandhi in 1975 led to the realization that the government could not completely control modes of distribution any more and Doordarshan and the National Programme were boosted, at least partly, on a desire to therefore control modes of information. As we have noted the Emergency was also an attempt at fulfilling the promise of a protected domestic market made to the bourgeoisie. But the fulfillment of this promise of a national market “depends on geographically defined distribution oligopolies” (p.39) which was no longer tenable in the face of concerted efforts by the US and Japan to break these up. In response to these efforts (as we noted earlier), the Indira Gandhi government made the first shifts to a more market oriented *laissez faire* capitalism, claiming that the market had to be “freed” in response to global capitalism.

This change in economic policy coincided with the demographic expansion of the so-called middle classes who by the mid 1980s

constituted more than 10 percent of the population. The agenda for Doordarshan was: on the cultural front, a focus on the aspirations and anxieties of this 'middle class' and on the economic front, a shift from the planned to a consumer economy (Mankekar, 1999). The growth of television was dramatic, especially in the context of a poor, underdeveloped country: Doordarshan's reach grew from an estimated 8 percent of the nation's population in 1982 to covering 81 percent of the urban and 50 percent of the rural population by 1985 (Page & Crawley, 2001). The originary moment of the dramatic changes in Indian television can therefore be mapped to the mid 1980s when the Indira Gandhi and then the Rajiv Gandhi led Congress governments first moved away from the state driven public broadcasting model and embraced the advent of private players, even if initially within that public model.

Neoliberal Economics in India: 1990-1995

But when private television arrived in India in 1991, it was in a world born from the balance of payments crisis facing the nation. This was, in fact, a world that Stanley Kochanek, the political scientist whom we encountered earlier, had predicted would emerge when the contradictions in Rajiv Gandhi's New Economic Policy became too difficult to reconcile among themselves. This crisis necessitated a widely trumpeted set of economic 'reforms,' and indeed these reforms were presented to the public as having been necessitated by the crisis. But we have seen earlier, for example in the prognosis of Vanaik (1990), that these reforms would have undoubtedly taken place

sooner rather than later anyway. I am not suggesting here that the crisis was in any way manufactured, but that the inevitable outcome of the trajectory on which the Indian economy had been placed since around 1973 was a crisis of this nature, the prescription for which would be a set of Washington Consensus conforming economic reforms acting as medicine for the crisis. The basic supposition behind the reforms was of course the dogma--as J. Ghosh (1992) put it--that “the chief solution to most economic ills is the ‘freeing’ of market forces” (p.948). But it was almost certainly the case that the crisis was of a *temporary* nature while the solution to the crisis was of a long term or permanent one (Corbridge & Harris, 2003). One of the main thrusts of these reforms was the removal of license controls from a whole host of industries and sectors, key among them the media sector, and specifically television. This enabled both private and foreign players to enter the market, even though various kinds of restrictions remained in place to moderate the influence of foreign ownership of media, especially the news media. (For a whole host of reasons which we do not have space to get into here, regulations around ownership and control of news media—especially print and radio—continued to develop separately from and independent of regulations of television). Without going too much into the details of the economic liberalization/reforms programme, we should note here that these 1991 reforms continued the Rajiv Gandhi trajectory of intensive imports that domestic demand was supposed to mop up (A. Ghosh, 1993). The balance of payments issue itself was certainly

addressed within the next couple of years, but it was not clear whether the prescribed medicine was working and the hoped for cure had taken effect. Looking closely at the import-export data, Arun Ghosh (1993) concluded that the increase in exports had arisen “not from the export of manufactured goods (particularly high value engineering goods or chemicals etc.), but from an increase in the export of primary products” (p.2325). If the increase in exports was coming from primary products (i.e. agricultural and mineral products, mainly) that would clearly imply that additional jobs were not being created to the extent that the prophets of neo-liberal economics had promised pre-liberalization; and certainly not being created to absorb the vast mass of uneducated and under educated Indian workers, most of whom were moving to urban areas in the search of relief from the distressed state of Indian agriculture.

Vanaik (1990) shows that between 1965 and 1986, the share of agriculture in India’s GDP fell from 46% to 32% while the share of workforce only went down from 73% to 70%, indicating a huge pressure on agricultural wages. Post the 1991 liberalization, agricultural distress has only increased significantly, with the proportion of workers engaged in agriculture remaining stuck at around 60%, as J. Ghosh (2009) shows. In addition, over the years, even as the employment in agriculture did not change significantly, the gap between incomes in agriculture and non-agriculture did. Between the 1950s and the 1990s, the ratio of per worker domestic

product in non-agriculture to agriculture increased in this period from two to well over four (J.Ghosh, 2009).

What flows from the above changes are a few key shifts related to television in particular, but the media in general. First, the significant opening up of the economy resulted in the entrance into the domestic market of a number of multinational and foreign players. The goods and services that these organizations produced were inevitably accompanied with marketing and advertising efforts directed towards citizens in whom a consumer subjectivity had either to be cultivated or enhanced. And in a country of multiple languages and high illiteracy, it stood to reason that the medium of television-- especially television in the Hindi language intelligible to at least 40% of the population (Census, 2001)-- became rather important in this respect. Second, economic liberalization in the 1990s saw the advent of private television in India and the state no longer had direct influence on all of television. Both Indian and foreign companies invested in cable and satellite channels (henceforth C&S, following industry terminology) with Sony-Columbia's flagship Sony TV, Newscorp's flagship Star Plus and the homegrown Zee TV vying to overturn Doordarshan's primacy. At inception, private television was almost entirely advertising driven—and for that matter has largely remained so even twenty years after its arrival in the country with 80% of their revenues still coming from advertising (KPMG, 2011). This meant, at least in the eyes of early private broadcasters as well as the advertisers who would buy air time from them, that the perceived

upper middle class audience, able to afford the products advertised, were the ones primarily targeted by television. It is no coincidence, therefore, that the first formal private audience measurement services in India started only in 1994, with the setting up of the Indian National Television Audience Measurement (INTAM) service by the research agency ORG-MARG (Chougule, 2005).

Given the advertising driven nature of the medium, it was natural that the early serials on private television focused on clearly upper middle class characters living in urban locations, exhibiting new modes of being and behaviour. While this did not prevent working class or lower-middle class viewers from watching these shows, these characters clearly came across as being very much removed from their lives as Mankekar (2004) shows. These new depictions of being and of womanhood on television were not without controversy, especially in the face of another powerful force operating across India's political and cultural terrain- the resurgent politics of right wing Hindu nationalism.

A Very Brief History of Hindu Nationalism in 20th Century India

The story of Hindu nationalism in India has a long and complicated history and we will discuss it at length in the next chapter. But it is important to note for now that true electoral success did not come to Hindu nationalist politics till 1977, when its political arm the Jana Sangh (later to become the Bharatiya Janata Party, or BJP) became part of the coalition that formed India's first non-Congress government. This was a momentous development, not just

for the Jana Sangh but for Indian politics as a whole. Till such time the Congress was the only party that had held power at the federal level since independence in 1947; and it had done so partly riding on the immense goodwill and historical memory of the party as the party of Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru—the party that had led India to independence. But while 1977 was the first year that the Hindu right tasted political power (albeit limited) at the federal level, it had spent years building various kinds of organisational capabilities since the dark days of 1948 when it had been banned following its complicity in the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi. The fount organisation of the Hindu right, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh or the RSS ('The National Organization of Volunteers') often known just as the Sangh, had been created in 1925 by the ideologue Keshav Baliram Hedgewar, with the explicit purpose of building a Hindu nation; and its women's wing the Rashtra Sevika Samiti ('Women Volunteers of the Nation') was founded in 1936. But within a couple of decades the RSS had started to put in place a network of organizations specifically geared to reach out to particular constituencies, later to be known by the collective appellation *Sangh Parivar* (i.e the Sangh family).

First, in 1954 the RSS took effective control of the Bharatiya Jana Sangh ('The Indian People's Organisation'), a party created in 1951 by erstwhile Congress minister Shyama Prasad Mookerjee in the belief that it was possible to marry Hindu traditional values to middle class liberal principles--and therefore have "secular nationalism and

unflinching faith in democracy” as the key principles of its original constitution (Graham, 2005). RSS control of the Jana Sangh meant that these principles were soon discarded, spurred by the very justifiable belief that despite the Congress’ overwhelming political dominance, there was space for a party that represented the interests of the Hindus, especially the small landholders or small businesses who were becoming increasingly jittery with the state moving in the direction of increasing control and regulation. But its involvement in issues such as the anti-Urdu campaign in northern India, the campaign for Hindi as a national language and the campaign against cow-slaughter post 1950s reinforced its image as a sectarian party outside the mainstream (Hansen, 1999).

The Jana Sangh’s uptick in fortunes happened in the 1960s when it adopted a more populist stance borrowing from Gandhian philosophy, moving more to the centre and starting to align with centrist parties (Hansen, 1999). Around this time, the task of consolidating and centering the Hindu religion itself (a key founding imperative of the RSS) was taken up more seriously by the Sangh. The Vishwa Hindu Parishad (‘World Hindu Council’, known by the acronym VHP) was thus founded in 1964, occasioned by the Pope’s announcement that the International Eucharistic Conference would be held in Bombay in November that year where 250 Indians would be converted to Christianity. Conceived as the chief link between the RSS and Hindu religious leaders scattered all over the country, the VHP soon took on the task of moulding Hinduism into the ecclesiastical

structure characteristic of Islam and Christianity— the religions that the Hindu right so feared (Jaffrelot, 2005).

The birth of the VHP also marked the increasing positioning of Christians as ‘alienating others’ to go with the stigmatization of the Muslims. Especially because the Jana Sangh was trying to become more centrist, these stigmatizing tasks fell to the VHP, which later gave rise to two subsidiary organizations geared to appeal to and attract a mass base: the Bajrang Dal for the men and the Durga Vahini for the women, both named for martial god figures in the Hindu pantheon, the warrior monkey god Hanuman and the warrior goddess Durga, respectively. Together, these various outfits--along with other special interest ones, like the trade union Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (‘Indian Worker’s Union’, acronym BMS), and the Swadeshi Jagran Manch (‘Front for the Mass Awakening on Economic Nationalism’, acronym SJM)-- became a part of the Sangh Parivar (The Sangh Family) even as the RSS protested time and again that these were independent bodies and that it itself was only a cultural organization.

As the Jana Sangh tasted power at the centre in a coalition in 1977 it put on a less right-wing garb, and its successor the Bharatiya Janata Party (‘The Indian People’s Party’, BJP) was launched on the ideological platform of ‘Gandhian socialism’ in the early 1980s. Yet at the same time, the inheritor of Jawaharlal Nehru’s secular legacy, Indira Gandhi, made a move from populist socialism to a more clearly articulated Hindu appeal. This had the paradoxical result of increased

RSS support to the Congress government even though she criticized the opposition which included the RSS's ideological offspring, the BJP (Vanaik, 1990). With the BJP dabbling in socialism, the VHP became the main spearhead of Hindu nationalism in the decade in which political Hinduism began to believe in its ultimate glory: the 1980s.

Achin Vanaik (1990) notes that the most important factor behind the rise of Hindu nationalism post-independence has been the intermediate castes, which comprise the agrarian bourgeoisie and the rural and urban petty bourgeoisie. So the assertion of Hindu fundamentalism was not merely a reaction to social and economic failures as say Hansen (1999) would argue but “a consciously chosen cultural expression of a social force which has enhanced its authority and which is upwardly mobile on the economic and popular fronts” (Vanaik, 1990,p.144). The analysis of Nandy et al. (1998) is more on socio-psychological (and rather culturalist) grounds, without affording the actors as much agency as Vanaik does. According to them, the politics of Hindu nationalism allows scope for reconciling two sets of demands “within the terms of discourse of modern India”(p.78): one, the internalized demands of state ideology which constantly propagated secularism, development, and scientific rationality and two, the demands of modern India which resulted in confusing encounters with uprooting, deculturation and massification.

Strategically speaking, however, the approaches that resulted in the rise of Hindu fundamentalism in the 1980s were extremely

sophisticated. Since it was not possible to directly position Muslims as the enemy, given that they constituted only 12% of the population and were disproportionately poor and illiterate, the messaging was that the secular state had 'appeased' Muslims and treated Hindus unfairly (Vanaik, 1997). The state, therefore, was 'pseudo-secular' and only the BJP could guarantee 'genuine' secularism based as its philosophies were in the supposedly innate tolerance of Hinduism. The task that the Sangh Parivar set out to accomplish was to re-engineer Hindus according to the ideals of Hindutva, backed by "a pasteurized Brahmanic version of the dominant public ideology of the modern west", in Nandy, Trivedy, Mayaram & Yagnik's words (1998, p.63). They argue that this ideology works on a number of stark polarities- genuine secularism versus pseudo-secularism, genuine history versus false history and true nationalism versus false patriotism.

The BJP's hijacking of secularism found traction because the Indian state's secularism had in practice meant appeasing all communalisms in succession (Vanaik, 1997). This was amply demonstrated in the politics of Rajiv Gandhi who had neither the experience nor the political skills of his mother, Indira, to handle the problems that faced him in 1985-86 after the rather vocal opposition to his economic policies. Partly in order to recover his rapidly diminishing political capital, Rajiv fanned the flames of soft Hindu nationalism that his mother Indira had been encouraging in her last years in office. To be perfectly clear many Congress members had often talked secularism and walked soft Hindu nationalism right from

the time of the national liberation struggle and Indira Gandhi had started pandering more overtly to the Hindu right, so Indira and Rajiv's moves were not altogether without historical precedent.

Rajiv's version of espousing secularism translated in practice as offering concessions to hardliners of both communities, treated as *the* representative voices of their communities. His government showed "an increasing willingness to take sides in disputes between and within communities" (Jaffrelot, 1996, p.369). First, it introduced a bill in Parliament that sought to overturn a Supreme Court judgment and take Muslim personal law out of the purview of the Criminal Procedure Code (the so-called Shah Bano case). This gave ammunition to the Hindu right which trotted out the by then familiar mantra of Muslim appeasement. Then, pandering to the chauvinists on the other side of the already hardening Hindu-Muslim divide, the Rajiv Gandhi government allowed the opening of the locks to the sanctum sanctorum of the Babri Masjid. The Babri Masjid was a mosque that the VHP speciously claimed had been built on the site of the god figure Lord Ram's birthplace in the northern town of Ayodhya, and into which Hindu right wingers had smuggled in an idol of Ram in 1947 (Guha, 2007). This mosque therefore had been a flashpoint for antagonism between Hindus and Muslims for nearly four decades, but the intensity of the antagonism had remained on low boil. For the VHP, which had by now emerged as the self-declared guardian of Hindu interests not just in India but also among the diaspora, the campaign to 'liberate' the Ramjanmabhoomi (Land of birth of Ram)

and build a *mandir* (temple) on that very spot that the Babri Masjid stood, became a practical crystallization of the thought of Hindu nationalism's key ideologues. The government's decision to open the locks to the sanctum sanctorum was an indication of tacit consent to the Hindu right's spurious and ahistorical arguments. In fact, it was part of a larger 'Ayodhya strategy' by the Congress government which believed that it could secure more electoral success by pandering to Hindu nationalist sentiments and adopting a conciliatory stance towards the BJP-VHP combine (Hasan, 2005).

In addition, the decision was taken to broadcast the great Indian epics *Ramayan*¹⁴ (The Tale of Ram), on state run Doordarshan starting 1987, followed soon enough by the other epic *Mahabharat*. The argument deployed at that time was that these were not simply Hindu, but Indian epics beloved by all Indians-- and this was not an argument entirely without merit. But the televised versions of these epics, particularly that of the *Ramayan*, borrowed heavily from the discourses of contemporary Hindu nationalism, rather than acknowledging the multiplicity of voices inherent in these epics. The decision to telecast these epics was extremely controversial, but for the government it was simply a case of moving with the winds in politics at that moment. But neither Rajiv Gandhi nor the Congress party realized just how effectively their attempts at showcasing their Hindu credentials would be hijacked by the more media savvy and

¹⁴ In this dissertation, the title *Ramayana* will be used to denote the epic, while *Ramayan* (without the final 'a') will be used to refer to the televised version of the epic.

politically astute campaigners of the Sangh Parivar. (See Rajagopal, 2001, for the most comprehensive account of how the Parivar did so). By 1991, the Parivar, in the form of its proxy BJP had managed to establish itself as a significant force in Indian politics, establishing itself as the second largest party in the lower house of Parliament—the Lok Sabha—and virtually managing to eliminate the Congress in the populous and politically important Hindi-speaking states of Northern India (Malik & Singh, 1992). In its bid to gain power at the federal level, the BJP opposed many facets of the Congress led government's policies of economic openness. It espoused the cause of *swadeshi* or indigenous economic self-sufficiency, even though it changed tack as it came close to the seat of power by the late 1990s (Lakha, 2007). This economic nationalism was mixed with a cultural nationalism that found easy targets in the newly available television programming.

Hindu Nationalist Politics, Culture, and Citizens: Early- Mid 1990s. Television, both indigenously produced and of foreign origin, as well as other cultural happenings, faced the wrath of Hindu nationalists in the mid 1990s. Special ire was reserved for the Miss World competition held for the first time in India in 1996, with women activists from Hindu nationalist parties threatening to burn themselves in protest against the undermining of “India’s 5000 year old cultural heritage” (‘Miss World Crowned’, 1996). For Hindu nationalists, the family and the woman’s body had always been central foci of anxiety and the renewed visibility of novel mass

mediated spectacles showcased on globalized media forms provided an opportunity to rearticulate these anxieties with renewed vigor. (We will discuss at length Hindu nationalism's complex articulation of these anxieties in chapter 3.) As a very visible avatar of globalization, transnational satellite television became an easy target. MTV attracted serious criticism for being culturally invasive when it was first launched in India (Page & Crawley, 2001), and the Indian government even objected to MTV's use of the Indian flag colors on its logo during Independence Day broadcasts. Nightclubs, magazines, advertisements-almost anything could be objected to and threatened with a ban by Hindu nationalists in the mid 1990s on the pretext of not being in line with the 'values' and 'traditions' of India (Spaeth, 1995).

This concerted effort to politicize culture by the Hindu right was sometimes reflected in viewer opinions. In the larger of the non-metro¹⁵ towns like Ahmedabad and Pune, some audiences interviewed by media researchers expressed concern about the "moral values" imparted by satellite television in general, and not just those of MTV or American shows. A viewer from the apparently more 'globalized' city of Bombay wrote to the editor of *Outlook*, a leading English language magazine about one of the most popular Hindi serials at that time: "I hate the soap opera, Tara, as it shows the degradation of women. A woman is shown getting into wedlock several times, drinking and smoking. This is really a bad example for youngsters" (Kabra, 1996).

¹⁵ The five big cities of Bangalore, Chennai, Delhi, Mumbai & Kolkata are usually referred to in India as the metros.

Some women viewers from working classes or small towns felt that even the Indian language soaps painted “an unreal and perverted picture of women” (quoted in Page & Crawley, 1996, p.166). Mankekar (2004) also reported how her lower middle class and working class informants considered the depictions of these mostly upper middle class women to have little relation to their own lives, but at the same time contended that these representations of women heralded larger changes in society such as broken families and teenage pregnancies. And in Gokulsing (2004) we see audiences at the same time arguing simultaneously that women being engaged in ‘gainful employment’ was beneficial to society even though their not respecting their husbands’ and in-laws’ wishes was not!

The disapproval of the depictions of women’s desires on these serials came even from westernized cosmopolitan young respondents interviewed by the television scholar Melissa Butcher (2003). Butcher observes that the outward adoption of western accoutrements like jeans and English speech and a desire to travel to the United States co-existed with a denunciation of the rootlessness and infidelity that supposedly marked the West. Her young respondents positioned themselves against the West’s supposed immorality, shallowness of relationships and lack of traditions, offering stereotypical truisms like, “The concept of family doesn’t really exist much there [while] Indians still give deference to their family traditions” (quoted in Butcher, 2003, p. 212). This increasingly louder invocation of ‘tradition’ was not occurring in a vacuum, clearly, but under sustained Hindu nationalist

attempts to capture the political space by deploying 'tradition' --and as we will see later, conflating the category 'tradition' with the category 'Hindu upper class upper caste norms and beliefs'. As Page & Crawley (2001) pointed out, "The emergence of the BJP and the Shiv Sena¹⁶ as dominant political influence at the national level and in Maharashtra [the capital of which is Mumbai, the heart of Hindi film and TV production] contributed to the emergence of a more conservative cultural atmosphere." As I will show later, what began to emerge on television was a depiction of the suppression of upper class female desire, albeit couched in the garb of 'tradition.' And this tradition, as I will show, was expressly couched in the discourses of the highest echelons of the caste system, Brahminism.

Hindu nationalism as upper caste elite revolt. Any discussion of the politics of modern day India is incomplete without reference to caste, even though, as Sudipta Kaviraj (1997) says, "...there is a certain oddity to speaking of them [i.e. caste and religion] separately, as caste is a special mode of organization internal to Hinduism" (p.5). But, as Kaviraj himself goes on to discuss, caste has inflected the social processes of religions other than Hinduism as well, even if it is identified mostly (if not exclusively) with Hinduism. Rather than being immutable and unchanging, then, caste shows constant transformation; and it is this change and mutability that ensured that Hindu nationalism in the late 80s was dialectically intertwined with

¹⁶ Another Hindu nationalist party, but unlike the BJP which has more or less a national presence, the Shiv Sena is concentrated mainly in the western state of Maharashtra.

the resurgence of caste based movements in many parts of India at the same time. As Jaffrelot (1996) and Vanaik (1997) among many others have shown, the Hindu right was initially opposed tooth and nail to rising caste based movements as well as to central government policies that sought to reverse years of discrimination against the lower castes through affirmative action policies. This was in large part because the Sangh leadership and ideologues were almost all Brahmins; and the Ramjanmabhoomi movement was in large part an attempt to coalesce a Hindu identity against the threat of caste based identity politics. This obviously necessitated the positioning of an 'other' (namely Muslims, to start with, and then Christians) whom all Hindus could rally against.

Later on, in the interests of electoral politics, the BJP did try to broaden its appeal to various castes, in that they appealed to caste groups as caste groups rather than as part of a larger unified Hindu community (Corbridge & Harris, 2003). Kaviraj (1997) argues, though, that while politics of caste identity have gained in strength, caste as a social dynamic has decreased in importance. This argument is similar to a parallel argument that even if the politics of religion has been more salient in India of late, religion itself has lost its potency. (Versions of this argument can be found in Bal (2009), Kaviraj (1997), and Ohm (2007), among others). These are both statements that have some merit, but as I argue, in this dissertation, this takes our attention away from the fact that Hindu nationalism has transformed into a banal one.

In an interesting weaving together of the various trends in the political landscape of India in the 1990s, Corbridge and Harris (2003) assert that these trends (namely, economic liberalization and Hindu nationalism) are “in some senses to be understood as ‘elite revolts’, reflecting the assertions especially of upper castes and middle classes’ (p.137). That is, “elite assertions on one side...and subaltern mobilizations on the other intersected with the politics of caste, community, and spatiality” (p.122). Note, though, that both community and spatiality are extremely important for market driven private television is concerned—the former because the majority of visual representations end up being anchored in one community (upper-caste Hindu), both using hegemonic discourses and contributing to that hegemonization; the latter because television audiences are sliced and diced according to the spaces that they live in, that is, the geographical markets that they constitute. (In chapters 4 and 5, we will tease out the implications of these dynamics in far greater detail).

Over the last three decades, economic liberalization and Hindu nationalism have both been reflected on Indian television, sometimes covertly and sometimes more overtly. Missing on private television though has been any reflection of the debates around caste. In fact, I would suggest that caste is the elephant in the room as far as Indian television is concerned, both in terms of its content and in terms of its analyses. As far as the content is concerned, caste has never been addressed on Indian television shows in any significant sense, other

than occasional observations that characters on Indian television seem to be drawn almost exclusively from the Hindu upper castes.

This naturalized quality of upper casteness has been present in analyses of television as well. Britta Ohm (2007) takes the dominance of the upper castes among the creative decision makers of late 90s satellite television for granted as does Ananda Mitra (1993) in his discussion of Doordarshan. What studies have very rarely done, though, is look at the audiences of television and enquire if the dynamics of caste have at all been at play in the interaction between television content and its audiences. The reason for this is not hard to discern. The discussion of caste has been, if anything, even more complex and unresolved in the Indian context than the discussion of religion, with myriad interpretations not just of how caste plays out, but what it actually is. These range from an extremely localized conception of caste, as posited by legendary Indian anthropologist MN Srinivas (1962) to Louis Dumont's landmark *Homo Hierarchicus* (1970) which argued that notions of purity and pollution, embedded in a strong hierarchy, was symptomatic of the Indian caste system and constitutive of an Indian essence. The interaction of caste with class is equally contentious, with a number of anthropologists often contending that class was an inadequate category for the study of India, especially that of peasants and village India (Beteille, 2002). Even respected scholars coming from a Marxist tradition such as Javeed Alam (2010) have publicly grappled with the difficulties in reconciling issues of caste and class. I am not going to suggest that

this dissertation will make a significant contribution to the debates around the interaction of caste and class in India, but to ignore it altogether in the context of any study of India that engages with political developments (as this one does) risks limiting its usefulness. I will focus, though, on one aspect of caste, the fact that the reproduction of the Hindu nation on the K-serials was the reproduction of a Brahminical nation on the K-serials. Before going onto a discussion of the shifts the political economy and content of television, it is necessary to mark a significant shift in the larger context that occurred in the late 1990s.

A Kind of Consensus Emerges: Late 1990s

By August 1997, the political context had shifted appreciably in favour of the Hindu nationalists. 1997 was marked by the year end collapse of the United Front government, a government which the political scientist Sumit Ganguly (1998) described as nothing more than a “loose agglomeration of some 14 ideologically diverse political parties that had governed India for 18 months” (p.126). This made the political scenario extremely propitious for the BJP which was tipped to become the single largest party in Parliament in the elections scheduled for March of the next year, a prediction that it duly fulfilled. (It was anyway firmly in control in many of the country’s most populous Hindi speaking states by that time, and had already once managed to form a central government, albeit a short-lived 13 day one in 1996). In those 1998 general elections, the BJP not only emerged as the single largest party, but it gained votes in the eastern and

southern parts of the country where support for it had hitherto been almost non-existent (Corbridge & Harris, 2003). More than just success in the electoral arena, though, it seemed that there were profound shifts underway. In the words of Anil Nauriya (1996), commenting on a recent Supreme Court decision, there seemed to be a “growing tendency towards appropriation of the BJP-RSS conceptual framework by state institutions” (p.13). Or as Kapur & Cossman (1996) put it in stronger words, “the court has given legal sanction to the Hindu right's ideology of Hindutva as well as to its discursive strategy of hijacking secularism for its own unsecular agenda” (p.2613).

Equally, by the late 1990s, the consensus around the broad repudiation of India's founding economic dogmas, and acceptance of the necessity for neoliberal economic policies was increasing across the political spectrum. The transition from state capitalism to neoliberal capitalism with Indian variants had been more gradual compared to some of the other nations that had undergone radical economic surgery under IMF decrees. A strong politically organized left, and leftist voices in the centrist Congress had resisted the complete opening up of markets in the 1980s and early 1990s. But by the late 1990s, more and more of the market fundamentalist arguments of Milton Friedman and the Chicago School were being adopted in India across wide swathes of the political spectrum. (See Krugman, 2007, for a balanced appraisal of Friedman and his doctrines). This meant a move away from broadly Keynesian

macroeconomics into monetarism or a replacement of debt financed public expenditure as a stimulus for growth by internationalized credit financed private expenditure (Ghosh, 2009). By 1997, *The Economist* was celebrating that the economic reforms thus far were “nothing less than a repudiation of India’s distinctive approach to development- a repudiation, that is, of Nehru’s vision of socialist self-reliance” (quoted in Corbridge & Harris, 2003, p.157). But India was not severely affected when the so-called ‘tiger economies’ of South East Asia faced an existential crisis that year, mainly because of its still limited integration with the world market (Ganguly, 1998). This was ignored by the cheering brigade of economic liberalization, who felt that the pace of ‘reforms’ was still too slow. Mainstream economists such as Jagdish Bhagwati continued to call for enacting further reforms, especially those that would be directed at privatizing the public sector and would deal severely with recalcitrant unions, allowing private firms to lay off workers more easily (Corbridge & Harris, 2003).

For its part, the BJP, which had strongly been advocating *swadeshi*, seemed to have been doing so more under pressure from its parent the RSS, than because of an innate belief in economic nationalism. In power, the BJP was starting to redefine *swadeshi* as “competition” and “going out to the world and winning” (Nayar, 2001, quoted in Lakha, 2007, p. 112). This led to no little amount of tension between the BJP and the other constituents of the Sangh Parivar, particularly the RSS and the Swadeshi Jagran Manch, ultimately

boiling over in 2002 in the RSS supremo's call for 'a second independence movement' to overcome the dominance of the 'economic superpowers' (Deccan Herald, 2000, quoted in Lakha, 2007, p.112). Nonetheless by the end of the 1990s, the the Hindu right was dominating in the arena of politics as was neoliberal economics in the larger political economy. These were significant shifts taking place on the landscape of India and these shifts were reflected, often in very complex ways, on the content of Indian television.

Indian Television: Content and Context

State television: mid 1980s. I will now examine in some greater detail the content of some of the most popular shows of Indian television in that period, focusing on the representation of family, gender, and class on these shows.

India's first ever serialized television program *Hum Log* started airing on Doordarshan, the state monopoly broadcaster, in 1984. In direct translation, the title *Hum Log* means 'We People', but perhaps the phrase 'We The People' conveys the semantic richness of the title better. The title with its resonances of democratic discourse was both deliberate and apposite since the state saw television serials as carrying out its pedagogic projects, with this first serial being used to promote the cause of family planning. The inspiration for *Hum Log* was the Mexican Sabido soaps which married developmental projects with melodramatic idioms, and which in turn were inspired by the success of the Peruvian telenovela *Simplemente Maria* (Das, 1995; Roy, 2008; Singhal & Rogers, 1991, 2001; Singhal, Rogers & Cozzens,

1989). More efforts in the same vein followed from Doordarshan, and as Roy (2008) argues, “a host of television serials till the early nineties tried to incorporate what the State thought to be ‘progressive’ within the ambit of popular melodrama” (p.38).

Conventional analysis of *Hum Log*, therefore, understands the emergence of the show largely as the result of ministerial and bureaucratic attempts to use the steadily popular medium of television for didactic messaging, specifically in this case, the benefits of population control.¹⁷ But as we have seen earlier, it was around this time that the transition to a different political economy was being attempted, accompanied by a shifting political focus on the top 10% of the population who would generate demand for the products of the liberalizing economy. The conscious articulation of the social objectives that television soap could fulfill was therefore inextricably tied up with the unarticulated need of the state to create consumer demand and an intensified consumer subjectivity, which would be critical to driving the engine of economic growth in the new economic regime.

It is no surprise then to note that in 1980, government targets for black and white TV coverage were upped in one shot from 25% of the population to 80% of the population. In 1984, the government made an attempt to increase the number of transmission centers from 50 to 180 between just June and October, even as two-thirds of the

¹⁷ An interesting anecdote that Singhal & Rogers, 1991, relate traces the genesis of the soap in a September 1981 meeting that MS Swaminathan, father of India's Green Revolution, had with Nobel Laureate Norman Borlaug, the father of the global Green Revolution, at a population conference in Oslo

three million TV sets then in existence remained concentrated in the four big cities of Bombay, Calcutta, Delhi, and Madras ('Fictional "Coverage"', 1984). *Hum Log* also paved the way for commercial interests to engage with public television in the form of program sponsorship. Sponsorship in the early days of Doordarshan was somewhat circuitous, as the producer of the show, and not the channel itself, had the responsibility of finding a corporate sponsor. For *Hum Log*, this sponsorship came in the form of Food Specialities Ltd., a subsidiary of Nestle, which used this unprecedented opportunity to promote its newly introduced Maggi 2 Minute noodles (an *avatar* of easy-to-make ramen noodles). So successful was Maggi advertising on *Hum Log* that its production went from 1,600 tons in 1983 to 4,200 tons in 1985, with a survey indicating that 84% of surveyed adults had heard of the product through television and 58% had started using it after doing so (Singhal & Rogers, 1988). This success at commercialization enabled Doordarshan to move from being a "revenue guzzler" to a "revenue creator", with its revenues nearly doubling from \$80 mn to \$160 mn in the year and a half that *Hum Log* was on air (p.120). Lost in the slipstream of this success, though, was the initial objective of using the vehicle as an instrument of pro-social messaging, especially population control. After the first 13 episodes delivered disappointing viewership, the family planning theme was significantly diluted, even though messaging around status of women, family harmony, and national integration continued to be attempted (Singhal & Rogers, 1991). To be absolutely clear, there is no

direct evidence linking the dilution of the family planning message to pressure from commercial interests, but it is interesting to note that the first attempts at audience measurement were initiated by Doordarshan only after commercial sponsorship of television programming was introduced, in 1985 (Mitra et. al., 2010).¹⁸ It is highly unlikely, however that commercial considerations were not significantly present in interpreting the results of audience measurement efforts, given how much commercial television in every other part of the world has historically been influenced by audience measurement data. (See, for example, Balnaves, O' Regan & Goldsmith (2011), Eaman (1994) and Meehan (2005), for an understanding of the influence of ratings on decision making around television content, even in the case of public television). In this context, it is interesting to note that while the state had planned to supply 700,000 odd community television sets, largely to rural communities, in order to promote pro-social messaging through television, in reality the number fell way short of targets, remaining stuck at around 8,000 ('Fictional "Coverage"', 1984). This failure to achieve community television targets was representative of a broader tendency starting to emerge in state television of privileging audiences that could respond to the commercial messaging of its commercial partners. Most television sets, therefore, remained concentrated in

¹⁸ It should be noted here, though, that research agencies did conduct audience research on their own in the absence of widely available or uniformly accepted audience research. The agency IMRB, for example, set up a diary based panel with respondents from nine cities across India as far back as 1986 (Page and Crawley, 2001) but their results were by no means a common currency for the industry.

overwhelmingly urban areas- 75% of Indian television audiences were in the four big cities of Bombay, Calcutta, Delhi, and Madras (Singhal & Rogers, 1988). As television programming became increasingly urban centric, contemporary commentators started to worry about the propensity for commercial television to widen the social gap between rich and poor. (See for example A. Ghosh, 1986 and Singhal & Rogers, 1988).

The plot of *Hum Log* centred on the travails of a lower-middle class joint family with “a parallel story strand addressing smuggling, political corruption, and underworld activities” (Singhal & Rogers, 1988, p.115). It was clear, though, that this family was evidently considered to be representative of the typical Indian family, at least as envisaged by the officials and bureaucrats behind the show. The title of the show, basically ‘We, the People’ is indicative that the television family is a stand in for the paradigmatic and normative national family. This understanding is carried forward in the opening credit sequence of the show. The sequence is brief, but telling. It lasts barely twenty seconds, and the visuals play out over a song that has the single line lyric (in translation), “Come, let us raise our hands as well” with the phrase *hum bhi* (that is, “we as well”) repeated multiple times at the end for emphasis. The invocation is for the “ordinary” person to take a stance against injustice. There are only three shots in this brief sequence, but each of them works hard in establishing the theme of “We, the People.” The first shot is that of an undifferentiated mass of people in a crowd, walking away from the camera in

anonymity. This dissolves immediately into a single frame/image with a number of pen sketched line drawings of people clearly indicating the diversity of the Indian population.

If you were an Indian viewer watching this, even in the mere couple of seconds that the image lasted on screen, you would have noticed representatives from all of India's key religions: Hindus (as represented by a Brahmin *pandit* or priest), a Muslim, a Parsi, and a Sikh. You would also, at the same time, have noticed an attempt at representing multiple communities, professional and otherwise, including small traders, tribals, priests, and mendicants, among others. And you would have been able to do that since this particular image (made of a collection of line drawings) drew on a trope that all Indians who had the privilege of a school education in India would have been familiar with—the trope of 'unity in diversity'. This was, in Shashi Tharoor's (1998) words, "the most hallowed of independent India's self-defining slogans" (p.130), and it stemmed directly from Jawaharlal Nehru's conception of India as a palimpsest on which "no succeeding layer had completely hidden or erased what had been written previously" (quoted in Khilnani, 1999, p.169). And while the cracks in the so-called Nehruvian consensus that underpinned this idea of India were beginning to show by 1984 (with secessionary movements in the states of Punjab, Kashmir, Assam, and Nagaland gaining strength and an emergent Hindu nationalism also rearing its head) as far as the Indian state was concerned, the consensus was still fairly robust as a guide to its policies. Little wonder then that the

state broadcaster, when it chose to illustrate its first televised serial that it had grandiosely titled “We, the People”, borrowed from familiar visual depictions of diversity in India’s people.¹⁹ On screen, to further emphasize the point, this image of ‘unity in diversity’ transitions in a dissolve to a title card with the title *Hum Log* written in Devanagari (Hindi) and Roman (English) script with some of the characters of the show seen within the lettering, even as the ‘unity in diversity’ image remains as a ghostly presence in the background. Simply put, in *Hum Log* we see the banal form of secular nationalism at play.

As we concluded from Das’s (1995) analysis, *Hum Log*, was hardly a typical soap opera, in that it did not concern itself with anxieties around the dissolution or break up of the family. Even more interestingly, the family depicted in it was lower middle class (and not middle-class, as Das would have it). It is certainly noticeable that this is the class that is being held up as being representative of the nation. The family on *Hum Log*, not even seen in the title credits, is a Hindu family, but their Hinduness is not remarked upon in the show; nor is their Hinduness overtly signified. Given how strongly the state was involved in the creation of *Hum Log*, it is not very surprising that the secular nationalism of the state comes through loud and clear even in the very abbreviated title credits.

The credits of another extremely popular television serial which also started in 1984, barely a month after *Hum Log* started to air,

¹⁹ For a really interesting, though critical, look at the attempts of the Indian state to visually represent Indianness, especially using the ‘unity in diversity’ trope, see Roy, 2002.

presents some interesting differences. This show is called *Yeh Jo Hai Zindagi* ('This Life That Is', Doordarshan, 1984) and obviously is also making a claim to generality with this title, just as *Hum Log* is with its own. This show, unlike the dramatic (and melodramatic) *Hum Log*, was billed from the outset as a light comedy and can claim to be India's first ever sitcom. Airing every Friday night for a little more than a year, it was, again, an enormously popular show, fondly remembered decades after its first appearance on air ('Oberoi Films wins', 2001). Its opening credit sequence and song signaled--as title songs of Indian television serials usually do--the tenor of its content. The song was sung by India's most famous playback singer at that time, Kishore Kumar and this jaunty, buoyant tune (which became a bonafide hit in its own right) conveyed the thought that while life could be bittersweet, the best way to get through it was with a smile. What was really interesting, though, was not this bit of pop psychology in the song, but the accompanying visuals. In the clothes that we see the protagonists wearing, and the decor of and goods within their home, they are clearly being coded as an urban middle class²⁰ nuclear family, while the representation of the *Hum Log* family (who are not clearly seen in the opening credit sequence) was more lower-middle class.

As you watch more episodes of *Yeh Jo Hai Zindagi*, more and more of the electronic goods then slowly making it into the market as

²⁰ I am using the term 'middle class' quite loosely in this chapter without defining it adequately so as to not get lost in a definitional thicket. As we shall see later in chapter 4, this term, though widely used even in academic writing about India, suffers from being poorly defined and conceptualized.

a consequence of the New Electronic Policy (discussed earlier) begin to make their presence felt. Even if these visual indicators did not convey that this was, in fact, a clearly ‘modern’ family, the structure of this family would indicate to the viewer that it was most certainly the case. The family set up that is depicted in the show is what sociologists call ‘supplemented nuclear’ (in this specific case, a couple without children but with an unmarried relative staying with them permanently), a long distance away from the ‘traditional’²¹ form of the Indian family, and especially noteworthy for the unusual situation of the brother of the wife shown as living with the couple.

Almost all of the minute and a half running time of the title song depicts visuals of exterior locations, split across nineteen shots. More significantly, the chief female protagonist of the show, the character Renu, is depicted wearing modern western dress, rather than the traditional sari, in all but one of the shots she features in. There is no way of knowing just by looking at her whether she is married or what religion she professes, given the complete absence of markers such as the vermillion *sindoor* powder or the *mangalsutra* chain that are commonplace visual signifiers of a Hindu woman’s marital status in traditional depictions of womanhood. In fact, given that she is shown in ‘western’ dress (i.e. skirts, blouses, dresses, etc.), a viewer accustomed to Bollywood depictions of women might well draw the conclusion that she is not in fact Hindu. As it happens, when the

²¹ As with the term ‘middle class’, the term ‘traditional’ used to talk about the family form in India, often suffers from insufficient specification, especially when used in studies of the media and popular culture. I will expand on the problems with the term ‘traditional family’ later.

show opens and the viewer realises that her name is Renu, it does convey that she is most likely to be Hindu (especially taken in conjunction with the fact that her husband's name is Ranjit and her brother's is Raja). However, the fact that she is Hindu is completely incidental to this show. Her identity, as discerned from the opening credits alone is really that of 'modern working woman'. Even more interestingly, she is symbolically depicted as very much her husbands equal. In one of the first shots of the title song, we see Ranjit speed off on her motorbike even as Renu is left stranded behind, gesticulating after him. In the last shot of the title song, we see a mirrored version of this scenario. This time, though, it is Renu who flags down a passing car and speeds off in it, even as Ranjit, dawdling at a street vendor's cart, is left making gestures almost identical to those we saw Renu making earlier. Strangely enough this depiction of the woman as a symbolic equal of the man is not to be found to this extent in the title songs of the shows on private television of the 1990s, even if the content of the shows engaged with themes considered quite radical for television of the time.

Private satellite television: mid 1990s. The period from 1992-2000 (the early satellite period) was marked by experimentation with directly imported foreign content as well as attempts at indigenization and localization, and the absence of a dominant leader in the television space with the likes of Zee, Sony, and Star all trying to gain the upper hand. Hindi being the one language that is more or less understood in wide swathes of the country, it was Hindi television

that constituted the largest share of viewing and therefore advertising, although Star started off with exclusively English programming, transitioned into a mixture of Hindi and English in the mid 1990s, and only became a fully Hindi channel in 2000. Whatever the language of broadcast, the programming on private channels was directed at a supposedly urbanized, globalized, middle class audience. It therefore depicted topics like adultery, rape, sexual harassment, working women and extra-marital relationships mostly unknown in the monopoly days of Doordarshan. In the words of David Page and William Crawley (2001), they focused largely on the “‘new bold woman [and in offering] a variety of new role models to the urban middle class ...provoked much controversy in the process” (p.166). Even as viewing choice increased with the launch of numerous regional language channels, Doordarshan’s national Hindi language service continued to have by far the most dominant viewership figures in the country, its reach comfortably greater than that of all C&S (Cable & Satellite) combined. In these years, any marketer looking to build a ‘mass brand’ largely continued to favor Doordarshan given its huge reach. Given that the biggest advertisers on television at that time were such fast moving consumer goods or FMCGs, that is, non durable goods like toiletries, foodstuffs, oils, cosmetics, etc., the C&S channels were undoubtedly keen to create programming that would attract these advertisers (Page & Crawley, 2001).

Aired in the mid 1990s on India’s first private Hindi language television channel Zee TV, *Hasratein* was one of a slew of TV shows

that depicted female desire in ways quite unprecedented for Indian film and TV. As Purnima Mankekar (2004) explains, in Hindi films “erotic desire outside romance was explicitly condemned and was restricted largely to villains and vamps.” But in television not only was erotic desire represented “in a relatively open ended manner,” it constituted a “*central and explicit* focus of many television programs” (p.419, emphasis in the original). In *Hasratein*, the female protagonist, Savitri, called Savi in short, is a partner at a public relations firm who lives together with her married lover and has a child with him, yet is never presented as a woman of diminished character. As Mankekar shows, though, while Savi might pursue pleasure, she is never shown as anything less than “Indian,” always dressed in saris and expressing a sense of duty towards her lover’s parents, very much as a daughter-in-law in an Indian household would be expected to do. In Mankekar’s words, *Hasratein* and other serials of that time “revealed ambivalent and shifting discourses of ‘Indian womanhood,’ in which women struggled to juggle their responsibilities and duties to their families vis-a-vis their pursuit of erotic pleasure” (p. 425).

This ambivalence is in fact cued off from the very title of the show itself. The word ‘*hasratein*’ is an Urdu word which in this case chiefly means desire or intense yearnings, but it also has the dual meaning of ‘grief’. (And as the viewer of this show would find out in due course, both of these meanings are dealt with substantially in the

course of the show). In fact, this duality and this ambivalence are at play right from the opening credits and title song. Its lyrics go:

“Hasratein hi hasratein hain
 Aur kya hain
 Zindagi ka naam hi bhi doosra hain
 Yeh lahoon aisa kabhi hota nahin
 Par na phir koi yahaan hasta nahin rota nahin
 Hasratein hi hasratein”

Translated, this reads as:

“Desires are desires
 What else are they
 But just another name for life
 If this blood had never been this way
 None would have laughed or cried here
 Desires are desires”

The song itself is a paen to *hasratein*, calling them ‘just another name for life itself’ (my translation) and saying that there would be no laughter and no tears without desires. While it acknowledges the fact that desires may bring tears, it still does not deny those desires; the word *hasratein* here does double duty to indicate both desire and grief. In fact, the song makes that desire visceral by the use of the word *lahoo*—the Hindi for blood—in the lyrics.

The visuals, however, don’t really depict desire explicitly. The title sequence opens on a generic still shot of the setting sun obscured by clouds over the sea and moves into a number of mid shots that sequentially introduce the main characters and identify the actors who play them. What becomes interesting to note in the visual choices here is that unlike in the by then decade old *Yeh Jo Hai Zindagi*, all of the action seems to have moved to the interior. The only exteriors depicted are within lawns and seating areas outside the house proper

but within the walls of the residential area. The homes that are shown are evidently upper middle class— as evident not just from the decor visible, but from the very fact that these are homes that have lawns and external seating areas attached to them. However, even if the absence of exterior locations seems striking, when compared to the earlier *Yeh Jo Hai Zindagi*, it must be said that the action is not all confined to the home. Workplaces—and characters in them—are clearly depicted as being as important as the arena of the home; and the visual coding (with prominent computers and cordless telephones) makes it abundantly clear that these are modern and contemporary workplaces.

Note of course, that by this time the discourse of Hindu nationalism has become dominant in the Indian public sphere, and cultural nationalism is on the upswing. More significantly, then, every one of the five women characters (with one exception) depicted in the opening credits are in what would be considered ‘traditional’ Indian attire (i.e. saris or *salwar kameez*), even when they are depicted at work. The vermillion *sindoor* has now made an appearance and prominently indicates the marital status of the women who are married, and marks them slightly more strongly as Hindu. But this coding is neither overt nor insistent and we see no signs of religious symbolism on screen. Equally significantly, though, the focus in *Hasratein* is on the individual rather than on the family. It is individual desire that is the object of scrutiny; and no claims are made to the generalizability of this individual condition. This depiction

of the individual soon gave way to a depiction of an extended family, accompanied by the arrival of religious symbolism on the show *Amanat*.

Private satellite television: late 1990s. Around the time *Amanat* made its appearance in 1997, the BJP was nearing the peak of its political appeal—it would for a relatively stable government for the first time at the center the next year. *Amanat* very quickly became the most popular show on private television—a position it held till end 2000, when it was dethroned by the K-serials. *Amanat* is considered a landmark because it was the “first in the line of the traditional family sagas” (Zarina Mehta, quoted in Chougule, 2003). If you look at the title track/song for *Amanat*, you can immediately detect a change in not just milieu, but in focii of concern. Whereas the title track of *Hum Log* in 1984 conveys the notion of a nation united in diversity, and urges its people to raise their voices in unity, *Yeh Jo Hai Zindagi* the same year positions women and men as symbolically equal partners in sharing the bittersweet joys of life, and whereas *Hasratein* takes the focus on the individual further, celebrating female desire, even if it is ambivalent about it, the title track of *Amanat* is all about *churi* (bangles) and *mehndi* (henna decoration) and floating *diyas* (traditional Indian lamps)—motifs very strongly associated with rites of Hindu weddings and married life. In fact, the title track itself is a wedding song, reflective of a whole host of Bollywood films that in the mid 90s started to elaborately depict north Indian Hindu weddings, such as *Hum Aapke Hain Koun?* (‘Who am I to You?’), the 1994

blockbuster which even today is one of the largest grossing Indian films of all time (boxofficeindia.com, 2011). The visuals of the *Amanat* title track depict seven young women rejoicing at and occasionally being disheartened (when the bride leaves) at a wedding. The wedding/title song of *Amanat* has as its central line the sentence, “Jiski amanat hai banno, woh saath tujhey le jayega.” This loosely translates to “He whose stakehold you are, princess, will take you away with him”. ‘Banno’ here is a generic name/word that means princess, and has a strong cultural cachet, having been used in innumerable Bollywood wedding songs. The song laments a little later on that this departure of the princess is something “Aakhiya bhi na rok payengey, babul bhi rok na payega”, that is, neither tears nor the father will be able to prevent this departure of the princess. On screen, you see women falling into each others arms crying, and the father of the bride gesturing in vain at the car departing with his daughter and new son in law.

These visuals and these lyrics tap into a number of culturally entrenched norms and beliefs, chief among which is the notion of the daughter being actually the *amanat* which passes from the father to the husband at marriage. *Amanat*, as with many other Hindi-Urdu words has a dual meaning and both of these meanings are highly gendered when used in this context. On the one hand, *amanat* means ‘trust’ or ‘faith’ and in this context it indicates the passing of trust or faith from the father to the husband. On the other hand, *amanat* also means a deposit or holdings, and again in this context it conveys the

passing of this holding from the father to the husband. There is in the word *amanat* a strong connotation of property rights, and coded into this song therefore is an acceptance that the woman is simultaneously the repository of faithfulness and she is at the same time the wealth or property that passes on from one male to another.

Note, here, how different in tenor this title song is even from the one of *Hasratein*, which appeared only a few years prior to this one.

Where the *Hasratein* song celebrated female desire, the *Amanat* song reinforces the notion that women are ultimately not the owners of their own selves. Note also, that this notion does not need to be depicted through visuals of agony and misery. The women on screen (who as it happens are seven sisters of the same family, having been brought up by their prematurely widowed father) very much seem to be enjoying themselves, dancing and moving in very Bollywood film inspired choreography. (In fact, one of the last shots of the title song depicts *diyas*—traditional Indian earthenware lamps—floating on water, in a visual signifier of the *karva chauth* festival during which women pray for their husbands. This festival was little known in most of India before that time, but became inexplicably popular nationally from the late 1990s onwards when a slew of hit Bollywood films featured it prominently (See Ashar, 2011). But, clearly, even as this title song is almost entirely populated by women, it shows these women exclusively in the arena of weddings and rituals connected to weddings and marriage. You do of course see other people and get a glimpse of a community larger than the immediate family, but again

in the context of the wedding, as the friends and relatives of the bride and groom.

Interestingly, though, for a brief few seconds you do glimpse a character who is coded very clearly as a Muslim. This is the character Ahmed Chacha (Uncle Ahmed), whose red henna-ed beard is a visual signifier of his Muslim identity- at least in the context of Bollywood depictions of Muslim identity. He is one of the last- if in fact not the last- Muslim characters to be seen in the opening credits of any popular Hindi show on satellite television that is not exclusively set in a Muslim milieu. In any case, talking about shows “set in a Muslim milieu” on private television from the late 1990s, means talking about a grand total of *one* show, *Heena*. The show was fairly popular when it aired, but as Britta Ohm (2007) argues, in being obsessed with the provision of Muslim men divorcing women merely by uttering the word *talaq* thrice in succession, the show added to the “stereotypes of Islam as a historical and religious category [a] framing of the Muslim as a judicial (social) problem” (p.340).

Amaanat then starts to introduce a new element into Indian soaps: the explicit coding of characters as Hindu, and depiction of Hindu rituals, even if we don't quite see gods and religious icons taking centre stage. This emerging Hinduness, though, is complicated by the presence of a Muslim character in a pretty important role. *Amanat* also entails a move away from the individual to the family. This family, though, is still middle class. But in the move away from the individual to the family, the depictions of female erotic desire are

replaced by centrality of marriage for the woman. And while it is not complete at this stage, the notions of gender and femininity have started to become marked with a strongly Hinduised politics, if not yet a Hindutva politics. These representations are certainly a departure from shows of the Doordarshan era as well as shows of the early satellite era— the agency and desire of the woman was much more strongly felt in shows of both of these eras.

The Woman on TV: Before the K-serials

Of course, *Hum Log* (1984, Doordarshan) and *Buniyaad* (1986, Doordarshan) two of the earliest successes of Indian television, presented women largely within the environment of the home. The mythological *Ramayan*, still perhaps the most watched Indian TV series of all time, had at its heart the travails of Sita, the embodiment of the respectful, suffering, sacrificing Indian woman. As Purnima Mankekar (1999) has argued, while the trope of the Bharatiya Nari or the ideal Indian woman predates television, 'Doordarshan occupied a central place in constituting female viewers not just as women but as *Indian women*' (p.10, italics in the original).

But despite their many faults, Doordarshan shows did also portray many women protagonists dealing with real life issues outside of the family home. Renu on *Yeh Jo Hai Zindagi* was depicted doing a full time job outside the home, with her skirts and dresses superficially indicating her 'modernity' and her spirited retorts to her husband indicating a level of equality. Even more engaged with the world outside the home was the homemaker activist Rajani crusading

against corruption in *Rajani* (Doordarshan, 1985). Priya Tendulkar, the actress who played the role, became one of the early stars of Indian television and her eponymous character became a culturally significant metaphor for urban middle class angst against institutionalized corruption in India, reflecting perhaps the popular mood against corruption which we saw Patel (1987) refer to when analyzing the limitations of Rajiv Gandhi's economic program. Five years after *Rajani*, another strong female character again struck a significant chord with viewers. This was the policewoman Kalyani Singh on *Udaan* ('Flight', Doordarshan, 1990), played by the serial's writer Kavita Choudhary. As Mankekar (1999) puts it, *Udaan* was 'exceptional in its construction of a complex and introspective protagonist...whose observations on corruption in the police force coexist[ed] with the pleasure she derive[d] from her own ascent to power' even if the critique of the patriarchal family structure was softened by the creator herself and did not go 'far enough in its advocacy of feminist activism' (p.139-149). For Abhijit Roy (2008), "Many of these serials telecast on the much-demonized Public Television seem to have been sensitive at least in their figuration of certain realms of life about which the soaps in the era of satellite television are terribly amnesiac" (p.38).

Women were not restricted to the home and the hearth between 1991 and 1999 either, the early years of the C&S (cable & satellite) era, nor was their Hindu-ness central to their identity. The programming on private channels was directed at a supposedly

urbanized, globalized, middle class audience, depicting topics like adultery, rape, sexual harassment, working women and extra-marital relationships mostly unknown in the monopoly days of Doordarshan. As Page & Crawley (2001) show, these shows focused largely on the ‘new bold woman.’ The shows provided a “variety of new role models to the urban middle class [and] provoked much controversy in the process” (p.166). The most prominent family structure in these shows were ‘aspiring nuclear families’ (p.155) or extended nuclear families (i.e. nuclear families plus the paternal grandparents). These shows often featured the woman walking out on the marriage or refusing to graciously welcome back the straying husband as she might have been expected to do as a traditional Indian woman. Tara in *Tara* (Zee TV, 1993), Saavi in *Hasratein* (Zee TV, ‘Desires’, 1996), Priya in *Saans* (Star Plus, ‘Breath’, 1999), and Pooja in *Kora Kagaz* (Star Plus, ‘Burnt Paper’, 1999) were all strong women characters in their own right, even if the serials themselves were often wracked by anxiety surrounding the purported decay of the institution of marriage; and never really went in for a forthright condemnation of that institution. These depictions were to change radically with the Hindi turn taken by Star Plus and its almost overnight success as the new leader in the television space.

Among the many significant changes in representation introduced by the K-serials was the fact that the family on screen was very obviously upper class. This was a change from earlier depictions of families which were coded as lower middle to middle class. The

phrase ‘middle class’ has been associated strongly with commercial television pretty much since the inception of commercial television in India. When I say commercial television, I don’t just mean private television that emerged on the Indian scene in 1991. I include within the phrase ‘commercial television’, every advertiser funded show starting with *Hum Log* which first allowed the entry of private marketers like Nestle into the hitherto sacrosanct realms of state owned television.

Television’s Middle Class Focus: Before the K-serials

As outlined earlier, the changes in the political economy in the 1980s necessitated the creation of a strong consuming class in the country. An absence of such a class would make the New Economic Policy being put in place by Rajiv Gandhi and his fiscal advisers meaningless. TV therefore came to play a crucial role in the creation of this class. Even though the New Economic Policy was sought to be walked back under political pressure by the Rajiv Gandhi government, there was no going back as far as the market’s incursion into television was concerned, and the hunt for the consuming middle class continued.

Within two years of *Hum Log*, national politics had inserted itself forcefully into television as well, in the form of the politically charged broadcast of the *Ramayan*. Much of the academic analyses of the *Ramayan* broadcast have focused on this political element of it, namely the work of Hindu nationalism. But it is important to note that *Ramayan*, much as it was a politically motivated broadcast that

borrowed from and lent itself to the work of Hindu nationalism, was also a hugely successful commercial endeavor. By the time *Ramayan* was aired, the commercial model for Doordarshan was up and running smoothly and the show performed spectacularly in generating revenue. The show premiered on 25 January 1987 and lagged behind a couple of other shows initially in terms of revenues—possibly because Sunday mornings were considered a ‘dead slot’ for TV viewership (Lutgendorf, 1995). At that time, there was no formal ratings system in existence. All that existed since 1985 were viewer surveys conducted by the public broadcaster’s in-house research team DART (Doordarshan Audience Research Team). It reached its respondents through the 40 Doordarshan television stations and 100 All India Radio stations scattered across the length and breadth of the country. More systematic and regularized audience research took off only in 1989²² with the introduction of the diary based panels (Mitra et. al., 2010). But the moment anecdotal evidence about the rather astounding reach and impact of *Ramayan* began to emerge, advertisers started flocking to the show. In February, around 15 commercials per episode were being aired on an average Sunday’s broadcast of *Ramayan*. By April, that number had increased to 32. By August of that year *Ramayan* was by itself generating as much as an eighth of the broadcaster’s income. Doordarshan was by now fending

²² To reiterate, market research agencies did conduct audience research on their own in the absence of widely available or uniformly accepted audience research. The agency IMRB, for example, set up a diary based panel with respondents from nine cities across India as far back as 1986 (Page and Crawley, 2001) but their results were by no means a common currency for the industry.

off requests from advertisers, 135 of whom were clamoring for air time (Lutgendorf, 1995).

There was a simple reason why advertisers were so eager to get on to the *Ramayan* bandwagon—it provided the easiest route for reaching a national audience. It was apparent to advertisers that as a medium for advertising their wares, television provided some advantages which were not available to other media. Bollywood film was still at that time culturally the most salient force. But the scope for advertising in cinema theaters was severely limited given that the multiplex boom was still years away and most theaters were single screen theaters, often owned by individual owners. This made a national advertising campaign in cinema theaters logistically a nightmare. Newspapers provided difficulties of their own. A newspaper explosion had started to take place already by that time with the circulation of dailies having gone from 15.2 million to 22 million between 1981 and 1986. But the newspaper audience was very fragmented given the linguistic diversity of the country; and the potential of newspapers was limited by the fact that while they expected literacy as a minimal condition of access, the literacy rate in India as per the 1991 census was still only 52% (Jeffrey, 2010). In addition, of course, the only truly national media were English language dailies which reached out to a tiny slice of the audience, best understood at that time as an elite, rather than a truly middle class.

On television, then, the representation of families reflected the conception of the audiences as middle class. This was to an extent the

case for *Hum Log*, and most certainly the case for *Yeh Jo Hai Zindagi*, *Hasratein*, and *Amaanat*. With the K-series another significant shift also took place. The representation of class on screen diverged from the conception of the audiences. Now the Virani and the Agarwal families on the K-series were obviously no longer in the middle class, and by Indian standards, not even in the upper middle class, but in the most affluent class. The producers of the shows were very aware of this; the shift was justified by Ekta Kapoor as saying that her serials were still about “middle-class values” (Lalwani, 2003), even though the families depicted on Star Plus were anything but the middle class.

The Rise of Star Plus and the Advent of a New Era of Television

The environment of the early satellite era (1992-2000) was marked by a frenetic jostling for supremacy by C&S (Cable & Satellite) channels such as Sony and Zee. This was completely upended when Star Plus became a mass channel in the year 2000, changing to all-Hindi language programming from its earlier mélange of English and Hindi. This heralded a seven year period of complete dominance in the market for Star Plus and marked what I will call the middle satellite period.²³ Star Plus remained an unchallenged leader in the television

²³ This periodisation of television into the categories of ‘early satellite’ (1992-2000) and ‘middle satellite’ (2000-2007) which might seem somewhat subjective and even arbitrary to the reader has admittedly been constructed with its middle period- the period of Star Plus dominance- being the one first defined. As I show in chapter 5, though, the overwhelming and clear dominance of Star Plus is not in itself the reason why the period of its dominance is privileged in this study as a critical one. Instead, this period is privileged because it was distinctly different from the one that came before it in terms of the material realities of the industry’s operations and its location within a wider nexus of free market relations. The dominance of Star Plus was a symptom, and not the cause of this change

market in this period, delivering every week at least forty-five of the top fifty shows and sometimes all fifty out of the top fifty shows (Krishna, 2004). The locus of interest for advertisers, viewers and entertainment journalists shifted quite decisively to Star Plus (henceforth Plus), even if C&S as a whole continued to trail Doordarshan in terms of reach. By 2003, Doordarshan's then marketing director, clearly concerned about the shifting of the sands beneath the state broadcaster's feet, was openly complaining about this shift in the advertisers' stance:

If media planners go by TAM statistics, we have numbers on our side and eyeballs. I would urge the younger lot of media planners and buyers to study the ground realities. They must also learn to distance themselves from inherent biases - for instance most of the metropolitan bred media planners and buyers seem to think that all Indian youth think and act like them. But, the reality is different as India is a diverse country with several cultural, psychographic and demographic differences (Chhabra, quoted in "Quibbles Apart", 2003).

This was not just self-interested complaining. As Roy (2008) argues with reference to Doordarshan serials of the late 80s and early 90s:

[T]he idea of 'progress' still did not sever its connection from a certain concern for the lower and lower-middle class or for the small town and the village, as exhibited in some of the popular tele-series like *Nukkad*, *Malgudi Days*, *Rajni*, *Basanti*, [and] *Udaan*. Many of these serials telecast on the much-demonized Public Television seem to have been sensitive at least in their figuration of certain realms of life about which the soaps in the era of satellite television are terribly amnesiac (p.38).

Star Plus serials had very little connection with the concerns of lower and lower-middle classes or for small towns and villages. Yet, its

success lay not just in being able to deliver affluent urban viewers to advertisers; if anything it was extremely successful among viewers in lower socio-economic strata. Plus's leadership in the middle satellite period was near absolute with an overwhelmingly large share of the viewership in the Hindi television space, sometimes going up to even around 76% compared with 12% each for its two nearest competitors Zee and Sony (Chougule, 2005) and showing "50 on 50 of the top shows in its space week after week with almost boring regularity", as the industry publication *Indiantelevision.com* commented in 2003 (*indiantelevision.com* Team, 2003). By May 2002, barely two years after *Kyunki* had started airing, 87 out of the top 100 programs on Indian television were on Star Plus (Chougule, 2002). Plus also commanded by far the highest advertising rates among all channels in the industry including Doordarshan ("Star Plus jacks up", 2004) even though the latter had at that point a greater reach than any of the satellite channels. Such was Star Plus's dominance that influential business newspapers would carry stories entitled 'Is Star feeling the heat?' even when it was three times the size of its nearest competitor, just because it used to be four times so earlier (see Bansal & Das Gupta, 2004). In an extremely competitive market—with at least two hundred channels on offer in a multitude of languages—Star Plus had a channel share of 15% (Chougule, 2002). In other words, 15% of all viewers who were watching television in India, were watching Star Plus. For a competitive multi-channel, multi-lingual market, this kind

of market share was astonishing, and not just for Indian television, but for television in general.

As discussed earlier, Plus's rise had happened initially on the back of an *Kaun Banega Crorepati*, but its dominance was sustained by the prime time soap operas that aired four days a week (later five) for years on end—*Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi* and *Kahaani Ghar Ghar Kii*. These two shows were in fact India's first ever daily soaps on prime time—almost all of the other shows discussed in this chapter were weekly shows. In that sense *Kyunki* and *Kahaani* were India's "first true commercial soap operas" (Ohm, 2011, p. 679), and they were able, as stated above, to attract a not just an upper middle class but a broad cross-class viewership. In chapter 4, I will detail the political economic context of television at that time that contributed to building this cross-class viewership. As I will also show, the targeted viewership of Star Plus ended up becoming effectively a Hindu viewership, concentrated in areas where the political and cultural appeal of Hindutva was the most salient. In chapter 5 and 6, I will show how the content of the K-series was deeply inflected by the discourse of Hindutva, but which went unrecognized given the banal form in which it was served up.

Before that, though, in the next chapter I take up in detail the trajectory and ideas of Hindu nationalism. The objective is not only to understand in depth the ideology of Hindu nationalism but to also answer a significant question we have not yet asked: what might be the key elements of banal Hindu nationalism, like the flag and the

eagle on the coinage are elements of banal nationalism in the American context.

Chapter 4

Hindutva: Spectacle, Banality, Ideology

In the previous chapter, I touched upon the broad trajectory of Hindu nationalism in 20th century India. In this chapter we will take a closer look at the ideologies of Hindu nationalism. I will highlight the key differences between Hindu nationalist imaginings of the nation and other, especially mainstream secular nationalist imaginings of the nation and outline the key elements of the very important debate around secularism in India. I will discuss the main thrusts of the Hindu nationalist project discussing in particular the Brahminism and anti-Muslim rhetoric that underpins this project. I will follow this by looking at how central the issue of culture has always been to Hindu nationalism and broadly sketch out the history of Hindu symbolism in the Indian public sphere. In this section, I will argue that Hindu symbolism on satellite television circulates in a manner different from the way Hindu symbolism has circulated historically in the Indian public sphere and argue therefore that this is a cause for concern.

I will then investigate the dynamic and shifting nature of Hindu nationalism—the manifestations, in short, of Hindu nationalism moving from a ‘hot’ or spectacular to a ‘banal’ condition. I will specifically look at the shifts in the nature of Hindu nationalism in late twentieth century in two key areas: a) in the forms of its public expression and b) in its gender politics. Taken together, I will argue,

these signified a transition in Hindu nationalism from the spectacular to the banal.

The three key objects that I will use to understand the ideology of Hindutva are three of the core texts of Hindu nationalism. Of these the two are V.D. Savarkar's *Hindutva: Who is a Hindu*, originally published in 1923 and M.S. Golwalkar's *Bunch of Thoughts*, published in 1966. A third seminal text Golwalkar's *We, or Our Nationhood Defined* was officially disowned by the Sangh, so indefensible has its anti-Muslim rhetoric proven to be in contemporary times. But while not easily available publicly it has historically been a kind of Bible for RSS workers (Puniyani, 2006). Savarkar was the first person to codify the ideology of Hindu nationalism, which in various forms had been gaining momentum since the mid-nineteenth century. A former head of a terrorist group and the future head of the Hindu revivalist organization Hindu Mahasabha, it was Savarkar who in the eponymous book coined the term 'Hindutva' and sought to distinguish it from Hinduism (Jaffrelot, 1996; Sharma, 2003). Golwalkar, was the second *Sarsanghchalak* (Supreme Leader) of the RSS but its most important ideologue till date. He led the RSS for 33 long years from 1940 and it was under him that the RSS and the Sangh Parivar laid the foundations for its eventual success in the 1980s and 1990s, establishing the various wings of the Sangh Parivar, and putting in motion the infiltration of RSS cadres in various organs of the state and media (Puniyani, 2006). Taken together, Savarkar and Golwalkar's ideas animated (and still to a large extent animate today)

the march of Hindutva. I will supplement the analysis of their ideas with a synthesis of already existing research, particularly around gender and Hindu nationalism, Hindu symbolism in the Indian public sphere, and the secularism debate. This chapter will therefore enable us to understand better Hindu nationalism, especially in its banal forms, and set the parameters within which our textual analysis of the K-series will largely be conducted. We start with an analysis of the differing ways in which India was conceptualized by secular nationalists and Hindu nationalists.

The Ideas of India

India became independent in 1947. But there were questions aplenty for the founding fathers to address. What form would this new nation-state take? What, for that matter, was India? Who was an Indian? There were multiple answers given to each of these questions even within the Congress party of the time, the main divergence happening between the perspectives of secular nationalism, as mainly expressed by Jawaharlal Nehru, and Hindu nationalism, as mainly expressed by India's first home minister Vallabhbhai Patel (Guha, 2009).

But there was a difference of opinion around even the most basic question: was India even a nation? As Chakrabarty (2003) shows, the earliest nationalist historians like R.C. Mazumdar, Bisheshwar Prasad, Amales Tripathi and B.R. Nanda, to name a few not only underplayed the division between Hindu and Muslim communities but elided the differences within those communities, and

swayed perhaps by the Nehruvian dictum of unity in diversity, called for all other aspects of identity to be “subordinated to the nation” (p. 16). The Hindu or Muslim nationalist ideologues, on the other hand, believed in the “political codification of a single cultural community” (p.16). The Marxist interventions took some radically different directions. Some of them like R.P.Dutt, M.N. Roy and A.R. Desai argued - no doubt under the influence of a Stalinist definition of the nation- that India was not a nation because it was bound by neither a common language or a common culture. Irfan Habib was quite unequivocal. He asked, “Is India then a nation?” and went on to answer:

Marxists must without hesitation answer this question in the negative. India is a country, certainly; but it is not a nation, because it meets the requirement of neither a common language nor a common culture. It is a country which contains a number of emerging nationalities with different languages and cultures of their own (Habib, 1975, p.17).

The concept of the national that eventually became hegemonic, though, was Nehru’s. Perhaps no one’s legacy and achievement has been so contested - in both popular and academic discourse - as that of Jawaharlal Nehru. The irony of course lies in the fact that these post-mortems of Nehru are occasioned by the results of the very Nehruvian vision of India’s place in the world. In his *cri de couer* in defence of Nehru, *The Idea of India*, Khilnani (1999) explains:

Nehru wished to modernize India, to insert it into what he understood as the movement of universal history. Yet the Indian created by this ambition has come increasingly to stand in an ironic, deviant relationship to the trajectories of Western modernity that inspired it. The processes of modernity within India have unraveled, and it has not kept to the script. In Nehru’s rich

metaphor, the 'garb of modernity' has not proved uniform and Indians have found many and ingenious ways of wearing it (p.8).

Nehru and other nationalists believed that the West's present portended India's future. As Khilnani argues, Nehru had no single ideological or theoretical argument but his belief in inserting India into world history led to a firm conviction that the newly won independence could only be preserved by a national state that would direct economic development, build a constitutional non-religious regime, extend social opportunities to all and remain neutral in the sharply emerging polarities of the international world. The emergence of the Indian constitutional state was a contested affair pitting Nehru's vision of a modernist, reformist state that would fall in line with universal history against Vallabhbhai Patel's conception of a state that replicated existing hierarchies, religiosities and patterns of Indian society. Nehru won out and "like the British empire it supplanted, India's constitutional democracy was established in a fit of absentmindedness" (p.34). This constitutional democracy had two pillars, both deriving from Nehru's reformist agenda, one looking at the future through an economic lens and the other through a socio-cultural one. The first resulted in the path of planned industrialization and economic development and the second in a state enforced secularism, both of which shaped (or were misappropriated in the service of) resurgent militant Hindu nationalism. In both of these, Nehru had to contend against the presence and influence of Gandhi. For Vanaik (1990), Gandhi was the force that ameliorated the tensions

between the demands of a section of the leadership that was more inclined to a cultural, Hindu definition of bourgeois nationalism and the framework of bourgeois democratic aspirations of the Westernized liberals. But Gandhi was also implacably opposed to industrialization and contended that India had succumbed to foreign rule in the first place because Indians had been tempted by the glitters and baubles that Western industrialized modernity promised even while impoverishing the soul (Chatterjee, 1986). It was a form of modernity that was “imprisoning, destructive and iniquitous...dumbly cherished in the West”(Khilnani, 1999, p.34). For Gandhi, concepts of state and Parliament were banes of humanity and the social division of labour that modern society reinforces was an impediment to human growth. The only guide is absolute transcendental Truth lying outside history and the only salvation lay in a “politics directly subordinated to a communal morality” (Chatterjee, 1986, p.91). Gandhi’s articulation of his social ideals put forward most clearly in *Hind Swaraj* (1909) centered on the idea that the real enemy was not political domination by the British but all of modern industrial civilization and it represented a “response to the deeply alienating effects of ‘modernization’ particularly under colonial conditions” (S. Sarkar, 1983, p.131). Clearly this posed a problem for Nehru for the Nehruvian project was all about bringing India into the trajectory of world history.

Partha Chatterjee (1986) locates Nehru’s response to the Gandhian critique of western modernity and civil society in the

formulation that social justice cannot be provided for all within existing Indian frameworks which were antiquated and incapable of dynamism. Nor would the colonial state create an economic structure whose fruits could be dispersed throughout the social structure. The only solution was the formation of a national sovereign state whereby nationalism would now be incorporated within the state ideology of economic development, distributed to all. This formulation, Chatterjee argues, was not without reliance on the old Orientalist principles (or exoticist understandings of India) but “the difference between East and West is reduced from the essential to the conjunctural” with European civilization having found suddenly “a certain point in history a new spirit, new sources of energy and creativity” (pp.136-37). It also relied on a selective appropriation of Marxism (in that it separated subjective beliefs and ideologies from the ‘real economic interests’ and invoked socialism but resisted class struggle) but also found a solution to the problem of communalism in the simple guaranteeing of universally ironclad rights of citizenship by the paternalistic state. For Vanaik (1990), the fact that the Indian bourgeoisie was independent of both metropolitan capital and the indigenous landed elite along with the absence of any pressure from the working classes, meant that it could embark on the project of creating an independent bourgeois-democratic nation-state practically unhindered.

This incipient nation-state found its saviors in scientific planning embodied in the Planning Commission, which had its

genesis in the National Planning Committee formed in 1938 and consisting of five scientists, three economists, five businessmen and three politicians, including Nehru himself (Chatterjee, 1998). As Chatterjee sees it, the Planning Commission was the Nehruvian response to the “fundamental problematic of the post-colonial state - furthering accumulation in the modern sector through a political strategy of passive revolution” which subsequently gave rise to various “ambiguities in the legitimation process” (p.216). These ambiguities were reflected in debates about relative importance of the market versus the state, the efficiency of the private sector over that of the public sector and over the dynamism that loosening state controls was sure to bring versus organized privilege embodied in state dominance. At the same time, the processes of “rational” planning and “irrational” politics were twinned inextricably, with the “very ‘irrationality’ of the political process [continuing to work] to produce legitimacy for the rational exercise of the planner” (p.219).

In the Nehruvian state, social justice was conflated with development and modernization. As Mankekar (1999) describes it, “ideologies of development converged with discourses of citizenship. Citizens were entitled to development benefits from the state, but at the same time, it was also their *duty* to contribute to national development” (p.58, emphasis in the original). Nehru’s conception of India’s future unity incorporated not just a common project of Indian development but also a shared history of cultural mixing. But as Khilnani shows, it was difficult to use the past as a guide for practical

policy. For one, India had only truly been politically united by imperial powers and elements internal to India like caste, race and language were ruled out either by their conceptual thinness or insufficient potential for unification. Nehru proceeded therefore towards an idea of Indian identity that was “layered, adjustable, imagined, not a fixed property” (Khilnani, 1999). This identity could only emerge and be guarded within the confines of a state - a notion which made him diverge from the thinker who he drew most from, other than Gandhi - Rabindranath Tagore.

Tagore was, according to Nehru, India’s internationalist par excellence (Guha, 2009) and he saw nationalism as a danger to humanity. As he put it, “There is only one history -- the history of man. All national histories are merely chapters in the larger one” (Tagore, 2009, p.23). Writing almost a hundred years ago, Tagore presciently noted that the development of communication facilities was leading to geographical boundaries becoming “imaginary lines of tradition divested of the qualities of real obstacles” (p.67). This notion of internationalism was complemented with an idea of India that steered well clear of any parochialism or essentialism stemming from a religious or regional core. In the words of Ramchandra Guha (2009) Tagore believed that “the staggering heterogeneity of India was the product of its hospitality, in the past, to cultures and ideas from outside” (Guha, 2009). He wished to retain this openness and refused to privilege a particular aspect of India - Hindu, North Indian, upper caste, etc. As Tanika Sarkar points out, for Tagore, India “was and

must remain a land without a centre” (T. Sarkar, quoted in Guha, 2009, p.136).

It was this lack of centering that was most anathema to the Hindu nationalists, in particular its original ideologue V.D. Savarkar. In personal belief an atheist (as were many subsequent ideologues of Hindutva), Savarkar drew inspiration from Giuseppe Mazzini with whose writings he had come into contact with while in Britain from 1906-1910. Also influential in developing his worldview was Fichte’s idea of “the internal border,” the internalized individuation of nationhood (Hansen, 1999). For Savarkar, it was Hindu culture that embodied Indian national identity. Hindu culture comprised of the religion, the language (Sanskrit and Hindi which was derived from it), the cult of the golden Vedic age, and the territoriality of India as the sacred Fatherland of ‘Hindusthan’, the name Savarkar claimed had been the preferred name for India through the ages. Since Hindusthan played such a central role in defining who a Hindu was, all those professing religions that had “grown out of the soil of India”—not just Hindus and Hindu sects but Buddhists, Jains and Sikhs as well—were willy-nilly embraced into the fold of Hindus. Christians and Muslims whose holy lands were outside of India could therefore never be trusted entirely as they would always have “extraterritorial loyalties” but could be admitted back into the Hindu fold if they gave up their “alien” beliefs. Hindutva was not about the religion, apparently, but about a ‘whole way of life’ (Hansen, 1999; Jaffrelot, 1996). On top of this Muslim men were seen as lascivious and lustful,

not only raping Hindu women, but symbolically raping Bharatmata [Mother India], or the Indian nation itself (Bacchetta, 2005; Hansen, 1999).

M.S. Golwalkar in his 1939 book *We, Or Our Nationhood Defined* extended Savarkar's articulation of Hindu nationhood. Even while the mainstream of Indian nationalism was deriving inspiration from English notions of liberal universalism, Golwalkar drew sustenance from the works of German writers like Bluntschli who propounded an ethnic definition of nationalism, defining a nation as an 'organic being' typified by a national spirit (Volksgeist) and a national will (Volkswille). Claiming inspiration from Hitler²⁴ -- the book is full of admiration for "the German Race-spirit" (Hansen, 1999)--Golwalkar took further the project of alienating Muslims insisting they had to pay obeisance to symbols of Hindu identity because these were representative of the Indian nation. Golwalkar took society—and not race—to be the constituting element of the Hindu nation. Therefore, the mission of the RSS was to "fashion society, to 'sustain' it, 'improve' it, and finally merge with it when the point had been reached where society and the organization had become co-extensive" (Jaffrelot, 2005b). In this society, Muslims would only have place if they would renounce virtually all aspects of their religion. That is why the ex-supremo of

²⁴ Despite Golwalkar's fascination with Hitler, Vanaik (1997) argues that equating Hindu nationalism with fascism does not meet the 'fascist minimum' conditions, among which are the absence in the Parivar of a truly charismatic leader; the absence of explicitly anti-liberal/anti-democratic and anti-working class themes in its campaigns; the absence of verbal anti-capitalist rhetoric, etc. He argues that political vehicles like the BJP are at most "potential fascist formations" and the "conditions for the realization of that potential do not exist and are not likely to surface" (p.269)

the VHP, Ashok Singhal, could announce openly in a speech in 1995 that there would not remain a single non-Hindu in the country (Katju, 2003) or that “Islam has a future in this country only if it submerges itself among the hundreds of sects that already exist in this country” (Singhal, quoted in Katju, 2005, p. 187).

Hansen (1999) targets the Nehruvian project along both its key pillars: economic development and state secularism. Holding up Gunnar Myrdal’s (1968) work as evidence, he argues that the Planning Commission failed in its redistributive efforts because of a middle class bias that led to a focus on the so-called modern sector, with persistent inequalities in the countryside rarely becoming the biggest issues of concern. Even as the government became the biggest source of patronage and jobs for the middle classes ordinary people largely encountered it in its alienating form of corruption and immobile bureaucracies. The national interest was therefore defined as something beyond debate and even as the state embarked on huge modernizing industrial processes, it left the task of social reform to the local communities. As Vanaik (1990) explains, the Congress was a social reform movement dedicated to a Gandhian class coalition and constructive work which also happened to be a bourgeois party promoting the interests of the dominant bourgeoisie. But after independence only the second characteristic remained. Hansen (1999) also chastises the state for producing ostensibly secular public spheres that remained “full of religious signs and practices, packaged and represented as culture, making up a nationalized cultural realm

represented as unpolitical, pure, and sublime” (p.53). For Hansen, the Nehruvian state married together two “antipolitical” strategies - the efforts of the Planning Committee to develop India in a rational technical manner and the removal of society and nation from the banality of everyday intimate politics. Consequently, he says, “The Nehruvian state never created space for production of secular citizenship, even in legal terms. Government and legal practices were always premised upon an ongoing essentialization of the nation’s constitutive cultural communities and affirmation of their boundaries” (p.55).

But is that then reason to suggest that the difference between Nehruvian secularism and Hindu nationalism is merely a matter of degree? I would argue not, because there is too much at stake in the secularism debate.

The Debate Around Secularism: What is at Stake

The Indian constitution and the Indian state are officially secular. As we just saw, despite the claims of Hindu nationalists (within and outside the Congress), the Nehruvian vision of India as a secular state was what emerged as one of the key guiding principle of creating the new nation-state (Khilnani, 1999; Sarkar, 1983). The experience, relevance, applicability and efficacy of secularism and state secularism in the Indian context were called into question by the success since the mid 1980s of a virulent, militant brand of Hindu nationalism and consequent communal violence and even genocide.

In any discussion of secularism it is useful to remember that the emergence of secular states in Western democracies was not an institutionalization of an abstract secular ideal but a practical consequence of a specific historical experience (Vanaik, 1997). From this history, three meanings of secularization have emerged: secularization as decline in social significance of religious institutions and beliefs; secularization as relative separation of religion and state; secularization as greater rationalization of thought and behavior. A fourth understanding of secularization (used synonymously with secularism) is an Indian contribution: an understanding that has a strong connotation of an enduring state of affairs rather than a process of religious change, related to the principle of religious tolerance apparently embodied in “Indian civilization” and perceived as “the unifying principle mediating between and collating different religious communities in order to forge a common struggle for national liberation” (p.67). In India, then, the “overdetermination of the notion of secularization by the idea of tolerance did mean that the question of secularization of civil society was never posed in the same way as in the West” (Vanaik, 1997), till the rise of Hindu nationalism brought it on to the academic and social agenda.

Very interestingly, though, Hindu nationalists in India claim to be not against secularism at all. They are against so-called pseudo-secularism which they claim is what the state has historically engaged in, “appeasing” the minorities for political gains. Therefore, only Hindu nationalists can guarantee genuine secularism, as their philosophy is

based on eternal Hindu tolerance (Nandy, Trivedy, Mayaram, & Yagnik, 1998; Vanaik, 1997). In reality of course the ideological basis of Hindu nationalism, the principle of Hindutva, is premised on stigmatization and creation of alienating others (Jaffrelot, 1996). The real and contentious debate can then be boiled down to those who claim that what is needed is more secularism (the secularists) and those who say that it is secularism itself that is to blame for the present state of affairs (the anti-secularists). At the crux of it are questions to do with nothing less than modernity and Nehru's belief in a Western liberal model of India's progress.

The most well known of the self-proclaimed anti-secularists are the sociologist T.N. Madan, the political theorist Bhikhu Parekh, the political scientist and historian Partha Chatterjee and the public intellectual Ashis Nandy. The anti-secularists can again be classified into two kinds, anti-secularists but modernists (Madan, Parekh and Chatterjee) and anti-secularists who are also anti-modernists (Nandy, with occasional interventions by Chatterjee). Ranged on the other side are a whole host of equally famous scholars and intellectuals, many of them Marxists like the historian Sumit Sarkar and the scholar-activist Achin Vanaik as well as left leaning intellectuals like the sociologist Andre Beteille and Nobel laureate Amartya Sen.

The difference in perspectives about secularism has strong connections to the differences between Gandhi and Nehru both of whom were secular but the former's secularism stemmed from his religion while the latter's stemmed from his understanding of Western

history and liberal political philosophy. For Gandhi religious pluralism meant inter-religious understanding and mutual respect and was the strength of Indian society, but for Nehru religiosity and attendant conflicts were a sign of backwardness which the state had to remove (Madan, 1997). For Parekh (1989) and Nandy (2003a) the misunderstanding and lack of application of Gandhian secularism and the forced application of state secularism are problematic. State secularism is the main culprit for Madan (1997) as well. "It is important," he says, "to recognize that one of the major reasons for the rise of religious fundamentalisms all over the world today is the excesses of ideological secularism and its emergence as a dogma, or a religion, just as Karl Marx, Max Weber, and some other social theorists had anticipated" (p.260). And, he argues, it is difficult to apply it to India in its original conception rooted as it is in "the dialectic of Protestant Christianity and the Enlightenment" (p.275), and therefore having no basis in the religions that grew out of India: Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism or Sikhism.

Ashis Nandy (2007) is the most original thinker of the anti-secularists, and he believes that his thoughts occasion hostility because he has been consistently anti-modern and anti-modernity. He believes that modernist processes, "by 'de-permeating' religion and permitting its 'narrowing' institutionalization, can create the basis for more extravagant yet sharpened expressions of religiosity which serve to mark a religious identity and assert it against the Other" (Vanaik, 1997, p.159). In fact, in Nandy's post-Weberian understanding of the

ravages of industrial modernity, a growing religiosity is an inevitable outcome of modernist processes such as secularism. Nandy (2003) argues that the concept of secularism in India is dead today, the common people of India had never anything to do with it anyway and however much one might try, secularism is not an ideology that is going to take root in India. Because India remains a traditional society, a modern secular state that tries to encroach on to it only results in 'pathologies.' As he says, "To accept the ideology of secularism is to accept the ideologies of progress and modernity as the new justification of domination, and the use of violence to achieve and sustain ideologies as the new opiate of the masses" (p.78). The route to communal harmony is to be found in the resources of religion itself, namely tolerance and that is what should be fostered. In India, religion has been split into two, faith and ideology and the reason why the majority of Indians have managed to live together in harmony over centuries is because of their diversity of lived experience, their religious faith. What is needed, then, is not more doses of secularism or modernity but a 'critical traditionality' (Nandy, 2002, 2003a).

Partha Chatterjee represents (in Vanaik's words) is "the curious case of subaltern studies" (1997, p.180). Like Nandy, Chatterjee positions himself against *both* secularists and Hindu nationalists. In a significant article in *Public Culture* published in 1995, Chatterjee took the stance that there was no incompatibility between the agenda of the Hindu communal right and the preservation of a secular state. While the basic values of a secular state are liberty, equality and

neutrality, the Hindu right's call for an Uniform Civil Code replacing Muslim Personal Law brings forth an unresolvable contradiction (or impasse) between the tenets of liberty and equality. He then ruled out the search for a common understanding on the basis of a fundamentally agreed set of universal values. He argued that the inner domain of the cultural community should remain aloof from state imposed laws, thereby resisting techniques of governmentality (though Chatterjee does admit that he is using the formulation slightly differently from the way Foucault intended). He calls for a process of 'toleration' where the religious community should be accountable to itself through consensual processes but has the right to tell outsiders to "leave us alone and let us mind our own business" (p.190). This formulation is a continuation in some sense of Chatterjee's (1993b) separation of the public and the private that he argued had taken place in colonial times.

For Vanaik (1997) and other Marxists, the solution is simple. Like it or not, Vanaik argues, India has been on its own trajectory of modernity for a while now. The search for tolerance in religion is chimerical because there is no religion that is innately tolerant, especially Hinduism with its history of caste oppression. The distinction between religion as faith and religion as ideology is false and plays into the hands of the Hindu nationalists. If secularism has failed it is not because there is something inherently alien about it but because the state has not done enough to promote it and desecularize

the public sphere - an accusation Hansen (1999) also levels at the Indian state.

Amartya Sen (2005) believes as well that India has had too little secularism, not too much. He disagrees with Nandy's (2002) analysis that modernity was the force that disrupted the tolerant existence of multiple communities. Nor does Sen (2005) agree that secularism is innately non-Indian, giving the example of the emperors Ashoka (ca. 304-322 BC) and Akbar (1542-1605) whose states embodied secularism in more or less the fashion that the modern Indian nation-state did. Sen acknowledges that the concept of secularism has faced many attacks in the recent past and even if "the winter of our discontent might not be giving way at present to a 'glorious summer,' but the political abandonment of secularism would make India far more wintry than it currently is" (p.316). This is a view that I fully agree with. What is at stake in the discussions around Hindu nationalism (banal and otherwise) is the very soul of India.

Centralizing, Fixing, and Eliminating Diversity: The Work of Hindu Nationalism

The fixing of what was hitherto fluid has long been at the heart of the Hindu nationalist project. In other words, one of the key desired outcomes of the Hindu nationalist project is a homogenization of Hinduism, very explicitly counterposed against the heterogeneity of Indian religious practices. This intent to homogenize shares common ground with fascist ideology: both the RSS founder K.B. Hedgewar and the ideologue M.S. Golwalkar were admirers of Hitler. It is no

surprise, then, that the Sangh Parivar slogan of ‘one nation, one culture, one religion, one language’ resonates strongly with the Nazi slogan ‘Ein volk, ein Riech, ein Fuehrer’ (Teltumbde, 2005). In 1947, Jawaharlal Nehru, India’s first prime minister observed that the RSS was “a private army which was proceeding on the strictest Nazi lines” (quoted in Jaffrelot, 1996, p.87)

This desire to homogenize is related to one of Hindu nationalism’s biggest anxieties: the fact that Hinduism does not have a central book, or an organized ecclesiastical structure, or one central prophet. Hindu nationalists find it almost abhorrent that there is such an incredibly diversity of practice under the broad umbrella of Hinduism (Ludden, 2005). This lack of a formal structure and a defined book and prophet is held up as evidence by the Hindu nationalists that Hinduism is not so much a religion as a “way of life” (Jaffrelot, 2005). The lack of a central prophet also is considered as a feature that ensures that Hindus can never be communal. A Hindu nationalist from the RSS tells the anthropologist Shubh Mathur (2008) that:

There are many sects within Hinduism, which can be described as *sampradaya* [i.e. sect], but Hinduism is unlike other religions because it is not based on any single book or on the teachings of a single individual. Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism are all *sampradaya* , but Hinduism is a *dharma* [i.e. religion]. Therefore Hindus cannot be communal...Hinduism is not a sect. Therefore Hindus cannot be [*sampradayik*] communal (p.96).

So, by this logic Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism are all categorized as sects by Hindu nationalists, but only Hinduism is a

religion. But in reality, the question of whether or not Hinduism itself is a religion is quite a thorny one. At the very least, the evidence is pretty solid that what is held up as Hinduism by Hindu nationalists is not really as age old and eternal as it is supposed to be. As Romila Thapar (1989) has shown, there has not always been “a well-defined and historically evolved religion which we now call Hinduism and an equally clearly defined Hindu community” (p.210). For Nandy et. al (1998) the attempt by Hindu nationalists to create a new Hinduism :

Defensively rejected or devalued the little cultures of India as so many indices of the country's backwardness and as prime candidates for integration within the Hindu/national mainstream. Instead, the new Hindus sought to chalk out a new pan-Indian religion called Hinduism that would be primarily classical, Brahmanic, Vedantic...This attempted Brahmanization...was sustained by the poor access and even contempt that many of the early stalwarts of Hindutva had for the diverse lifestyles that went with Hinduism in South Asia (p.58).

This was aided and abetted by an Orientalist, Indologist, and religious reformist view of India which viewed Hinduism as what was explicated in the texts rather than what was lived reality. As Nandy et. al. (1998) continue:

The Orientalists and the religious reformers created the impression of there being a ‘real’ Hinduism which transcended the ‘trivialities’ of the local traditions. The modernists and the missionaries delegitimized Hinduism as a lived experience and left open, for the increasingly insecure Indian literati, the option of defending only philosophical Hinduism as the real Hinduism (p.59).

That is, Nandy et. al. (1998) see Hinduism as the totality of all the local practices, rites, rituals, ways of worship, etc. in all their staggering diversity. And they argue that this diversity is a strength

and provides resources to combat sectarianism and communalism.

(To be absolutely fair to Nandy et. al., they notice this diversity of practice in all religions in India, not just Hinduism). Similarly Wendy Doniger (2009) argues that, “Different Hindus not only lived different Hinduisms but privileged different aspects of Hinduism” (p.32).

Doniger has a rather evocative description of the diversity within what is called Hinduism, so I will quote her at length:

The configuration of clusters of Hinduism’s defining characteristics changes through time, through space, and through each individual. It is constantly in motion, because it is made of people, also constantly in motion. Among the many advantages of this cluster approach is the fact that it does not endorse any single authoritative or essentialist view of what Hinduism is; it allows them all. Any single version of this polytheistic polytheism (which is also a monotheism, monism, and a pantheism)... is no better than a strobe photograph of a chameleon, a series of frozen images giving a falsely continuous impression of something that is in fact continuously changing... We can decide which aspects of Hinduism we want to talk about and find the cluster of qualities in which that aspect is embodied—and, if we wish, call it Hinduism (p.28).

But Hindu nationalists have always seen this diversity as a weakness that prevents Hindus from being united as a *political entity*, and therefore susceptible to attacks from ‘outsiders’ such as Muslims and Christians. This was the impetus for the deployment of *Hindutva* or Hindu-ness as a mode of unifying Hindus, despite obvious and stark differences among the adherents of this extremely diverse set of beliefs and practices. As V.D. Savarkar (1923), the founding father of Hindutva, the ideology of political Hinduism, argues:

Some of us are Jains and some Jangamas; but Jains or Jangamas — we are all Hindus and own a common blood. Some of us are monists, some, pantheists; some theists and some atheists. But monotheists or atheists—we are all Hindus and own a common

blood. We are not only a nation but a Jati, a born brotherhood. Nothing else counts, it is after all a question of heart...We feel we are a JATI, a race bound together by the dearest ties of blood and therefore it must be so (p.32, emphasis in the original).

Note here how Savarkar is careful to state that even an atheist can be a Hindu, as can be the follower of the Jain religion. The attempt here is to differentiate between Hinduism and Hindutva, with the latter argued as a ‘way of being’ which was not necessarily connected to the religion one followed. Of course, in order to be admitted into the Hindu fold, you had to accept that you were one. As far as Savarkar was concerned if you were born in this country, you were Hindu, and Muslims and Christians who did not accept the fact were traitors to the nation. Note also that Savarkar here uses the term ‘*jati*’ to translate race. This is a political, not a linguistic decision. As Jaffrelot (1996) shows, in the Brahminical world view, a *jati* is any species, human or otherwise, which all occupy particular ranks in the universe in accordance with universal law or Dharma, within which “humans are integrated in a hierarchical social order, the caste-system” (p.30). The use of the word *jati* here signals Savarkar’s acceptance of the caste hierarchy of human society. Within this hierarchy, it was in fact possible for minorities (and even foreigners) to find a place, obviously at a level lower than Brahmins—all they had to do was accept themselves as essentially Hindus. Because the concept of *jati* is based on cultural rather than biological criteria, it was not possible to construct a biological ideology of race. Instead, as Jaffrelot (1996) argues, “a racism of domination by the upper castes appears

natural” (p.31). So, the translation of race as *jati* by Savarkar is done in order to make the case for the political union of Hindus, but within the parameters of a caste system that is by its nature divisive.

Similarly, Golwalkar too translates race as *jati* and argues that even if “there be people of a foreign origin, they must have been assimilated into the body of the mother race and inextricably fused into it” (Golwalkar, 1939, quoted in Jaffrelot, 1996, p.56). But Golwalkar is adamant that the “foreign races [i.e. Muslims and Christians] must either adopt the Hindu culture and language [and] must learn to respect and hold in reverence Hindu religion” (p.56). If they did not, they could only stay in the country “wholly subordinated to the Hindu nation, claiming nothing, deserving no privileges, far less any preferential treatment—not even citizen’s rights” (p.56).

This is not a racism in the conventional sense but “an upper-caste racism” (Pandey, quoted in Jaffrelot, 1996, p.57). This is also a racism differentiated through culture and fairly agnostic to questions of racial purity, with both Savarkar and Golwalkar more interested in cultural rather than racial homogeneity. This, again, stands to reason given the centralizing thrust of Hindutva.

The lack of a centralized structure in Hinduism is seen as a weakness by the chief ideologues of the philosophy of Hindutva (even though it is exactly that lack of an ecclesiastical structure for Hinduism that enables Hindu nationalists to call Hinduism a ‘way of life’ rather than a religion). It is this perception of lack that led in the 1960s to the creation of the VHP, which Jaffrelot (2001) calls “a

nationalist but mimetic attempt at federating the Hindu sects". The attempt to create the VHP is 'mimetic' because it attempts to create an ecclesiastical structure similar to the religions it fears and detests, namely Islam and Christianity. What Hindu nationalism wants to do more than anything else is unite Hindus as a political entity, in the way they believe adherents of Islam are. Uniformity and standardization in every aspect of the performance of Hindu subjectivity is then a most highly desired outcome for Hindu nationalists. This has to be done under the umbrella of culture, expressed as rites and rituals, which are of course Vedic rites and rituals.

Brahminism, 'Sanskrit' and the Ideological Function of Rituals

For the Sangh Parivar the building of the Hindu nation (*rashtra*) comes before—and is critical to—the task of building the Hindu state (*rajya*). The definition of the Hindu nation and its composition are carefully outlined in the foundational text of Hindu nationalism, Savarkar's (1923) *Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?*. It is this text that we see rituals identified as being central to the conception of Hinduness.

But these rituals that Savarkar identifies as markers of Hinduism are in fact Brahminical or scriptural or Vedic²⁵ rituals, derived from classical Brahminical scriptures. He has no time or space for folk rituals—those which are not found in the scriptures but are found in the local practices of Hinduism. Since the objective is to centralize and fix Hindu practices, it is only Brahminical rituals that

²⁵ From the word Veda, four key collections of texts, the first three of which are devoted exclusively to the performance of religious rites and rituals.

are taken into account by Savarkar. Here it must be said, though, that sociologically speaking, it is quite common for lower caste groups to adopt Brahminical rituals as a way of moving up the caste hierarchy. This process, termed ‘Sanskritization’ by the anthropologist M.N. Srinivas, is one in which “Vedic social values, Vedic ritual forms, and Sanskrit learning seep into local popular traditions of ritual and ideology” (Doniger, 2009, p.5). This has historically been an extremely fluid process and is often accompanied by the reverse process of local traditions inflecting the Brahminical/Sanskrit traditions—a process that Wendy Doniger (2009) calls ‘deshification’ (from *desh*, the Sanskrit-Hindi word for the local). While under the influence of Hindu nationalists (though not that alone), Hinduism has been identified with Brahminism, Brahminism was as much of a sect as any other within this larger conglomeration of sects to be later clubbed together as Hinduism. Savarkar’s Hindutva, as of the RSS, is a strongly Brahminical one—and is animated, as we have seen, by the fear of a strong centre that in his eyes Islam possesses, but Hinduism lacks. This centre is therefore found by Savarkar to reside partly in Brahminical rites and rituals.

For Savarkar, *Hindutva* or Hindu-ness is defined by three key markers: geographical boundedness, race, and a common culture. Savarkar (1923) very deliberately downplays the importance of religious criteria in determining the Hinduness of an individual. For him Hinduism, the religion, is only one (and not even the most important) of the attributes of Hinduness. Race too is defined in

cultural terms. And indeed, it is in culture that the thrust of his arguments lie. As Jaffrelot (1996) says, these arguments stem “directly from the crucial importance of rituals, social rules, and language in Hinduism” (p.31). For Savarkar (1923):

Hindus are bound together not only by the tie of love we bear to a common fatherland and by the common blood that courses through our veins and keeps our hearts throbbing and our affections warm, but also by the tie of the common homage we pay to our great civilization—our Hindu culture, which could not be better rendered than by the word *Sanskriti* suggestive as it is of that language, Sanskrit, which has been the chosen means of expression and preservation of that culture, of all that was best and worth-preserving in the history of our race. We are one because we are a nation a race and own a common *Sanskriti* (civilization) (p.33).

The deployment of ‘Sanskrit’ here is of course deliberate, first since it is the language of Brahminism, and second since it manages to alienate at one stroke the vast swathes of the population who speak Urdu, a language that is not derived from Sanskrit, unlike Hindi which was. The word ‘*sanskriti*’ used by Savarkar has the same roots as the word *sanskar*. The word *sanskar* has both a specific religious/technical and a popular meaning, with the two closely interconnected. *Sanskar*, in the former sense, refers to a set of rites that a Hindu is supposed to undertake through the course of a life. This meaning is also present in the popular understanding of *sanskar*, which largely refers to the adherence to cultural rites and custom—such as touching the feet of elders in obeisance, for example. Loosely speaking, *sanskar* can also mean tradition, not in the sense of ‘being

traditional,' in terms of a mode of thinking harking back to the past, but in the sense of living that thought.

Savarkar is very clear that it is this *sanskar* that is the key marker of difference between Hindus and others. That is, Hindutva is defined above all by cultural symbols. He uses these cultural markers to distinguish between Hindus on the one hand and Muslims and Christians on the other. While he is careful to not anchor his understanding of Hindu-ness in the *religious* content of any particular set of practices or customs, preferring instead to unearth the common features of the Hindu 'race', Savarkar nonetheless argues:

From a national and racial point of view do the different places of pilgrimage constitute, common inheritance of our Hindu race. The Rathayatra festival at Jagannath, the Vaishakhi at Amritsar, the Kumbha and Ardhakumbha—all these great gatherings had been the real and living congress of our people that kept the current of life and the thought coursing throughout our body politic. The *quaint customs and ceremonies and sacraments they involve, observed by some as a religious duty, by others as social amenities*, impress upon each individual that he can live best only through the common and corporate life of the Hindu race. These then in short—and the subject in hand does not permit us to be exhaustive on this point—constitute the essence of our civilization and mark us out a cultural unit (p.37-38, emphasis added).

Note that Savarkar is not really concerned with whether or not there are religious imperatives behind the conduct of rituals and ceremonies as long as they are undertaken. This is befitting of someone who had very little to do with faith himself, an atheist who left instructions in his will to cremate his body in an electric crematorium without any religious ceremonies (Sharma, 2003). What is important to Savarkar (1923) are the cultural aspects of the rituals

and ceremonies, the conduct of which he believes define the conductor as Hindu. That is, Savarkar himself is perfectly happy for ritual to be, so to speak, banalized and desacralized since it is their overt presence that is critical rather than the imperatives for their presence.

Savarkar's explication of Hindutva proved to be the spur for the formation of the RSS. When the RSS was formed its founder K.B. Hedgewar embraced the celebration of six religious festivals as core to its annual cycle of activities (Jaffrelot, 1996). Again, the rationale is simple: it is in these religio-cultural activities that boundaries can be most sharply drawn between one who is Hindu and one who is not. Yet, what is intriguing in that in the list of these six festivals, you do not find the most commonly celebrated Hindu festivals Diwali and Holi. Perhaps this is because in India, for example, Christmas, Eid, Diwali and to an extent, Holi, have always had social components that attract participants from outside the core religious communities with which these festivals are associated. The RSS therefore decides to celebrate six festivals, some created expressly for the purpose: Varsha Pratipada, the Hindu New Year; Shivajirajyarohonatsova, the coronation of Shivaji, the Maratha king who resisted the Mughals; *guru dakshina* [gift or donation to the *guru*] a celebration of the guru; Raksha Bandhan, a North Indian festival which celebrates the brother's role as protector of his sister; Dussehra, the last day of celebrations of the worship of the goddess Shakti in her various incarnations; and Makarsankraman, to celebrate when the sun enters

Capricorn in January (Jaffrelot, 1996). Each of these has a distinct set of rituals associated with it; and each of these automatically excludes Muslims from participation. So, festivals that might be of Hindu origin but have deep social penetration and any element of cross religious appeal are rejected in favor of those that do not. To emphasize once again, it is not the celebrations associated with the festivals but rather the rituals around these festivals that mark them out as belonging distinctively to one community.

Hindu Nationalists and Muslims

As we have touched upon earlier, for Hindu nationalists, Muslims were the key threat to both the Indian and the Hindu nation. As Jaffrelot (1996) points out, central to the discourse of Hindu nationalism is “the strategy of stigmatization and emulation of ‘threatening Others’ ...based on a feeling of vulnerability born of a largely imaginary threat posed by ‘aliens’ principally Muslims and Christians.” This strategy is heavily indebted to negatively exoticist constructions of Islam and Muslims. Mushirul Hasan (2005) has shown how these constructions were perpetuated by a number of British writers in India— travellers, missionaries, administrators, ethnographers— who all reported back about the supposed dogmatism of Islam, the corruption and low morality of Muslims, the fanaticism coupled with visions of post martyrdom sensuality that apparently typified Muslims and the innate hostility of Islam to the West, all of which were carried over from the early origins of the religion. These distortions of Islam were very much a part of the

worldview of the celebrated 19th century Bengali novelist Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, “one of the most systematic expounders in India of the principles of nationalism” (Chatterjee, 1986) and a “crucial force in the making of both a nationalist imagination and a Hindu revivalist polemic” (T. Sarkar, 2005). Precursor organisations of the Sangh Parivar, such as the Arya Samaj and the Hindu Mahasabha, borrowed many of these constructions, articulating Hindu concerns regarding the weakness of their own religion against the supposed strength of Islam and unity of Muslims, but the ideological coherence that the movement was seeking was delivered only by Savarkar in 1923, leading to a very specific understanding of the Indian nation as a Hindu nation. In fact, intriguingly enough, RSS leaders very rarely use the term ‘Hindu.’ The term that they use most often is ‘*Bharatiya*,’ the adjectival form of Bharat, the term used in Sanskrit texts to denote the landmass that later became India²⁶ (Jaffrelot, 1996). This allows for the positing of cultural markers of Hinduness as the cultural markers of Indianness. Muslims are not Indians, then, till such time as they renounce all external signs of belonging to a religious community. That is, Muslims need to ensure that religious practice is firmly located in the domain of their homes. (This also enables us to understand why Hindu nationalists also claim to be secularists—they too would like to banish from the public sphere all visible markers of professing the Muslim faith, just like the ‘hard’ secularists of France who outlawed the *hijab* in public places).

²⁶ It is also the officially recognized Hindi name for India.

But it is not enough to divest themselves of all markers of their religion, Muslims also need to openly pledge their allegiance to Hindu religious symbols, which of course are presented as national symbols. And, as we saw above, if they do not, they cannot expect any rights as Indian citizens. The elimination of Muslim rites, rituals, and even cultural markers from the public sphere then becomes a key objective of Hindutva.

Hindu nationalism, Muslims, and the family. One of these cultural markers is considered by the Hindu nationalists to be the family, which becomes a potent site for anti-Muslim discourse to play out. In fact, in the 1980s, the very structure of the family became a key marker to establish difference between Hindus and Muslims. The Shah Bano case (referred to in the last chapter) of the mid 1980s where the Congress government bowed to fundamentalist Muslim clergy enabled the BJPs to present its demands to adopt a Uniform Civil Code as modern and progressive, rather than the outcome of a deliberate anti-Muslim agenda (Jaffrelot, 1996). The family had been pretty central to the discourses of Hindu nationalism, especially that of the Rashtra Sevika Samiti. If Hindu nationalism has always given primacy to the creation of the Hindu nation, the Samiti believes that the institution upon which the nation is based is that of the Hindu family. Therefore, if the Hindu nation has been weakened and in need of rediscovering the fundamental principles of Hindutva, it has largely been because the ideal Hindu family has been destroyed by intermarriage; and this has gone hand in hand with indignities

heaped upon Hindu women by Muslim men, without any equivalent retaliation from weak and effeminate Hindu men (Bacchetta, 2004). By the 1990s, the fear of the ‘traditional’ family splitting apart became quite important to the Hindu right’s understanding of the changes wrought by economic liberalization in the late twentieth century, with women leaders of the Samiti decrying the “mummy and daddy culture of nuclear families” (Quoted in Hansen, 1994, p.28).

The ‘traditional’ family. Ironically enough, there is not enough sociological evidence to say with certainty that the joint family so beloved of Hindu nationalists and referred to even by academics as the ‘traditional’ family had actually been the dominant family form in India in years past. The perception that the joint family is the traditional Indian family form and the notion that the form has increasingly been at threat due to the advent of modernity was largely a contribution of British Orientalists and their successors, the Indologists. (c.f. Uberoi, 2000; D’ Cruz & Bharat, 2001; Niranjan, Nair & Roy, 2005). However, it was possibly the defining family type for a particular type of Indian: North Indian urban upper caste traders, clerks, and business folk which formed the core support base for the Sangh.

On the other hand, A.M. Shah has presented a wealth of historical and empirical data to suggest that there was no significant dissolution of the joint family structure post the advent of industrial capitalism in India, and if at all it has been happening, it has been happening for professional and westernized upper middle classes

(Uberoi, 2000). But the perception that the joint family was the 'traditional' Indian family holds fast. As Uberoi rues, 'the public at large, and even many social scientists, remain addicted to their misconceptions' (p.131).

A recent report, however, argues that the proportion of nuclear families in urban areas in India increased by 1% between 1981 and 1998-99, which amounted to a 9% increase in relative terms (Niranjan, Nair & Roy, 2005). Yet the same study also suggested that in the period of industrialization and urbanization (i.e. post independence in 1947), "the joint family [was] not the norm in India" (p.632). That is while, nuclear and supplemented nuclear families rose in number, this did not happen necessarily at the expense of the joint family.

Whether true or not, this misconceived idealization of the threat to the Hindu family was counterposed against the even more egregiously pernicious misconceptions of the Muslim family, and increasingly made commonsensical in the last two decades of the twentieth century. Even as attempts were made to combat the perceived nuclearization of the Hindu family under the cultural invasion from the West and establish the *Hindu* joint family as the repository of *Indian* tradition, tropes about Muslim fertility and family sizes were deployed extensively. The Hindu right argued that Indian Muslims gained an unfair demographic advantage from the existence of separate family laws for the adherents of different religions, especially that Muslim religious law allowed all Muslim men to marry

four wives. In fact, this understanding of the Muslim family has become ‘commonsense,’ as Gramsci (1971) puts it—a historically specific set of ideas and beliefs which are then taken to be universal.

The Muslim family is, then, typified in the vitriolic formulation ‘Hum paanch, hamare pachis’ [‘We five, our twenty-five’], a spin on the Indian official family planning mantra, ‘Hum do hamaare do’ [‘We two, our two’], a formulation indicating the supposed lack of Muslim interest in family planning (Anand, 2007). By extension this lack of interest also then cues the lack of patriotism of Muslims in carrying out the national project of population control. This formulation is a late twentieth century articulation of the pervasive anxiety that prevails in Hindu nationalist circles about the Muslim plot to overrun Hindus demographically by producing more children, which will apparently result in there being more Muslims than Hindus in India by 2051 (cf. Reddy, 2002).

All the way back in the 1950s, the RSS had started to argue that overpopulation was at the heart of India’s economic problems and Muslim women were to blame; and the “population bomb” (which was activated by polygamy) was a war tactic used by Muslims against Hindus (Bacchetta, 2004a). Almost needless to say, these discourses prevailed even though in reality there is less polygamy among Muslims than among other groups, such as tribals, and rates of Muslim polygamy are comparable to rates of Hindu polygamy (Puniyani, 2003). In addition, Muslim family law underwent significant changes since the 1970s giving earlier wives the right to

divorce their husband if he practiced polygamy. Further proving the empirical emptiness of these discourses is the fact that the growth rate differential between Hindus and Muslims is marginal at best, and family planning has more to do with socio-economic factors rather than religious ones (cf. Shariff et.al., 2006; Subramanian, 2008). Despite all such evidence to the contrary, Hindu nationalists have continually and consciously positioned the Muslim family as being distinctively different from the Hindu one. Of course, that is not really too much of a surprise. As Hansen (1999) says, the stereotypical Muslim of the Hindu nationalist imagination has no actual basis but is an “entirely ‘abstract’ or phantasmagoric Muslim existing as an ideological fantasy in the popular imagination among many Hindus. It is this ‘abstract Muslim’ rather than actual physical Muslim cohabitants in a slum who is the object of intense communal hatred” (p.211).

An indicator of the success of the project of Hindu nationalism is that this ideological construction of Muslims and Muslim families does not appear ideological to many Indians. As Stuart Hall (2003) remarks, ideologies

work most effectively when we are not aware that how we formulate and construct a statement about the world is underpinned by ideological premises; when our formations seem to be simply descriptive statements about how things are (i.e. must be), or of what we can “take-for-granted.” Ideologies tend to disappear from view into the taken-for-granted “naturalized” world of common sense (Quoted in Kumar, 2010, p.255)

It is in culture that ideological “commonsense” resides. It is also, as we will see, in culture that Savarkar and Golwalkar find the ‘essence’ of ‘Hinduness’; not just culture as defined in rites and rituals, but culture as defined in literature and the arts.

Hindu Nationalism and Popular Culture

The centrality of culture in Hindutva discourse. We have seen above how for Hindu nationalists rites and rituals are central to the definition of who a Hindu is. That is, one could be an atheist, but could still be a Hindu in terms of the rituals one performed. We have already seen Savarkar’s (1923) articulation of race and nationalism in cultural terms; and we have seen how strongly he defined rites and rituals as markers of cultural difference. For Savarkar, the nation was defined not just in terms of a bounded land mass (though that was important), but in terms of its cultural unity. As Savarkar saw it, the literature and the arts were critical to the definition of a nation:

Although the Hindus have lent much and borrowed much like any other people, yet their civilization is too characteristic to be mistaken for any other cultural unit. And secondly, however striking their mutual differences be, they are too much more like each other than unlike, to be denied the right of being recognized as a cultural unit amongst other such units in the world owning a common history, a common literature and a common civilization (Savarkar, 1923, p34).

In fact, it is culture that enables a people (or peoples) to feel a oneness. Savarkar exhorts Indians thus:

The English and the Americans feel they are kith and kin because they possess a Shakespeare in common. But not only Kalidas²⁷ or

²⁷ 4th century Sanskrit poet and dramatist, regarded as one of the greatest figures in Indian literature

a Bhasa²⁸ but, Oh Hindus ! ye possess a Ramayan and Mahabharat in common—and the Vedas! (p.51-52).

The televised *Ramayan*, as we have already seen, played a central role in the success of spectacular Hindu nationalism in the late 1980s and early 1990s. But the *Ramayana* continued to be explicitly invoked by the creators of the K-series as an inspiration. Ekta Kapoor, for instance, stated that *Kahaani* was in her head a reworking of the *Ramayana*; and why not since it was relevant for each and every home. It is important, then, to examine the continued importance of *Ramayana* in Hindu nationalism.

Ramayana and the fluidity of narratives. In the academic literature, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* are usually treated as the religious literature of the Vaisnavas, a cult that worshipped Lord Vishnu (Thapar, 1989). In the popular discourse though, it is often argued that the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* are beloved Indian—and not just Hindu, and not just Vaisnava— epics. As such, it is claimed that their narratives are familiar and recognisable to audiences across the nation, and therefore provide tropes easily appropriated by creators of cultural products. In fact, exactly this argument of universality is provided by the creative personalities behind *Kyunki* and *Kahaani*. And to be fair to them this argument is not entirely devoid of merit. For example there are 300 versions of the *Ramayana* extant in Urdu (Mustafa, 2005), the language that was

²⁸ 3rd century Sanskrit dramatist, the earliest known Sanskrit dramatist, influential on Kalidas

identified by Hindu nationalists as a Muslim language.²⁹ As the historian Romila Thapar (1989) explains:

The two epics, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*...were at one level the carriers of ethical traditions and were used again by a variety of religious sects to propagate their own particular ethic, a situation which is evident from the diverse treatment of the theme of the *Ramayana* in Valmiki [the presumed author of the epic], in the Buddhist *Vessantara* and *Dasaratha Jatakas* and in the Jaina version—the *Paumacaryam* of Vimalasuri. The epic versions were also used for purposes of political legitimation...Subsequent to this were various tribal adaptations of the *Ramayana*, and these were less concerned with the Vaisnava message and more with articulating their own social fears and aspirations(p.217).

Here, then, is a very important point about what we have so far been calling *the* Ramayana. It is apparent even from this brief excerpt that there are *many* Ramayanas. It has been retold by different authors (and often different sets of authors) in different languages in different eras. As AK Ramanujan (2000) says in the famous essay ‘Three Hundred Ramayanas’:

The number of *Ramayanas* and the range of their influence in South and Southeast Asia over the past twenty-five hundred years or more are astonishing. Just a list of the languages in which the Rama story is found makes one gasp...Through the centuries, some of these languages have hosted more than one telling of the Rama story (p.133).

However, some scholars, for example Sheldon Pollock (1993) would argue that all of these versions have at their core the *Ramayana* of Valmiki. But Ramanujan (2000) argues:

²⁹ The politics of language around the gradual decline of Urdu and the adoption of a comparatively recently developed language of Hindi are extremely complex and we don’t need to get into that here. But due to a variety of reasons, including state support to Hindi and the attempts by Hindu nationalists, Urdu has lost its status as the common spoken language of Northern India, and is increasingly identified as a ‘Muslim language’. See Mathur (2008).

[T]hese hundreds of tellings differ from one another. I have come to prefer the word *tellings* to the usual terms *versions* or *variants* because the latter terms can and typically do imply that there is an invariant, an original or *Ur-text*—usually Valmiki’s Sanskrit *Ramayana*, the earliest and most prestigious of them all. But...it is not always Valmiki’s narrative that is carried from one language to the other.

Therefore different tellings of *Ramayana* differ (often radically) in their details, the relationships depicted, the narrative arcs depicted, in the endings and in the ideological messages being conveyed. Importantly, when these tellings are the ones of a different religion they even stop carrying what one might call ‘Hindu’ values. As Ramanujan (2000) says, “[T]he Jain texts express the feelings that the Hindus, especially the brahmans, have maligned Ravana, made him into a villain...The Jain *Ramayana* of Vimalasuri...knows its Valmiki and proceeds to correct its errors and Hindu extravagances” (p.145). Similarly there are texts that describe Sita as being Rama’s sister, there are texts which paint Ravana as a tragic rather than a villainous figure and there are texts in which Sita is the daughter of Ravana. That being said, one can still agree with Pollock (1993) that all of these tellings do take off from a basic narrative that counterposes a righteous Rama against a terror inducing Ravana. Nonetheless, as Paula Richman (2001) argues, it is difficult to identify any one telling of the *Ramayana* as canonical in the Weberian sense of the term. “The notion of canon,” she asserts, “assumes a single unchangeable telling that remains at the core of a religious tradition, but in Indian textual

tradition, many tellings of the Rama story appear, circulate, and continue to be transformed” (p.450).

I would argue, therefore, that the claim that the *Ramayana* is an Indian epic is both true and false. It is true because you can find a version of the *Ramayana* in almost every part of the country, but it is also at the same time false because it is not a single *Ramayana* that unifies these parts of the country. In different languages, in different tellings, for different groupings, the *Ramayana* becomes different things.

In Northern India, though, the most prominent telling was the *Ramcharitmanas* of Tulsidas. It was written in Awadhi, a vernacular dialect of Northern India, related to what eventually became the language of Hindi. Significantly, this is also the telling that became central to the work of Hindu nationalism in the last three decades of the twentieth century, and the work of television in the 1980s. Even though it was originally supposed to draw from a number of tellings, such as Kampan’s Tamil language, Krittibas’s Bengali language and other regional tellings, the televised *Ramayan*, broadcast on the state channel Doordarshan in the mid 1980s drew largely from this telling (Lutgendorf, 1990).

Given the status of Doordarshan at that time as the sole television broadcaster in India, and the huge viewership and response to the telecast, it was the televised version of the Tulsidas telling of the *Ramayana* that became fixed in the public imagination and naturalized as the definitive telling of the epic. That is, very strong

barriers were now put up to the continual transformation of the Rama story; or indeed its multiple tellings. Naturally, if the attempt is to centralize, then it is no wonder that Hindu nationalists are mortally afraid of acknowledging that there are innumerable tellings of the *Ramayana*, or of acknowledging the fluidity of the epic. In fact, so entrenched is this fear of fluidity that even Ramanujan's (2000) scholarly essay discussed above can become a cause of controversy. Hindu nationalists successfully managed to remove this essay from the syllabus of Delhi University in 2011, simply because the essay had the temerity to argue that there is really no standardized text of the *Ramayana*. (See an insightful commentary on the issue at Kesavan, 2011).

There was therefore a concerted effort by Hindu nationalists to situate Ram as the very embodiment of Hinduism, around whom all Hindus from all kinds of sects could rally round. Ram had traditionally always been portrayed in the *Ramcharitmanas* as being *udar* (generous) and lacking masculine assertiveness (Kapur, 1993). In the hand of Hindu nationalists, though, Ram metamorphosed from an incarnation of beatific love into a primarily martial hero. Ram was presented by Hindu nationalists as *rashtrapurusha* (statesman) and *maryadapurshottam* (valorous superhuman) and the calmness, tranquility, and tenderness he had always been associated with was replaced instead by interventionist martiality (Katju, 2005). Ram in this case was the embodiment of the virile Hindu man who could protect the motherland (Bharatmata, literally Mother India) from the

pernicious Muslims. The rallying cry of the Hindu nationalists as they embarked on their orgy of violence after the destruction of the Babri Masjid was *Jai Siya Ram*. In riot after riot around the country, Hindu nationalists would rouse their troops with the rallying cry of *Jai Siya Ram* (or 'Victory to Ram'). Even if the *Ramayana* was truly an *Indian* epic before that, starting the late 1980s it became a *Hindu* epic, or more accurately a *Hindu nationalist* epic, through the vehicle of the televised *Ramayan*.³⁰ That is, in the two decades since 1980s then, Ram became intimately associated with Hindu nationalism and became *political*. That is, I would argue, after the events of the late 1980s and early 1990s, there could be no such thing as a depiction of Ram that did not cue off Hindutva ideology.

Hindu symbolism and the Indian public sphere. At this, point, though it will be useful to expand the scope of our present discussions somewhat and investigate if the excessive presence of Hindu symbolism in the Indian public sphere starting from the 1980s was unprecedented historically. In particular, there are two issues that are of relevance here: a) Is this efflorescence of Hindu-ness on television unprecedented for television? and b) Is this efflorescence of Hindu-ness on television unprecedented for all Indian media? And what are the implications of the answers to these questions.

³⁰ Did Muslims actually watch the *Ramayan*? There is no solid evidence either way. On the one hand Doordarshan bureaucrats and politicians insisted that they did, and therefore claimed validation for their decision to desecularize the medium. On the other hand some of Mankekar's (1999) respondents stated that they did not watch the serial, with one of them saying "Why should we? What does it have to do with us?" (Quoted in Mankekar, 1999, p.184). Interestingly, Mankekar found Muslim women's response to the televised *Mahabharat* much more equivocal than their responses to the *Ramayan*.

Let us start with the first of these questions. We have already seen earlier that the decision by the state broadcaster to broadcast a televised version of the *Ramayana* played into the hands of Hindu nationalists. And as we saw above the televisionisation of the epic helped fix the text and constrict the fluidity that had led to the emergence of multiple tellings with multiple viewpoints. The decision to broadcast *Ramayan* was not without controversy, it being seen as a direct repudiation of the Indian state's secular moorings, and fears about the potential of the telecast to create communal tensions were aired in the corridors of the Mandi House, the Doordarshan headquarters (Lutgendorf, 1990). This telecast, though, was followed in quick succession by shows such as *Alif Laila* and *Tales from the Bible*, stories deemed to be of Muslim and Christian origin, respectively. While this may have been some kind of a balancing act in the eyes of the mandarins of Mandi House, counterposing the telecast of 'Hindu' epics with Muslim or Christian ones, Rajagopal (2001) argues that 'the mythological genre tended to be denied to shows based on Muslim subjects,³¹ which were instead labelled 'historical' (e.g. *Akbar the Great* and *Alif Laila*), or 'quasi-historical' (e.g. *Akbar Birbal*), with one arguably historical serial, *Tipu Sultan*, actually labelled 'fictional' because of protests by Hindu conservatives' (p.95).

When the private satellite channels arrived in 1991, mythologicals on television died a very quick death. There were few

³¹ We will not here get into the issue of why Rajagopal thinks *Akbar the Great* or *Akbar Birbal* are 'Muslim subjects', or at least does not make clear in the text that he does not think so.

takers for mythological shows and there were even fewer takers for overt religious symbolism on non-mythological shows, especially since these non-religious shows were concerned with projecting a picture of modernity. You would be hard pressed to find elaborate depictions of rituals and worship on *Hasratein* or for that matter on earlier Doordarshan shows such *Udaan* or *Rajani*. That is, the line between mytho-religious content and non-mytho-religious content was very distinct.

Hindu Symbolism: Other Media. But what if we expand our gaze to media other than television? A body of scholarship holds that the public sphere in India was always full of religious symbolism. The argument is that if the Doordarshan telecast of the *Ramayana* appears to liberal commentators as a (state administered) injection of religion into the public sphere, it appears so only in the context of Nehruvian state secularism that dominated India since the nation's independence in 1947. In truth, the Indian popular cultural sphere has always been inundated with religion or religious iconography. And this popular cultural sphere emerges (intentionally or otherwise) in this scholarship as the authentic. This formulation borrows from Partha Chatterjee's (1993a) outer/inner and material/spiritual binaries that we talked about earlier. A similar binary is found in Arvind Rajagopal's (2001) deployment of the term 'split public' (which has become equally influential and taken for granted in studies of Indian media). A 'split public' is a "public in which an internal social division is accompanied by an ideological division that justifies the

divide while claiming to overcome it” (Rajagopal, 2009, p.10). I will quote Rajagopal (2001) at length here:

I use the term split public as a heuristic in thinking about an incomplete modern polity, standing for the relationship between the configuration of political society desired by modernizing elites and its actual historical forms. Central to this split is the unfulfilled mission of secularism in a society where a compromise between Hindu orthodoxy and progressive nationalism launched an anti-colonial independence movement, one that culminated in the declaration of a secular state. The distinction between an *officially maintained secular public sphere and a more heterogeneous popular culture* was not likely to survive the proliferation of new electronic media, however, and became problematic, as political parties themselves began to invoke the authority of faith to reinforce their diminishing electoral credibility, while citizens drew on the narrative resources of religion to make sense of an often disorienting, unstable polity (Rajagopal, 2001, p. 152, emphasis added).

In these formulations Rajagopal is positing a divide between elites and non-elites, the former secular, the latter not necessarily so. Therefore there is an “officially maintained secular public sphere” and a “more heterogeneous popular culture.” Rajagopal (2001) sees ‘social divisions’ between these elites and non-elites, and sees these divisions being reflected in the reporting of the Ram Janmabhoomi campaign in the elite English language media and the non-elite Hindi media.

This construction of binaries, as we have seen earlier, is a move that is common to many scholars who label themselves post-colonial. For them ‘elites’ or more commonly ‘Enlightenment rationality’ or ‘the State’ become the locus of multiple problems. Hindu nationalism or for that matter communal violence is sometimes seen as reactions to the elites’ or the State’s attempts at shoving unsavoury concepts such as secularism down the throats of an unwilling populace. Again, as we

have seen, these scholars, such as Chatterjee (1995), Madan (1997), and Nandy (2003) find secularism itself to be the problem. They usually try to counterpose an authentic Indian past which has not been ravaged by ‘modernity.’ This tendency is particularly pronounced in the works of the highly influential Subaltern Studies school of Indian history and historiography, but as Mathur (2008) remarks, this “search for an authentic Indian past, which has survived the ravages of colonialism and modernity by remaining buried within popular consciousness, brings it dangerously close to the agenda of Hindu nationalism” (p.35). Note that in all of these works, ‘modernity’ is a category that is taken for granted and its contours or boundaries rarely specified. But if, as Vanaik (1997,p.12) argues capitalist industrialization constitutes the “fundamental process of modernity”, the absence of capitalism or any kind of understanding of a class or material analysis makes the understanding of the situation less complete³². This absence makes it easier to counterpose an English speaking elite against a vernacular speaking populace, rather than a capital or land owning elite against a working class populace. The result then is to valorize the popular, which automatically stands in for an authentic notion of Indianness.

Fine arts and ‘bazaar’ arts. This valorization of the popular is seen very prominently in the emergent body of scholarship on Indian arts, both fine arts and ‘bazaar’ arts. This scholarship has established that Hindu symbolism was present in—and even central to—

³² None of these moves, of course, are unfamiliar to anyone familiar with the trajectory of postmodernism in the 1980s. See Callinicos (1990).

bourgeois, petit bourgeois and other popular cultures in India from well before neoliberal economics and Hindu nationalism started their dramatic ascent in the early 80s. In his landmark study of Indian art in the twentieth century, Partha Mitter (1994) has shown how artists were strongly influenced by the cultural nationalism of the nineteenth century, specifically by the Hindu nationalism of the twentieth century that created a new Hindu identity that was “unified, timeless and ahistorical” (p.242). Depictions of themes from Hindu myth, now considered as authentically Indian in opposition to European themes, followed in abundance. But this was not the case in just “high art” alone. Scholars of art history and visual culture have highlighted the omnipresence of Hindu gods and goddesses in what has come to be called ‘bazaar’ or ‘calendar’ art, that is, “cheap mass-produced icons [which] everyone has access to... in some form, whether bought, given, or salvaged...as calendars given to favored clients and associates...as smaller prints brought at roadside stalls; as inexpensive stickers, postcards, magnets, key rings, and pendants; [and] as cutouts lovingly gleaned from printed incense or soap packages” (Jain, 2007). The argument is that these operated on registers very different from those of the elites and were significantly, though not exclusively, devoted to Hindu religious themes right from their origins in the late nineteenth century up to the present day. Kajri Jain (2007) and Christopher Pinney (2004) for example have shown how Hindu religious iconography and imagery were predominant in the visual public sphere during the national struggle. The incorporation of

images of secular Congress party leaders within religious imagery (even as those leaders themselves exhorted the cause of secularism) was particularly striking. Frances Pritchett (1995) has thrown light on how the immensely popular *Amar Chitra Katha* ('Immortal Picture Tales') series of comic books, despite their genuine attempts at inclusion, have largely derived their stories from Hindu mythology. Katherine Hansen (1992) has described how the indigenous nautanki theatre has been deeply penetrated by Hindu religious themes. For that matter, the performance genre of the Ramlila ('The Play of Rama') is to be found all over the landscape of North India, reenacting often at length, the story of Rama. Hindu religious themes have not been absent from commercial Hindi films, even the non-mythological ones (Derne, 1995).

The case of Bollywood. In fact, Bollywood film, the most well known of India's media outside of India, provides us with an interesting case study. It has been often argued that Bollywood reflected the state's imperatives in constructing a nation, often seeking to elide differences in the process. As Rao (2007) states, "In the 1970s and into the 1980s, Hindi films became catalysts for the nation's homogenizing mission, which appealed to the underprivileged by building faith in the nation state's protective beneficence." The underlying assumption was that the (poor) "angry young man" (p.59) was the primary audience of these films. But this audience was not conceived of as being homogeneous in terms of religion; and neither were the creators of these cultural products a homogeneous group.

Some of the biggest stars, writers and directors of Hindi cinema in the 1940s and 50s were Muslims and they often had to undergo a symbolic rite of passage by taking on Hindu screen names; but there was no secrecy around this and their Muslim identities were hardly unknown to their audiences (Vasudevan, 2000).

Under the strong influence of Nehruvian secularism, the films of the 1950s focused on human values rather than religious values and were “preoccupied with creating a new mythology for a new nation” (Dwyer, 2006, p.138). Hindu mythological films, however, were churned out with regularity till the early 80s and subtle religious themes were introduced into social films of later years (Derne, 1995). But common also were films set entirely in a Muslim milieu—the so-called Muslim socials. Film imagery and dialogue explicitly used the motif of the Hindu mother as motherland but also showed that mother being nourished equally by her three children, Hindu, Muslim and Christian, as in the famous (if scientifically inaccurate) scene from the blockbuster *Amar Akbar Anthony* where the mother receives blood at the same time from her three sons who have grown up with three different religions (Thomas, 1995).

In the movies of the 1970s (including *Amar Akbar Anthony*), community was “condensed into the iconic figure, pre-eminently into the triad of Hindu, Muslim and Christian, whose attributes are largely fixed and unvarying” (Thomas, 1995, p.154). In general, Hindus were mostly placed at the apex of the hierarchy of communities, displaying all the desired attributes of modernity while Muslims and Christians

still exhibit 'backward' characteristics (Vasudevan, 2000). Yet the dictates of the star system would ensure that these narrative hierarchies were overturned when megastars like Amitabh Bachchan would play Muslim or Christian characters. As Vasudevan (2000) says, Bachchan's position in the star hierarchy

Put pressure on the regime of social representation which would subordinate such figures within the film. Something of a carnivalesque inversion of hierarchies then emerges; the plebeian communities acquire an attractive freedom, of personality, bodily disposition and romantic initiative, posed in marked contrast to the respectable, but also more repressed, Hindu hero of films such as *Amar, Akbar, Anthony*. It is as if the distractive, anarchic aspects normally associated with comic figures had erupted to envelop the narrative world, loosening hierarchies and coherent modes of symbolic social representation (p.154).

In another one of Bachchan's superhit films, *Deewar* ('The Wall', 1975), he is a Hindu labourer in the dockyards wearing an identification badge with the number 786. As a Muslim co-worker points out to him, this is a holy number, the numerological equivalent of the word Bismillah, meaning "In the name of God." Sure enough, it saves Bachchan's anti-hero character at various points in the story, till the time that he loses it (Basu, 2005). In *Coolie* ('Porter', 1983) Bachchan plays a Muslim who survives a hail of bullets because he recites the Islamic *Kalma* - "There is no God but God and Mohammed is his Prophet" (Dwyer, 2006). Vasudevan (2000) suggests that such possibilities where influences from other religions are woven into the core narrative were undermined in the climate of the aggressive Hindu nationalism of the 1990s.

From the 1990s, Bollywood was ruled by a troika of Muslim stars, Shah Rukh Khan, Amir Khan and Salman Khan, yet paradoxically they rarely played Muslim characters. They bore instead strongly urban, normative Hindu personae, even as genres like the Muslim social and the anti-heroic *dacoit* [i.e. armed robber] film with Muslim protagonists disappeared and the stereotype of the life-sacrificing Muslim soldier/policeman started populating some of the films which borrowed strongly from Hindu nationalist ideologies (Anustup Basu, 2005). But Ashis Nandy (2003b) contends that popular Hindi film has always abounded in all kinds of stereotypes and the positive ones are as comical as the negative ones. He also draws attention to the fact that “there never has been, except in the genre called Muslim socials, a major villain with a Muslim name”³³ (p. 82). While this is only partially true, it still does not take away from the fact that the depiction of Muslims in Bollywood films became more and more constrained from the 1990s. Muslims on screen were now expected to protest their fealty to the nation more vocally; and were often punished with death if they questioned it (Hirji, 2008). That being said, merely the representation of Muslims on screen per se has never been a problem in Bollywood, given the significant number of Muslim writers, producers, directors, lyricists, and actors working in the industry (Hirji, 2008). At the same time, though, 1990s film started to be inflected with more overt depictions of Hindu iconography, albeit often in a modern persona. For example the 1994

³³ Nandy is referring to the names of the character on screen rather than the actor playing the character. He is also a bit too definitive, but the main point is well taken.

blockbuster *Hum Aapke Hain Koun* was replete with depictions of Hindu rites and rituals (Uberoi,2003). Yet, as we shall discuss later on, the depictions on *Hum Aapke Hain Koun*, were as much of folk rites and rituals as of Brahminical ones.

Hindu Symbolism: Complexity vs. Exclusionary Maneuvers

It becomes apparent then that the efflorescence of Hindu symbolism, or more accurately the banality of the efflorescence of Hindu symbolism on television is not an aberration if you consider the history of the Indian public sphere. One could argue that it was the absence of such symbolism from public television till the arrival on it of *Ramayan*, and the absence of it from the English language media for most of its history in India, that was an aberration. This position is one shared by people from the television industry, and by scholars like Munshi (2010). Crudely, summed up, that argument goes something like “It’s no big deal.”

However, such a position is deeply problematic. In all of these cases of media other than satellite television, and most certainly in the case *bazaar* and calendar art, the imagery and the iconography available for consumption is not merely Hindu, but Muslim, Christian, Jain, and Buddhist. Even more significantly, the iconography is not solely Brahminical. The art of the bazaar, with circulation determined solely by the dictates of the market, free of the constraints of state secularism which restricted overt religiosity on the state run TV and radio channels, was full of religiosity at least in the superficial sense. But though these works formed the majority of the images circulating

in what Kajri Jain (2007) calls the ‘vernacular economy’³⁴, representations of Muslim, Sikh and Christian religious themes were available for anyone who wanted it. And of course there was imagery from within the vast range of perpetually moving clusters of characteristics that define Hinduism as such at a particular point in time. That is, even if the explosion of *bazaar* and calendar art is contemporaneous with the explosion of Hindu nationalism in India (Pinney, 2004); and mainstream nationalism in India itself is very often tinged with saffron (the colour of Hindu nationalism), and often a Brahminical saffron, the imagery in *bazaar* art does not limit itself to Brahminical motifs. As Kajari Jain (1997) has shown this art borrowed liberally from all kinds of idioms, and addressed a multiplicity of audiences. It was perforce not restricted to the “pasteurized Brahmanism” (to paraphrase Nandy et. al, 1998) that Savarkar and his followers peddled. Equally, as Freitag (2007) has shown there was a strong Indian Muslim niche market in calendar art. As she argues:

The realm of the visual provides a concrete example of, first, a ‘local’ aesthetic and set of practices within the global economic and technical flows of the period. This ‘local’ is distinctively South Asian, but shared across any Hindu-Muslim divide within South Asia...[T]he minority community of Indian Muslims operated in ways that protected and perpetuated their sense of distinctive community and identity, while still clearly situating themselves *both* within a shared South Asian ocular field *and* a particular Muslim identity (p.308, emphasis in the original).

³⁴ Jain (2007) uses the term ‘vernacular’ to distinguish practices and discourses distinct from the worlds of bourgeois-liberal and neoliberal modernism. It is a term that captures the “heterogeneity of postcolonial idioms and forms of experience while addressing their contemporaneity and currency, and their implicitly subordinate relation to hegemonic forms of discourse and practice (in short, their subalternity)” (p.14).

Similarly, even as Bollywood cinema wove Muslim stereotypes into its 'unity in diversity' formulations in films like *Amar Akbar Anthony* and churned out Hindu mythologicals like *Jai Santoshi Maa* with tedious regularity, Muslims were a bonafide part of the cinematic public sphere. In fact as Hirji (2008) argues, commercial Bollywood film showed strong traces of the state's liberal inclusive politics till the late 70s and continued to produce films on Muslim social and political themes. Even to this day it continues to highlight Muslim traditions, music, art and culture, albeit in attenuated terms. Kabir (2003) has pointed out how strains of 'Islamicate' culture continue to weave their way into Bollywood film, sometimes as celebration and sometimes as mourning for their loss. Importantly, as Derne (1995) suggests, Hindu religious themes in Bollywood films are "often vague and condensed, perhaps because so many of their viewers are Muslims" (p.200) and religious images are presented in a "very secular, degraded context" (p. 212). For that matter, the *nautanki*, as Hansen (1992) has shown drew from Muslim sources continually; and Ramlila performances often attracted Muslim audiences inasmuch they drew Hindu ones.

Doordarshan too exhibited some of these complexities and was subject to external criticism when it deviated from it. One, the decision by the secular state to start airing non-secular programming contested and compelled the then recently retired Secretary in the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting to publicly defend the decision to air Ramayana (Rajagopal, 2001). Also, as stated earlier, because the government at the centre still professed to subscribe to

Nehruvian secularism, the telecast of the *Ramayan* was followed in short order by the telecast of shows based on the mythic narratives closely identified with other religions, *Alif Laila* (based on The Arabian Nights), *Tales From the Bible* and so on (Mankekar, 1999). This was, in some ways, in consonance with the governing philosophy of the state broadcasting as expressed most clearly on state radio, to air shows that were “seldom incidentally Hindu or Muslim but rather intended as such” (Rajagopal, 2001, p.82). In other words a “serial emphasis on religious identity was a way to plead impartiality before a diverse audience” (p.82). It was in a way just another instance of the state putting into practice the peculiar Indian interpretation of secularism- the equal respect for all religions with the state acting as active balancer (Vanaik, 1997). As we can see, then, the relationship of popular culture and Hindu-ness has long been a complex and complicated one. Among the many characteristics that popular culture has exhibited, though, a rigid exclusion of any particular community has never been one of them. Hindu nationalism, however, has militated against this state of affairs, seeking to exclude Muslims from the mainstream of Indian life. In the 1980s, it tried to do this through a spectacular nationalism that was often expressed as violence.

Hindu Nationalism as Spectacle

By the start of the 1980s the Sangh Parivar, through its various affiliates, was well established across the country. The RSS therefore embarked with vigour on its original agenda of organizing Hindu

society across the country (Hansen, 1999). It did this through a succession of activities which all took the form of public spectacles, many of which turned violent. The first of these was the Ekatmata Yatra (literally, journey of 'one soulness') that criss-crossed the country in 1982-83. Ostensibly designed as an inclusive (i.e. no caste, sect, or gender barriers), it was underpinned by a pronounced anxiety against conversions to Islam which were said to be undermining Hinduism. At the heart of this 'yatra' were three processions, two from the north to south and one from the east to west, originating and culminating in Hindu holy places, distributing water from the holy river Ganges along the way. Other processions from the interiors joined these main columns. The idea was to explicitly connect the spiritual geography of Hinduism, so crucial to Savarkar's understanding of who a Hindu was. This yatra also marked a significant moment in the calculated use of religious symbolism. Images representing the river Ganges and Bharat Mata, but imbuing them with divinity, were carried by the processions on a kind of a ceremonial *rath* (chariot), allowing devotees to worship and give offerings. The objectives, achieved beyond expectations, were to establish a distinctively *Hindu nationalist* devotionism set apart from a Hindu devotionism, and therefore mobilize Hindus as a *political* community (Jaffrelot, 1996; Hansen, 1999). Along the way, images of Bharat Mata as well as water from the Ganges were sold as merchandising elements of the campaign. The basic elements of spectacular Hindu nationalism were now in place: a march or a

journey; a wheeled vehicle on which newly created or reconfigured deities would ride, as if on a *rath*; and clever use of imagery and symbolism, often sold as retail goods (a phenomenon that Rajagopal, 2001, terms 'retail Hindutva').

While the Ekatmata Yatra was a success, the foundations for even greater success were put in place when the long dormant controversy around the centuries old Babri Masjid was revived in 1984. A procession was launched with the ostensible mission of 'liberating' the Masjid, but the actual purpose was more ideological in that it placed idols of Ram and Sita alongside the use of the slogan 'Bharat Mata ki Jai' (Victory to Mother India), thereby positioning a Hindu nationalist cause as an Indian cause (Jaffrelot, 1996). From this point on, a series of high participation gatherings, public *yagna* (fire sacrifice oriented rituals) and marches were organised in various parts of the country making visible a newly aggressive Hindu nationalism. This aggression was directed mostly at Muslims, who were said to be benefiting disproportionately from the Congress's overtures towards them.

The high point of this strategy of ethno-religious mobilisation came towards the end of that decade when the VHP mobilised a huge contingent of Hindu religious leaders to offer their imprimatur to a plan geared at actually building a Ram *mandir* in Ayodhya. The funds for the construction would be generated by small sum door to door collections with donors receiving a certificate of recognition. Accompanying the collections were processions of bricks inscribed

with the name Ram (the so-called *Ram Shilas*) to be used for the building of the temple. At every step along the way pujas were offered to these bricks with the processions finally culminating in Ayodhya to begin the building (Jaffrelot, 1996).

Almost all of these spectacular activities had been driven by the VHP or the Bajrang Dal. As Jaffrelot (1996) shows the various constituents of the Sangh were now acting in concert to aid BJP's electoral campaigning in 1989. It was around this time as well that the televising of *Ramayan* provided spectacular Hindu nationalism with a fillip. By 1988, when the BJP finally decided to openly deploy aggressive Hindu nationalism in the pursuit of electoral success putting an end to its flirtation with political alliances and doctrines such as Gandhian socialism, the Ramjanmabhoomi ('The land of Ram's birth') movement was in full bloom.

Not too surprisingly, outbursts of communal violence and rioting broke out in various parts of the country alongside the *Ram Shila* processions. Communal violence was now taking on a national character, having earlier been largely local in nature. In 1990, spectacular Hindu nationalism took an even bigger leap when the BJP president LK Advani undertook a cross country 10,000 km tour in a modified Toyota truck designed to look like a mythical *rath* (chariot) and decorated with Hindu Om symbol and the lotus, the electoral symbol of the BJP. The tour was labelled a *rath yatra* (chariot journey) deliberately drawing on mythico-religious connotations of the term, and expressly aimed at gearing support for the building of the Ram

temple. Advani travelled unimpeded across eight Indian states, but was finally arrested in the state of Bihar by the local chief minister on the grounds of disturbing communal harmony. This led to another wave of communal riots.

For the next two years there were more and more overt and aggressive attempts to lay the foundation stones of the mandir, and consecrate the disputed space (*shilanyas*) in Ayodhya. When some Bajrang Dal activists lost their lives in police firing in the process, it gave rise to a cult of martyrdom, and provided another strand in an increasingly resonant narrative of injustices meted out to Hindus. The pent up hysteria finally boiled over on the 6th of December 1992, one of the darkest days of Indian history, when the Babri Masjid was demolished by activists, even as the leaders of the BJP looked on. The consequent spate of rioting across the country was one of the worst in terms of intensity and bloodshed; and while they were followed soon after by the terrorist bombing of Bombay and another spate of rioting, it was the last such instance of communal violence and anti-Muslim rioting on a national scale. Even if acts such as the massacre of Muslims in the state of Gujarat orchestrated by the Hindu right in 2002 (Mathur, 2008) would still take place, they would not reach national scale. The days of processions, *rath yatras*, and agitations for the cause of Hindu nationalism that were planned and executed at the national level were over. Even if there were instances of spectacular Hindu nationalism in action in the 2000s, they were usually orchestrated and planned in particular locales or regions, and limited

to them. In other words, the balance between spectacular and banal Hindutva was shifting decisively in favor of the latter.

Moving Away from a Politics of Spectacle 1: The BJP in Power

What does it mean to say that Hindu nationalism became banal? Using Billig's (1995) explication of the concept of banal nationalism it means a movement from symbolic mindfulness to mindlessness, that is the ubiquity of symbols without them being remarked upon; and it means the sacral becoming part of everyday life instead of being confined to particular times and spaces. Billig does not quite discuss how 'hot' nationalism cools and becomes banal but Skey (2009) argues that economic prosperity has a key role to play in this process. But in India, this can only be a very partial explanation as the fruits of economic liberalisation have accrued disproportionately to a thin slice of the population (Ghosh, 2009; Gupta, 2009). I would argue that in the Indian context the exigencies of electoral politics, in particular the formation of coalition governments (an almost unknown feature of politics in the UK and USA, the countries that Skey or Billig investigate) and the highly federated and regionalized nature of the political system, played a key role in the BJP moving away from spectacular expressions of Hindu nationalism. Note of course that I am not arguing that this move away meant a discarding of its pernicious ideology, simply a closeting away of its most spectacular and violent expressions; as Billig (1995) says "banal does not imply benign" (p.7). By this time many of the doctrines of Hindu nationalism had become commonsense and Hindu

nationalists were setting the terms of the debate, without needing to take recourse to violence.

As we have seen above, the Sangh Parivar had started to become more and more visible in the Indian public sphere in the mid 1980s. But just as the BJP was poised to gain electorally from these activities, Indira Gandhi was assassinated and her son Rajiv Gandhi was swept to power with an overwhelming majority that left the BJP with just two seats in Parliament.³⁵ In 1989, however, it took huge electoral strides on the back of the *Ram Shila* and other associated spectacular campaigns, landing as many as 85 seats. In 1990 came the Advani *rath yatra* and the BJP might have expected a stellar performance in the next election held in 1991, but it only reached 120 seats and the Congress with 244 seats formed a government. In 1996, the BJP did form a government but it lasted for only 13 days as it became clear that it did not have the requisite numerical strength in Parliament. It was only in the 1998 elections that the BJP actually got a strong hold on power, but only in coalition with a slew of other parties as part of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), and that too with a majority that was too slim for the government to last too long. The BJP finally received enough seats to form a stable five year government only in 1999 (when elections were called after the 13 month old NDA government collapsed) but again as part of the NDA coalition (now consisting of as many as 24 parties!). This invalidated two of the key assumptions governing coalitions (or at least

³⁵ All election data has been taken from the website of the Election Commission of India at http://eci.nic.in/eci_main1/key_highlights.aspx

assumptions about coalitions in the academic literature): coalition governments are inherently unstable and nationalists cannot compromise (Adeney & Saez, 2005). But that compromising under the pressures of forming and maintaining a coalition through its five year life time inevitably led to the BJP putting the Ram Janmabhoomi agitation on the backburner, as also some of its other hardline (and anti-Muslim) policies such as the vow to introduce a Uniform Civil Code.³⁶ In part, it was because the BJP was starting to articulate its ambitions differently. In S. Mitra's (2005) perception, the "accommodation of minorities within a redefined political space rather than the dissolution of their distinct identities appear[ed] to have become official BJP policy" (p. 87). But it was not just that the BJP unilaterally moderated its stance in order to make the coalition run: it was also that some of the BJPs ideas had by then gained wider acceptance outside of the Sangh Parivar (Mitra, 2005).

At the level of the states, where it was free of the compulsions of coalition politics, the BJP had much greater success in pushing its agenda. By 1991, it was a dominant force in state elections in the north, capturing the state governments of Himachal Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Uttar Pradesh (Ludden, 2005). In the state of Madhya Pradesh, of course, it had been more politically potent for a long time, largely due to the assiduous work done by the RSS cadres (Jaffrelot, 1996). But its success in state of Uttar Pradesh (India's

³⁶ In India there are separate civil codes for Hindus and Muslims, which Hindu nationalists claim discriminates against Hindus, and therefore want replaced by a uniform civil code (the elements of which would obviously be drawn from the Hindu code).

most populous state, contributing the largest number of seats to the Lok Sabha), was nothing short of stunning. While it had been unable to win in 1984 even a single Lok Sabha seat, by 1991 it was holding the reins of power in Uttar Pradesh (Hasan, 2005). The control of the levers of power in the state gave the Sangh and the BJP a golden opportunity to spread its discourse in addition to what was already being done through existing RSS channels. Knowing of the RSSs interest in building Hindu *rashtra* (nation), it should come as no surprise to know that the first venture it undertook after India's independence was to set up a primary school, in Uttar Pradesh. By 1991, these Vidya Bharati schools of the RSS had spread all over the country, especially in the north and west. 4000 schools were either directly run or affiliated to it, located in almost all parts of the country but the most widely spread in the RSSs strongholds of Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat, and Maharashtra (T. Sarkar, 2005). By 2002, the number of Vidya Bharati schools had shot up to 19,741 with 70,00 teachers teaching in them (Hasan, 2007). In addition to these schools, the RSS runs colleges, *Shishu Vatikas* ('Kiddie Gardens') created to resist 'westernized' Montessori schools which remove the mother from primary pedagogy of pre-school infants, and *Samskar Kendras* ('Culture Centres') in areas where formal education is not available. In each of these the focus is on religion, 'patriotism', and 'Indian culture' (T. Sarkar, 2005). Needless to say, 'Indian culture' is understood as a Brahminized Hindu culture without a trace of Islamic or Islamicate culture. At the Vidya Bharati schools students are told

that the famous Qutab Minar of Delhi was built not by Alauddin Khilji but the emperor Samudragupta; that various regressive customs of some Hindus such as child marriage, *sati* (the practice of Hindu wives joining their deceased husbands on the funeral pyre), and numerous superstitions were caused by fear of Muslims; and that Islam only teaches atrocities. These falsehoods were now sought to be implemented in all state run schools in the states where the BJP gained power, especially Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh.

With the BJP coming to power at the centre in 1998, attempts were made to scale this up to the national level. The Human Resources Development (HRD) ministry, responsible for national curriculum school textbooks embarked on a mission to Hinduise history. The attempts were not just limited to schools but extended to colleges and universities, which were now to teach pseudoscience like Vedic (i.e. derived from the religious texts, the Vedas) mathematics and Vedic astrology. This would reclaim the scientific genius of Hindus lost under the ‘degeneration’ caused by the advent of ‘Muslim’ rule in the thirteenth century. The BJP’s HRD minister considered this to be a “second war for the country’s cultural freedom” (Joshi, quoted in Hasan, 2007, p. 241). But while the BJP or Sangh Parivar’s attempts at redefining history had a distinct anti-Muslim tone, it’s not as if other political parties actively resisted the incursion of banal Hindu nationalism into education. The Congress led government of Madhya Pradesh granted the status of a state university to one

founded and run by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi,³⁷ with a curriculum based on Yogi's 'Vedic science of natural law' (Nanda, 2009). It offers graduate and postgraduate degrees in 'vedic science', astrology, yoga, and Vastu shastra (the Indian counterpart of Feng Shui) among others. The control of the levers of political power at the state and national level, then, proved extremely crucial to the Hindu right's attempts at naturalizing its ideologies. A banal form of Hindu nationalism was systematically making its way into the corridors of education. The move away from a politics of spectacle also resulted in another shift: an attempt to regain control over women's energies that had been calculatedly unleashed during the era of spectacular politics. As we examine the contours of this shift, I will also discuss the tensions between the Sangh and the Samiti understandings of gender.

Moving Away from a Politics of Spectacle 2: Hindutva and Gender

Golwalkar was the second Sarsanghchalak of the RSS and his book *Bunch of Thoughts* (1966) is one of the most important texts of Hindu nationalism. To start with, Golwalkar sees women primarily as mothers (who will produce children for the Hindu nationalist army). As he argues, "In our cultural tradition, the respectful way of calling a woman is by her child's name. To call a lady as the wife of Mr. so-and-so or as Mrs. so-and-so is the Western way. We say, 'She is Ramu's mother'" (p.79). Later on he states even more emphatically, "[E]very woman, whatever her age or status in life, except a man's wife, is a

³⁷ Yes, the same Mahesh Yogi to whose Ashram the Beatles decamped to in 1968; and who became the butt of John Lennon's disdain in the Beatles song 'Sexy Sadie.'

manifestation of the mother to him. This is a special feature of our culture” (p.109). Therefore, he continues, “The sacred responsibility of instilling Matrubhakti [love for mother], Deshabhakti [love for the nation] and Daivabhakti [love for god] in every Hindu boy and girl is upon our mothers” (p.283). So are there any fields outside the home in which mothers (or women, since clearly these are coterminous terms for Golwalkar) should exert agency? As he argues:

There is a special burden upon our mothers of serving our needy sisters in society. True, a majority of our mothers will not be in a position to go to far-off places to carry on social work among the distressed and the destitute. However, this does not mean that they should sit back in their homes all the while. They could establish useful contacts among the womenfolk in their own neighbourhood and carry out programs, which would inculcate our cherished ideas among them and their children. The spirit of mutual help and service would also have to be made popular through our day-to-day social intercourse. Our womenfolk should not be allowed to develop inferiority complex or a feeling of helplessness. They should be taught that they are the living emblems of parashakti [i.e. spiritual strength] (p.286).

This is from a book published in 1966. So the statement that a majority of mothers will not be in a position to go to ‘far-off’ places to carry out social work should be given a pass. What is interesting here, though, is that Golwalkar is not suggesting that women stay in their homes all the time. However, when they do venture out it should be for ‘social work’ and inculcating ‘our cherished ideas’. What are these cherished ideas? Golwalkar explains:

Literacy campaign among women is one more important programme, which our educated mothers alone can successfully tackle. But here also, *inculcating noble samskars in them should be given the priority, teaching of alphabets should come second*. In order to do this, instill in them a spirit of pure devotion to our motherland, faith in our Dharma and pride in our history. Show

them the map of our sacred motherland, the holy streams and mountains, the Tirthas [i.e. pilgrimages] and temples stretching right from the Himalayas to Kanyakumari. Introduce them to the rich variety of our national life in language, literature, art and social traditions. Thus make them become intimate with the true spirit of our national being (p. 286, emphasis added).

Note again the salience of the word ‘sanskar’ here, or for that matter, the curious injunction that it is the teaching of these *sanskars* that has to take precedence before the teaching of the alphabet. And note also, how the emphasis is completely on education, understood as an education in what is perceived to be ‘national’ culture.

But this understanding of gender roles does not give us the complete picture, especially in our attempt at understanding gender and empowerment in the K-serials. For this, we need to engage with the discourses of the Rashtra Sevika Samiti (National Women Volunteers Committee, henceforth Samiti), the women’s wing of the RSS. As we shall see, the discourses of the Samiti have run parallel to and have often overlapped with (but are not identical to) the mainline discourse of the RSS. Any understanding of the representation of women in the K-serials has to first engage with the parallel discourse of women and gender as purveyed by the Samiti as well as the way in which these were deployed to address contemporary circumstances in the 1990s by the Hindu right.

Gender, agency and the Hindu right. The historian Tanika Sarkar made an important point in 1991 when discussing the first efflorescence of right wing Hindu women’s participation in the public sphere, especially in militant activities:

In fact the new Hindu woman citizen is cast in a mould that is very close to bourgeois feminism. There is no denying that it [i.e. the discourse of the Samiti] does empower a specific and socially crucial group of middle class women, if not in an absolute feminist direction then definitely in a relative sense (p.2062)

In a significant collection of essays on women and the Hindu right, Amrita Basu (1995) pointed out that the “gendered imagery and the actual roles of women in Hindu nationalism are far more diverse than in [standard] fundamentalist depictions” (p.171). The discourse of contemporary Hindu nationalism, then, does not actively discourage women’s education and work. But it certainly expects primacy to be given to motherhood, because it is with the mothers that the critically important task of reproducing the cultural values of Hindu culture and therefore the establishment of the Hindu nation rests (Bachetta, 2005).

For the Samiti, mothers have a “primary role in the sons’ self-realisation, and are direct agents in the resurrection of the nation” (Bacchetta, 2005,p. 133). It uses several models of the ideal wife, but the most fully worked out one is that of Sita, Ram’s consort from the *Ramayana*. It actively encourages feminine warrior and leadership qualities, but at the same time restricts it to *sevikas* (women volunteers) and *pracharikas* (seniormost leadership of the Samiti). But it sees most women as still realising themselves within home and domesticity and makes little, if any, mention of women’s sexuality or economic self-sufficiency.

But in the late 1980s and into the 1990s as militant Hindu nationalism was going from strength to strength, more and more women were being engaged in Hindu nationalist activity in its spectacular forms. Women were actively encouraged to transgress the boundaries of home and even of geography (contra Golwalkar's advice, above), as long as they were doing so in the service of Hindu nationalism. As Tanika Sarkar and Urvashi Butalia (1995) argue, this posed a serious challenge to feminists:

Politically and methodologically this assertive participation of women in right wing campaigns pulled many of our assumptions into a state of crisis for we had always seen women as victims of violence rather than its perpetrators and we have always perceived their public, political activity and interest as a positive, liberating force (p.3).

In fact, some of the most violently anti-Muslim words came from women leaders of the movement such as Uma Bharati and Sadhvi Rithambhara (who became infamous for her obscenity laden, vitriolic declamations of anti-Muslim rhetoric). As Paola Bacchetta (2004c) has demonstrated, the activism of Hindu nationalist women in this period was supported by a "specifically feminine Hindu nationalist discourse" (p.3), exemplified best in the discourses of the Samiti. This discourse was used to encourage women to participate not just in electoral campaigning but even in riots. But it cannot be denied that Hindu women did find meaning in their own lives through their agency in Hindu nationalist activity such as the Ram Janmabhoomi campaign (Basu, 2005).

There are problems, though, if female empowerment comes couched in shades of saffron (i.e. the color of renunciation in Hinduism, but appropriated by the Hindu right as the identificatory color of Hindutva). One, the Sangh has an extremely distasteful view of Muslim women seeing them either as prostitutes, baby factories, or victims of 'Islamic evil' such as polygamy, *talaq*, or Muslim male corruption (Bacchetta, 2004a). Alternatively it even sees them as always desiring the heroic Hindu male who is defending the nation. While many of the female leaders of the Hindu right had been spurred into political engagement by their own experiences of gender inequality, this engagement never extended to any kind of solidarity with Muslim women. In the words of Amrita Basu (1995), "at their most benign, they render Muslim women invisible; more often they seek to annihilate Muslim women" (p.164). Savarkar himself was in on the game, especially in his attempt at marrying Hindu nationalism and historiography, *The Six Golden Epochs*, where he decries Shivaji's attempts to honorably treat Muslim women, insisting that the right approach is to "pay the Muslim fair sex in the same coin" i.e. that of rape (Savarkar, 1963, quoted in Agarwal, 1995).

To summarize, then, while women's self constitution as an active political subject was certainly enabled by Hindu nationalists in the late 1980s and early 1990s, it was (in the words of T. Sarkar, 1991, p.2057) done in "dangerously unprecedented ways". The other equally significant problem is that the empowerment of women driven by the doctrines of right wing Hindu nationalisms (and for that matter right

wing doctrines in general) is ultimately based on a set of reactionary politics. A supposed liberation of women under these politics can only be illusory, and not real. Both of these points were illustrated perfectly by the developments at the end of the 1990s.

Bottling the genie: Hindutva and women's energies. As we have just seen, the strategic deployment of women's agency helped make Hindu nationalism a potent force in the 1980s and 1990s. But as Thomas Hansen (1994) has argued, the Hindu right's response to greater visibility of women in the public sphere was to deploy a strategy of 'controlled emancipation'. He shows that there were two Hindu nationalist strategies adopted with respect to women: one asserted the primacy of motherhood, while the other tried to "suture gender conflicts through the controlled emancipation of women under the protective canopy of Hindu nationalist organisation" (p.82). By the middle of the 1990s though, women were being told to retreat back into the home and were no longer as visible on the frontlines of the Hindu nationalist movement. When Tanika Sarkar went back in April 1999 to talk to the respondents she had interviewed in the early 1990s, she found their circumstances and their outlook significantly changed. Specifically, she found that "Golwalkar's restricted and restrictive strictures on domesticity and the homebound women have been retrieved and refurbished" (p.2162). Earlier, representatives of the Samiti were very clear that the notion of sacrifice was bound up with active fighting. Samiti publications had argued that a woman who was able to defend herself acquired greater respect in society. The

Samiti magazine *Jagriti* ('Awakening') had stated in 1991 that it was extremely important for women to be economically independent for them to achieve comprehensive development. This was in line with Sarkar's (1991) observation that "the new Hindu woman [was] cast in a mould which is very close to bourgeois feminism" (p.2062).

Yet, by the end of the 1990s, representatives of the Samiti were saying that too much insistence on women's rights was leading to the dissolution of the incubators of the Hindu nation — the family. In the words of a prominent Samiti activist, "They [feminists] teach women about their rights, they tell them to fight their men about these rights. We teach them how to sacrifice themselves to keep the family together" (Gupta, quoted in Marsh & Brasted, 2007, p.296-7). The older leadership of the Samiti in the 1990s was increasingly uncomfortable with the emergence of a younger generation of women, who, instead of devoting time to building the ideal Hindu family (the microcosm of the Hindu nation, as we have seen) pursued careers or education, earning (as we saw above) the disapproval of the leadership for fostering the 'mummy and daddy culture of nuclear families'. Women's subjectivities were now again being anchored in their primary roles as mother and wife, yet at the same time, there were no restrictions sought on consumerism. As Tanika Sarkar (1999) suggested:

The new consumerist self-absorptions of the middle class woman, fanned by the ad-culture and the flood of beauty-aids, cosmetics and household-gadgets, are encouraged, since they provide the economic survival of much of the country's manufacturing- trading

classes. And this class is also the major basis for the political support of the Sangh parivar (p.2165).

In the next two chapters, we will tease these points out further. That is, we will see, how the imperatives of the market and those of Hindu nationalism are mediated by television soaps to meet in the institution of the 'traditional' joint family. These ideas about the nature of contemporary womanhood were not, however, introduced by the K-serials, but were prevalent in the Sangh Parivar *before* the shows launched. For example, Amrita Basu quotes Murli Manohar Joshi, the BJP ideologue (and then President of the party), proclaiming in 1991 that the BJP was "with women power" in their struggle. But then he goes on to say, "Please forgive me for saying that you have to change yourselves, for women forget their own sufferings when they become mothers-in-law' (Quoted in Basu, 1991,p.172). He has no problems with women exerting their agency, but he is equally certain that the agency has to be exerted in the domestic sphere. The very title of the biggest hit on Indian television of the post-Doordarshan era embodies and echoes Joshi's schematic: *Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi* i.e. 'Because the mother-in-law was once a daughter-in-Law Too'. Joshi was saying exactly what Ekta Kapoor was saying a good half a decade before the K-serials were conceived.

Banal Hindu Nationalism in Action

We see then that there was a transition from spectacular Hindu nationalism to a banal Hindu nationalism through the 1990s. As we have seen, the votaries of Hindu nationalism argue that Hindutva is a

‘way of life.’ If so, it does imply that banality is integral to the definition of Hindutva: if it is a ‘way of life,’ it has to do with the everyday and therefore the banal. This is one right-wing nationalism then, that contains in its DNA itself its banal form. But what can we consider to be the components of this banal Hindu nationalism? As we have seen in chapter 1, banal nationalism needs metonymic images but it also needs words. So the continuous flagging of certain kinds of images and icons and certain kinds of banal words can be considered instruments of banal Hindu nationalism.

The first of those images would be that of Ram. The Ram Janmabhoomi movement—abetted by the natural televisual appeal of battle scenes—succeeded in making Ram into a martial, avenging hero who would fight for the cause of the Hindus. This transformed Ram from his centuries old conception as an embodiment of divine love and locus of the very non martial *bhakti* movement. What we can see then is that after the Ram Janmabhoomi movement both Ram and the *Ramayana* begin to occupy a dual position. On the one hand Ram is *one* resident of the pantheon of gods and god like entities, on the other hand he is *the* ultimate symbol of political Hinduism, the prophet like figure around whom the Hindu community can organise itself. On the one hand the *Ramayana* is a beloved epic, told in multiple ways by multiple voices to convey multiple stories, often oppositional to the core narrative. On the other hand, the *Ramayana* becomes a political tool, *the* holy book of the newly politicised community of Hindus. After the Ram Janmabhoomi movement then,

neither Ram nor the *Ramayana* nor the elements associated with them can operate on merely a spiritual or even religious register alone. And these elements certainly operate on primarily a political register for a significant section of the population—namely, the core audiences of Hindu nationalism. (We will see in the next chapter how these core audiences of Hindu nationalism are located in the core markets for Star Plus).

As discussed earlier, banality is in a sense encoded into the DNA of Hindutva. As the ideologues of Hindutva argue, it is *not* about religion, but about *a way of life*. In other words, it is in the banality of everyday life that Hindutva manifests itself, or at least will in the ideal Hindu nation. Savarkar himself made rituals the heart of what defines a Hindu nation, and the RSS embraced festivals as key to the idea of a Hindu identity. Images (moving or otherwise) of Hindu rituals and festivals then are critical to the continual reproduction of the Hindu nation. But these rituals and festivals and images are drawn entirely from a Brahminical, Sanskritic or Vedic understanding of Hinduism, ignoring entirely the diversity of practice, thought, and philosophy that together constitute what is commonly known as Hinduism. The words *sanskara* and *sanskriti* used often by Hindu nationalism are in effect references to a Brahminical *sanskara* and a Brahminical *sanskriti*, and when the depiction of Hinduism is Brahminical, we can safely say that this is banal Hindutva in operation, and not just Hinduism.

But as Billig (1995) argues, “Small words, rather than grand memorable phrases, offer constant, but barely conscious, reminders of the homeland, making ‘our’ national identity unforgettable....The crucial words of banal nationalism are often the smallest: ‘we’, ‘this’ and ‘here’” (p.94,95). In the use of these small/little words the nation is taken for granted: “A daily deixis of little words can point out the homeland, reproducing it as the homeland in banally forgettable ways” (p.144). So we must pay attention to the use of these little words, such as *humara* (our) and *hum* (we) that crop up repeatedly in the K-serials. But banal nationalism also entails a movement from symbolic mindfulness to mindlessness. If we begin to see, for example, the images of Ram (and other Hindu idols) in excess, in situations and locations where it is working not as mindful symbol, we can see in that excess too a banal Hindu nationalism at work. But before going on to discuss the texts in detail, I will in the next chapter discuss the material conditions that were in place to allow the significant shifts in content on television to take place.

Chapter 5

Targeting the Audience, Or Why the ‘Hindi turn’ of Star Plus Became the ‘Hindu turn’

Having discussed the contours of Hindu nationalism and Hindutva in contemporary India, we could move on straight to a discussion of banal Hindutva in popular culture, specifically on television. But television is a medium that is heavily dependent on market forces, especially in India, where the bulk of its revenues come from advertising. In such an environment, no serial that alienated a significant section of the audience would ever see the light of day. But the K-serials, inscribed with banal Hindutva (as we shall see in the next chapter) certainly had the potential to do so. One could argue that this was because Hindutva had become naturalized and was not recognized as such, allowing the serials that carried them to air. But, even then, there have to be a set of conditions in place for any content to appear on television, starting first and foremost with a market logic for why that content will work. In this chapter we examine these conditions that enabled banal Hindutva to come into being on television. I argue that a confluence of three factors were instrumental in this development: 1) in the sphere of marketing, an evolving understanding and redefinition of the potential consumer and a refocusing of selling approaches; 2) in the sphere of television, Star Plus’s attempts to find audiences in large numbers; and 3) in the sphere of politics, the BJP and the Sangh Parivar’s focus on ‘middle class’ audiences in particular geographies.

Television being an advertising driven medium needs audiences to survive. Or to paraphrase Ien Ang (1991), it desperately seeks audiences. In truth, though, it is not television itself but marketers who pay for the advertising on television who are seeking the audiences. So it was that capital's search for more and newer consumers in the India of the 1990s and early 2000s created the conditions for the dominance of banal Hindu nationalism on television. I will show how two key (and interrelated) developments came together to create these conditions: i) a paradigm shift in marketers understanding of consumption in India and ii) the peculiarities of the audience measurement system in India. (Both of these were related to a fuzzy understanding of the 'middle class' in India, which I will discuss first). I will analyze the factors behind the decision by Star Plus to take the 'Hindi turn', including the two key developments. I will then show how the demographic and geographical markets identified by marketers and Star Plus overlapped significantly with the key audiences of Hindu nationalism. I will conclude the chapter with a brief discussion of the audiences who were ignored in these processes.

My analysis in this chapter will involve i) a close reading of key marketing literature, in particular those that deal with targeting consumers ii) an original critique of the audience measurement system in India (and its basis, the so-called SEC system) and iii) a brief analysis of electoral results in the late 20th century India, coupled with a look at the the shifting winds of Hindu nationalist

electoral politics based on an analysis of election manifestos. (i) and (ii) together will illustrate how particular audiences came to be privileged by marketers and private television and (iii) will illustrate how these audiences overlapped significantly with the key audiences of Hindu nationalism. Therefore, one of the central objectives of this chapter is to demonstrate that each of the significant actors in this scenario—marketers, Star Plus, and the Sangh Parivar (as I will show below)—was, in fact, chasing the same audience. We will first talk about marketers and their search for consumers.

The Shift in Marketing: Redefining Consumption Potential

The size of India's 'middle class'. After the economy was formally liberalized with a lot of hoopla in the early 1990s, the reification of the 'middle class' into the concrete object of everyone's attention started in full earnest. The entry of multinationals and media barons (both foreign and indigenous) with deep pockets and dreams of domination was accompanied by optimistic reports about the huge size of the Indian middle class. But clarity about the exact size of this middle class was hard to find. Within a few years of their entry into the Indian market, foreign multinationals were suspecting that the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow they were chasing was unlikely to materialize. In 1992, *The Far Eastern Economic Review* had estimated this middle class to be a 100 million strong (Mankekar, 1999). The Indian diplomat and writer Pavan K. Varma concluded in a 2007 introduction to his 1998 bestseller *The Great Indian Middle Class* that the size of the Indian middle class to be 400 million.

Putting aside 400 million, even 100 million is not something to scoff at given that this was greater than the population of all but 12 of the countries of the world. At the same time, though, it was but a small percentage of India's total population of 850 million (Census, 2001). So, multinational investment decisions that had been made on this audience size being closer to 400 million had started to seem really premature. It was clear by the mid 1990s to corporations who had rushed in to claim a piece of the middle class Indian gold rush that the Indian middle class was perhaps not even half as big as they had thought it was. The *New York Times* suggested in 1997 that many multinationals rushing into India post liberalization had "wishfully overestimated the size of the middle class." It quoted Keki Dadiseth, the then chairman of Unilever's Indian operations as saying, "In India, a middle class is a family that can afford to eat a balanced diet, send the children well-clothed to school and buy a black and white television" (Dadiseth, quoted in Jordan, 1997). In fact Varma's (2007) figure of 400 million too was derived from a similarly generous definition of middle class: in the Indian context it was "anybody who has a home to live in and can afford three meals a day, and has access to basic health care, public transport and schooling, with some disposable income to buy such basics as a fan or watch or cycle"(p. xviii, 2007).

Admittedly, the middle class is always difficult to pin down sociologically. As Gupta (2009) says "Nowhere in the world is the middle class actually in the middle" (p.79). But when it came to India,

the problem clearly went deeper. Gupta (2009) substantiates Dadiseth's (1997) and Varma's (2007) analysis:

The constituents of the Indian middle-class actually belong to elite sections of the country. Amidst the grinding poverty of millions, they can afford a lifestyle that somewhat resembles those of the European and American middle-class...When we refer to the Indian middle-class we are unconsciously thinking of those who can approximate the life of the common person in the West (p.80-82).

In Gupta's understanding a true middle class can only exist when there is a middle class project. As he says, "the most important reason why the term middle class looks sickly in India is because there is no project attached to it" (p.83). But what might 'sickly' actually look like in money terms? For an answer, we turn to the National Council of Applied Economic Research (NCAER).

Its report, titled *How India Earns, Spends and Saves*, acknowledges that pinning down the Indian middle class numerically has "always been a subject of much debate and controversy" (Shukla, 2010, p.99). It argues that an accurate interpretation has been hard to come by because of "its ambiguous definition and diverse interpretation by users", leaving the size of this class pegged by the media at anything between 200 million and 600 million. To bring some clarity, therefore, NCAER starts off by considering the World Bank definition of 'middle class,' which is all those having purchasing power parity (PPP) per capita per day between USD 10 and USD 20. This translates to an annual figure of USD 3650 and USD 7300. The NCAER definition for middle class, however, incorporates a much wider

band than this, including households whose annual incomes are between Rs. 200,000 and Rs. one million (that is USD 4,000 and USD 21,000). As per this definition, between 1995-96 and 2001-02 the middle class grew from 4.5 million to 10.7 million households, with urban households forming around three-fourths of the middle class. By NCAERs calculations, then, this middle class or consuming class is around 58 million strong. But significantly, this middle class as a whole (urban and rural together) has a disproportionate share of total income in India, nearly 25% in 2007-08. Consider this for a moment in the larger perspective: 58 million people, which was roughly 5% of the population in 2011, had a 25% share of the total income. If the data is sliced by income quintiles, one sees that between 1993-94 and 2004-05 the share of total income of the top 20% went up from 36.7% in 1993-94 to 47.9% in 2004-05. At the same time, the share of income of the second quintile (i.e. 21%-40%) dropped from 12.9% to 10.4% and that of the bottom quintile (i.e. 0%-20%) dropped from 7.3% to 6.5%. The NCAER (or Shukla, 2010, the author of the report) does not shy away from the obvious conclusion: “The nagging worry persists that the middle class being defined by most of these income bands is actually India’s upper class” (p.102). I would say, in fact, that the conclusion is unavoidable: whatever the discourse around it, in reality *India does not have anything resembling a middle class*; all it has is a thin layer of the relatively affluent and a very broad layer of the very badly off. This leads to an obvious problem: if what is conventionally understood to be the middle class is the upper or elite

class and is actually a rather small slice of India's huge population, it did not justify the scale of ambition that multinationals (and home grown corporations) had harbored around an economically liberalized India. This meant that the desired revenues would not come from selling moderately priced goods to a fairly large number of consumers. The desired revenues would have to come from selling really low priced goods to a huge number of consumers. This shift, though, had already started by the end of the twentieth century, with marketers across the global south starting to look for the 'fortune at the bottom of the pyramid.'

Finding the 'fortune at the bottom of the pyramid'. The logic of this shift was deceptively simple: if there were not enough number of Indian consumers to buy moderately priced goods, then the solution perhaps lay in expanding out to a really wide cross section of society. The idea, just like in various other parts of the world was to start creating a consumer subjectivity in people who had rarely figured in the calculations of capital. The thinking was this: even if the vast majority of Indians lived on less than 45 cents a day, as did 836 million of India's 1.1 billion citizens (Mazumdar, 2009) surely they also could be induced to part with a couple of cents to purchase shampoo and toothpaste packaged in sachets containing as little as 5ml of the respective product.(See for example 'Sachet Marketing', 2009). This was a very counterintuitive notion, going against the "widely shared orthodoxies of multinationals" (Prahalad & Hart, 2002).

While this practice of selling in minuscule amounts was not unknown in India, this ‘sachet consumerization’³⁸ really started to take off around the end of 90s. The mainstreaming of this micro targeting moment can be traced to management guru C.K. Prahalad’s call for corporations to mine the “fortune at the bottom of the pyramid,” urging corporations to ensure that even the poorest of the poor received the “benefits” of globalization, especially given that they were very brand conscious and for them even using shampoo and soap was “aspirational” (Prahalad, 2005). The idea was first raised in a working paper that its authors C.K. Prahalad and Stuart L. Hart titled ‘Raising the Bottom of the Pyramid: Strategies for Sustainable Growth’. This was later refined into a formal paper with the much catchier title ‘The Fortune at the Bottom of the Pyramid’ (2002). By the time it became a best-selling business book, it had lost an author (Hart) and gained a rather more emancipatory subtitle. The book was now called *The Fortune at the Bottom of the Pyramid: Eradicating Poverty Through Profits* (2005). According to the 2002 paper (the Ten Commandments of the microselling movement, if the book that followed was the Bible), four elements were key to locating this fortune: “creating buying power, shaping aspirations, improving access, and tailoring local solutions” (p.6). Prahalad & Hart recommended that multinationals shift their focus to the bottom of the pyramid, the so-called Tier 4 (see figure 1 below) of the world

³⁸ I am indebted to Deepa Kumar for the coinage.

economic pyramid where you would find 4 billion people with annual per capita income of less than \$1500 purchasing power parity.

Exhibit 1: The World Economic Pyramid



Figure 1: The pyramid, and its bottom

Source: CK Prahalad and SL Hart (2002). 'The fortune at the bottom of the pyramid'. *Strategy + Business*, 26(First quarter), p.4

This microselling concept was not introduced into India by multinationals. In fact, one of the key examples that Prahalad & Hart (2002) offer is of the home grown detergent brand Nirma ("a tier 4 pioneer") that gave the mighty Unilever a run for its money in the 1990s. But the concept really took off across the country in the late 90s when multinationals like Unilever and Procter and Gamble adopted the sachet approach wholesale. It is a strategy that worked and continues to work: even in recessionary times, FMCGs continued to grow. To give just one example, 70% of the shampoo sold in the country in 2009 was sold in sachets (Kamath, 2009). As multinationals, and local corporations realized that the size of the middle class was nowhere close to where it was supposed to be, they became more and more focused on shaping aspirations and extracting

value from the 'bottom of the pyramid'. This shift in strategy enabled Unilever's Indian operations to grow revenues by 20 per cent and profits by 25 per cent per year between 1995 and 2000. As Prahalad and Hart (2002) say, "Contrary to popular assumptions, the poor can be a very profitable market" (p.5).

So, by the end of the 1990s, marketers had started to actively target the bottom of the pyramid, where even soaps and shampoos could be aspirational. But the instrument of targeting was itself a related factor that played a role in the transition to the bottom of the pyramid strategy. This system of consumer targeting in India at the end of the 1990s was based on a decade old classification system that made it difficult to accurately target elite consumers. It was, to put it mildly, a fairly blunt instrument that made it easier to target the non-elite audiences.

The SEC system: A blunt instrument. As we have seen earlier, the introduction of Rajiv Gandhi's New Economic Program in the 1980s was a crucial step in the path towards the full fledged adoption of neo-liberal discourses and practices. Not coincidentally, it was in the 1980s that attempts to get a better handle on the consumer were being developed as well. At that time, a consumer classification system was developed by the Market Research Society of India which was looking for an alternative measure to income (Bijapurkar, 2007). The resulting system became known as the SEC system with SEC standing for Socio Economic Class. In the words of Bijapurkar, the SEC system is "perhaps the most widely preferred consumer

classification system, since it combines social and economic factors through intelligent use of the demographics of occupation and education, both of which majorly influence consumption patterns in India” (p.130). When it was being constructed researchers decided—given the well documented reluctance of Indian respondents to discuss or accurately state their income—that the consuming potential of a household could be gauged by identifying the occupation and education of the ‘Chief Wage Earner’ (CWE) of the household (See Table 1 below). The SEC system thus developed had two sub parts, the urban SEC system and the rural SEC system, which were (and still are) used separately to categorize rural and urban consumers.

Occupation of the Chief Wage Earner	Illiterate	School up to 4 th / literate but no formal schooling	School – 5 th to 9 th	SSC / HSC	Some college but not graduate	Graduate / Post Graduate – general	Graduate / Post Graduate – professional
Unskilled	E2	E2	E1	D	D	D	D
Skilled workers	E2	E1	D	C	C	B2	B2
Petty traders	E2	D	D	C	C	B2	B2
Shop owners	D	D	C	B2	B1	A2	A2
Businessmen / Industrialists with	Non	D	C	B2	B1	A2	A1
	1 – 9	C	B2	B2	B1	A2	A1
	10 +	B1	B1	A2	A2	A1	A1
Self employed	D	D	D	B2	B1	A2	A1
Clerical	D	D	D	C	B2	B1	B1
Supervisory	D	D	C	C	B2	B1	A2
Officers / Executives – Junior	C	C	C	B2	B1	A2	A2
Officers / Executives – Senior	B1	B1	B1	B1	A2	A1	A1

Figure 2: The Urban SEC Grid

Source: Rama Bijapurkar, *We Are Like This Only: Understanding the Logic of Consumer India* (New Delhi, Viking Penguin, 2007).

That is, the SEC of the chief wage earner would be the SEC of everyone in the home. In the urban SEC grid, SEC A (and within that

the sub-division SEC A1) purports to represent the “highest social class” (Bijapurkar, 2007, p.132) and SEC E the lowest. The scale is an ordinal one and the classes A, B and E are subdivided into two subclasses each. The governing philosophy behind the SEC was that “a junior executive with a professional qualification working in a firm will live differently from a shopkeeper with a similar income. What each of them spends on will also vary greatly” (p. 131). In other words, it’s not really income alone that would determine position in the hierarchy of the marketers but a combination of education and occupation standing in as a proxy for class. But because of the lack of income figures associated with the system, the application of the SEC to practical purposes becomes as much art as science. Various additional consumer surveys have to be conducted to map the SEC system to income. For example, a recent report suggests that SEC A represents just “the top 10 percent of urban population, and under 5 percent of Consumer India....SECA1, a rich subset of SEC A, is just 10 million in population” (Bijapurkar 2007,p. 132). But what does “top 10%” mean in income terms?

Well, the average monthly household income of SEC A is INR 18,549 which translates to a mere USD 418 (Datta, 2010). But significantly, there is a remarkable drop in the income figures when we go from SEC A to SEC B and then down the scale. For example, by extrapolating from the data in Datta (2010), we can see that the average monthly household income of SEC B (INR 10,911) is barely 60% that of SEC A, and the average monthly household income of

SEC C (INR 6,776) is in turn 60% that of SEC B. But SECs C,D, and E are bunched pretty closely together with the average monthly household income of SEC D (INR 5112) at about 75% of SEC C and the average monthly household income of SEC E (INR 4219) at about 83% of SEC D. That is, the average monthly household income of SEC A is approximately 4.5 times that of SEC E. Note, though, that even by taking all of these categories together we find that urban SECs A to E together constitute approximately 342 mn people, still only a fraction of India's total population in 2010 of 1.2 bn people. Within this SEC E, at the bottom of the pile, constitutes 27% of the population (Datta, 2010); SECs D & E together constitute the 'under privileged', totalling 159 million; and at the top is a layer of 105 million people comprising SECs A & B, the urban 'consuming class' of the country (Datta, 2010).³⁹ For comparison, the NCAER 'middle class' definition is around 58 million strong (Shukla, 2010). In other words, the most accurate estimate of the number of people in the consuming or 'middle' class in India is between 58 million and 105 million in 2010. The boundaries of this range were clearly even lower in 2000 (given India's much touted GDP growth rate in that period). This gives us concrete evidence that the size of the consumer base that had tempted many multinationals to India was certainly one-fourth and perhaps even one-eighth the most optimistic projections being bandied about. It was not surprising then that the mantra of the bottom of the

³⁹ These figures and proportions date from 2010. But they had not changed significantly since the start of the 2000s. One can safely assume that the number of people in each of the higher classes would have been even lower at the time of the launch of the K-series.

pyramid was appealing to marketers. But what would targeting the bottom of the pyramid mean in SEC terms and vice versa?

The bottom of the pyramid and the SEC classification. We have discussed two approaches of consumer classification: the ‘bottom of the pyramid’ and the SEC system. Before we go further, it will be useful to see the overlaps between these two approaches in concrete terms. If we look at Figure 1 above, which depicts Prahalad and Hart’s ‘bottom of the pyramid’ schema, we see that the bottom is defined by annual per capita income of less than \$1500. However this figure is in PPP terms per capita annually. To be able to use this in comparison to INR figures for the SECs we convert using the PPP rate of INR 15 to the dollar rather than the rate of INR 45 to the dollar (both are rates prevalent in 2000).⁴⁰ This is multiplied by the then average urban household size in India of 5.1. We finally use the actual USD-INR exchange rate to derive a figure of USD 208.33 as the level below which in 2000 the bottom of the pyramid exists. But we have seen earlier that the average monthly household income of SEC B is around USD 250 and that of SEC C is around USD 150.⁴¹ In other words, a ‘bottom of the pyramid’ strategy is equivalent to a strategy that targets SEC B and below. This is very important to note: a ‘bottom of the pyramid’ marketing strategy in theoretical terms, would

⁴⁰ The calculations have been done using raw data from the sites <http://data.un.org/Data.aspx?d=MDG&f=seriesRowID:699> and <http://www.tradingeconomics.com/india/currency>. Average household size data is derived from the Indian census site: http://censusindia.gov.in/Data_Products/Data_Highlights/Data_Highlights_link/data_highlights_hh1_2_3.pdf.

⁴¹ Note that we are using SEC data from the year 2010, assuming that in the year 2000 the figures would have been lower (all else apart because of inflation); and the arguments still hold.

in practice have implied a corresponding SEC B & C (and below) focused media strategy.

The transition to the bottom of the pyramid strategy was a fairly significant move in the world of marketing. For the first time, there was a deliberate focus on selling products at very low unit price, in very small quantities or small volumes (as little as 5ml, say). This is, obviously, the opposite of the model in developed capitalist economies in which products might be sold at low unit price alright, but in very large quantities or volumes (as much as 2 or 5 liters, say). But this shift can only work when a really large number of consumers buy the small quantity of goods. This then has a significant implication for media vehicles as well. This shift meant that marketers would in general demand from media vehicles large audiences, rather than elite audiences. The transition that media vehicles had to make was from 'quality' to 'quantity.'

The Shift in Television: Seeking the Mass Audience

The audience commodity and ratings in India. What was required to effectively reach this aspirational message across to the bottom of the pyramid audiences were the appropriate media vehicles. But television had not yet caught up with this shift: television of the early satellite era was still targeting audiences at the higher levels of the pyramid. Not just Star Plus, but others like Zee and Sony were clearly targeting the elite SEC A audience with shows like *Hasratein*, *Tara*, and *Saaans* targeted (as we have seen) at the new, bold, Indian woman. The targeting of audiences or consumers through media

vehicles, though, can only be as sophisticated as the systems which measure those audiences or consumers. At the heart of commercial television anywhere lies the relentless search for audiences that can be sold to advertisers. Or, putting it slightly differently, in Dallas Smythe's (1977) memorable words: "I submit that the materialist answer to the question—What is the commodity form of mass-produced, advertiser supported communications under monopoly capitalism?—is audiences" (p.3). This search has rested on continuous attempts to accurately capture viewership and measure audiences; and Eileen Meehan (1984) argues that it is not the audience itself which is the commodity but the ratings that are generated in the process of locating and measuring these audiences. Audience measurement has always been a heavily ideological process and academic criticism has often pointed out the flaws (and duplicities) involved in industry measurement of audiences. Ien Ang, for example, has forcefully argued that industry methods of measurement are "grounded upon a straightforward behaviourist epistemology [which defines television watching] as a simple, one-dimensional and purely objective and isolatable act" (Ang, 1996, p. 56). According to Eileen Meehan, "the market for ratings is ... characterized by continuities in demand for measurements of consumers and discontinuities in demand over the price that advertisers should pay networks to get those consumers" (Meehan, 2007, p. 64). She has aptly summed up some of the justifications and analogies that media institutions offer when defending the

overwhelming significance of ratings in making content decisions as “surely a case of smoke and mirrors” (Meehan, 2005, p. 8). For Ang, “the ‘television audience’ only exists as an imaginary entity, an abstraction constructed from the vantage point of the institutions, in the interest of the institutions” (Ang, 1991, p. 2) and these institutions therefore are forever condemned to “desperately seek the audience.” But much as television audiences might exist as only an imaginary entity or an abstraction, the desperate attempts by the television industry to seek these audiences have very real effects.

In India, these attempts were fraught with problems in the first few years of the early satellite era because of the absence of any audience measurement agency whatsoever. Even three years after the arrival of private television in India, the only form of audience surveys continued to be done by state television’s in-house Doordarshan Audience Research Tracking (DART), hardly the most neutral arbiter of such matters and by market research agencies but which were often specially commissioned and rarely found universal acceptance. It was only in 1994 that a specialized independent agency to measure viewership finally resulted in the creation of the Indian National Television Audience Measurement (INTAM) in 1994 (Chougule, 2005). INTAM was founded by the well-established research agency ORG-MARG but its sample size was “miniscule and restricted to major cities” (Mitra et al, 2010, p.7). In 1998, therefore, even as INTAM continued to operate, a second audience measurement service called TAM Media Research (henceforth, TAM) was set up as a joint venture

between the local agency IMRB and AC Nielsen. In order to resolve technical issues (such as sampling issues, for example) TAM was to work closely with a Joint Industry Body (JIB) consisting of representatives from the Indian Society of Advertisers (ISA), the Indian Broadcasting Federation (IBF) and the Advertising Agencies Association of India (AAAI), the three key players in the television economy (TRAI, 2008). The JIB drew its inspiration from the UK Broadcaster's Audience Research Board (BARB) and did meet from time to time with TAM to discuss industry concerns but did not own the audience measurement process in the way that BARB does in the UK. TAM and INTAM continued to operate in parallel till a respondent disclosure scandal—where the business channel CNBC managed to get hold of the identities of 625 supposedly confidential households under survey by INTAM—shook up the television industry in 2000. Soon afterwards—though not necessarily as a consequence of the scandal as popularly believed (AAAI, 2008)—TAM and INTAM were merged into the newly formed TAM Media Research (today owned equally by Nielsen and Kantar Media Research/IMRB).

But this measurement and targeting of audiences through ratings is complicated by the fact that the urban SEC classification lies at the heart of *all* audience measurement in India, whether it was by INTAM or is by TAM or the latest entrant into the space aMap.⁴²

⁴² India is unusual in that for the most part of its existence as a competitive TV market, two audience measurement agencies have coexisted side by side. Eileen Meehan (2005) has argued that one of the defining features of the political economy of audience measurement is the existence of one, and only one, audience measurement agency and therefore, just one currency.

For purposes of television audience measurement, the SEC system is overlaid with three other dimensions of dissection: age, gender and geographic area. Geographic area could either be the so-called metros (Mumbai, Delhi, Kolkata & Chennai, at the time of launch of the K-series) or other urban areas. These other urban areas could be of two kinds depending on population, '1Mn+' (denoting a population greater than 1 million) or '0.1-1 Mn' (denoting a population between 100,000 and 1 million). The subscribers to TAM can generate viewership reports under these parameters of SEC, age, gender, and geographic area.

The commonly understood rating, a single figure consolidated 'rating' that is industry shorthand for the success or failure of a show takes into account all ages, SECs, genders and geographic areas. But if one so desires, a subscriber to the TAM service can generate viewership reports for a particular show by, say, males aged 14-34 in the city of Mumbai, for SECs A & B, and any permutation of the categories thereof. In these cases, the rating figure that will be obtained will more often than not be a fraction of the overall rating, but it is not always the case. For example, there is a possibility that a show is designed to appeal only to adolescent and early adult males and not to other audiences, so the rating for the show among the age group 14-23 will be higher than the consolidated ratings. In theory, it is possible that a channel will build its programming around appealing only to a narrow slice of the audience rather than the whole viewing population. But in practice, it did not quite pan out that way

in the early satellite era, again largely because of the limitations of the SEC based audience measurement system.

The SEC system: An instrument too blunt for satellite

television. Taken at face value, the SEC classification seems to have a whiff of the ABCD classification that was used by the US television industry for much of its first few decades. As Arvidsson (2003) terms it, the ABCD classification was the prototypical example of the ‘containment paradigm’ that dominated the industry’s understanding of audiences in the early years of marketing research. In this paradigm, audiences were slotted a priori into certain pre-defined categories and the interest was in unearthing how many people in each category were watching or listening or consuming the show or product. By the 1970s, though, class position was no longer being linked in the US to consumption as it had been thus far. In parallel, the number of explanatory variables for consumption increased with the emergence of lifestyle surveys in marketing practice. This was a significant marker in the transition of audience research from the containment paradigm to a new ‘mobility paradigm’— pictures were now being drawn, in Deborah Tudor’s (2009) words, of the “affluent audience moving through a mediated space” (p. 836). The contemporary American situation with respect to television and ratings is summed up thus by Carlson (2006): “As programmers and advertisers turn from the mass-marketing model to demographic-conscious niche-marketing, these ratings take on a greater importance as advertisers attempt to minimize risk and maximize

resources through more exact purchasing and monitoring of the audience commodity” (2006, p. 101).

Of these niches, the largest have been the Hispanic (or Latino) and African-American consumers while many others have been developed, for example those for Asian Americans, gays and lesbians, and seniors (O'Barr, 2006). By the mid 1990s, another approach to segmentation was emerging as well—and that involved defining audiences through differing psychologies, the so-called psychographic profiling (Goss, 1995). The attempt to find “quality consumers” (i.e. those who had greater consumption or purchase potential) also resulted in the advent of geodemographics: a technique that used psychography and geography to help marketers predict consumer behavior on the basis of residence location and statistical models of identity based on the “fundamental sociological truism that ‘birds of a feather flock together’” (Claritas/NPDC, quoted in Goss, 1995, p. 172).

But unlike the US where the shift to the mobility paradigm made the ABCD system redundant, the SEC system in India at the end of the 1990s was being used unchanged almost as developed nearly two decades earlier. It was in fact the “standard industry framework used by all consumer goods and services” (Bijapurkar 2007, p. 132). That is, class position as defined by the SEC system was strongly linked to consumption. This remained the norm even though researchers often complained that the SEC classification “defie[d] the reality (sic) of not pointing clearly towards the ‘consuming class’” (MRUC and Hansa Research 2005, para. 2). In India, then, the

containment paradigm of measuring consumers and audiences remained prevalent, and the television industry consequently did not see the kind of structural shifts that took place in the US with the move from the 'containment' to the 'mobility' paradigm.

This structural shift in the television industry and the nature of content being produced entailed, in the words of Wilson II & Gutierrez (1995) a transition from "mass communication to class communication." In other words, the transition was from programming and channels that all sought to reach out to the widest viewership possible to the advent of programming and channels that seek to reach out to very carefully specified niches.

But the entrenchment of the containment paradigm and its continued use for audience measurement in India inhibited the development of niche channels. The broad pre-existing categories in the SEC system made it an instrument too blunt to specify or measure finer and finer niches of viewers. As we have seen earlier, the number of people in SEC A is not very high compared to the number of people in SECs C,D & E. Therefore, even if an advertiser was seeking to target a very specific SEC A subset of the audience, she would have had to be satisfied with a low number of viewers in total. The only way you could get higher number of total viewers is by targeting the cumulative or aggregate ratings figure, which by definition spanned SECs.

In other words, the existing audience measurement system in India created a bias for high cumulative ratings rather than higher

ratings within a specified sub group of the population. No wonder then that Ashis Ray, the first Asia bureau chief of CNN was complaining as late as 2007 that “niche, high quality TV is a non-starter”. Wilson II & Gutierrez (1995) have argued that one aspect of globalization was the exploitation of local differences and the use of multi-local niche marketing. But in India, the SEC system’s centrality to audience measurement, coupled with the lack of a transition to the mobility paradigm, ensured that niche-ing did not evolve in India in its first ten odd years of existence. This means that unlike in the US market where the focus has shifted to the ‘quality’ viewer, in Indian television it certainly had not, at least in 2000.

In India, this exploitation of local differences translated itself merely into the niche-ing (if we can call it that), by language. Most of the states in India are linguistic states with one dominant language. Therefore the easiest option for multinationals who came in was to launch channels in the language of particular states, for example in Bengali for West Bengal, in Telugu for Andhra Pradesh, and so on. However, because of the absence of geodemographics or psychodemographic profiling, there was no channel based on personal interest areas. Given that unearthing ‘quality’ viewers was proving difficult, channels necessarily had to pivot to the search for ‘quantity’. This pivot was first seen in *Amanat*, which as we have seen, entailed a qualitative shift in representation and milieu of television content.

By this time, it was clear that whatever the real viewership, the SEC system based audience measurement systems was not

measuring audiences of English language television, or for that matter the audiences of Star Plus. In fact, one of the most sustained and heated debates in the Indian television industry has been around the purported inability of the audience measurement systems to accurately capture the 'elite' viewership of English language movie, general entertainment, and especially business channels. The debate got heated enough for TAM to separately start tracking 'elite' audiences, and report on their viewership habits separately from the standard reports. But this was still a long way away in 2000, only coming into fruition seven years later ('Tam's elite panel', 2007).

There was a further significant problem with Indian audience measurement data: despite years of hand wringing and agonised discussions to the effect, TAMs audience measurement system in India did not in 2000 measure the viewing of rural audiences (and in fact, still does not). Nor does aMap, a rival service launched in 2004 (Mitra et. al., 2010). This means in short that the television measurement system by definition privileges the urban audience.

We have seen then that the audience measurement systems in India privileged urban viewing and had an inbuilt bias towards the reporting of cumulative ratings cutting across audience segments (or SECs) rather than reporting ratings within a specified slice of the viewing population (and therefore the targeting of niche audiences). We have also seen that advertisers were at this time also shifting their focus to a mass consumer base. The bluntness of the SEC (and therefore the TAM) system and the shift to the bottom of the pyramid

approach both had a role to play in the transition of Star Plus into a completely Hindi language channel- what I call the 'Hindi turn' of Star Plus.

Star Plus: The 'Hindi turn'

Star Plus turned into a completely Hindi channel in 2000, strongly embracing a notion of 'Indian' ness. There were three other factors that contributed to this, in addition to the audience measurement system's inability to sufficiently capture niche or 'quality' viewership: Rupert Murdoch's business difficulties; the role of the state; and Star Plus's own audience research.

Murdoch's business difficulties. We start with Rupert Murdoch's business difficulties. Murdoch, the owner of Star Plus, was apparently finding it difficult to get his new DTH (Direct to Home) television service approved by the Indian government, and this was partly because Star Plus was seen as 'foreign' to a greater degree than any other foreign owned media corporation. In fact, so strong was the resistance to Murdoch, that the Indian market was being called Murdoch's Waterloo. (See for example, Lesly et. al., 1997, and Naregal, 2000). There was a need, therefore, to 'Indianize' Star Plus's part western programming, and thereby create a positive rub-off for its owner. But this can only be a partial reason for the transition: as an owner Murdoch was not that concerned about the content of the channels, as long as they delivered eyeballs, and therefore revenue

(Ohm, 2007).⁴³ The more significant problem with the programming on Star Plus was that it was simply not delivering the kind of ratings that a world dominating media mogul expects as his right.

The channel showcased a lot of English language programs that were re-telecasts of American shows. And it did have individual Hindi programs that were successful, for example *Saans* and *Kora Kagaz*. Both of these shows were critical and commercial successes, and much liked by viewers. (See for example Chanda, 2005 & Gokulsing, 2004). In SEC terms, though, those shows were being clearly pitched at SEC A audiences. But the ratings, as delivered by INTAM, were simply not high enough for the rest of the programs on the channel. Even if there was anecdotal evidence that viewers were watching the English language programming on Star Plus, it was simply not reflected in the ratings figures. All that the ratings systems indicated in 1999 was that Star Plus's programming was lagging well behind its rivals (Ohm, 2007). Given that Hindi was understood by 422 million speakers ('Census', 2001), the solution was to turn completely to Hindi programming.

But even within this, the programming had to be of a kind very different from the Hindi programming that did exist on Star Plus at that time: there was a persistent feeling that much of the Hindi language programming that Star Plus was churning out was a reflection of what the English speaking, westernized producers

⁴³ On a personal and anecdotal level, this is something I can attest to as well, from my experiences of working with the Star network in India, albeit that I worked there in the period 2004-2007.

themselves wanted to see, rather than what the ‘mass’ viewer wanted to watch (Ohm, 2007). In 1999, these feelings were empirically validated when Star Plus commissioned a study of television viewers in the cities of Ahmedabad, Bombay, Delhi and Kanpur. The results—with viewers finding Star Plus characters to be ‘ultra-modern,’ ‘Westernised’ and ‘having lost their tradition’—only convinced the channel to turn to Hindi programming as a proxy for Indian-ness which those viewers found lacking in the channel (Ohm, 2007, p.132). When breaking down the results, surveyed viewers in the ‘higher’ socio economic classes were found to be much more positive about the existing Hindi-English and Hinglish⁴⁴ programming of Star Plus than the ‘lower’ socioeconomic classes. Clearly, I would argue, this indicated two possible routes of travel: one was to focus with renewed vigor on the higher socioeconomic classes, the other was to initiate efforts to expand its appeal among all socioeconomic classes. But as we have seen before, the SEC based audience measurement system was biased in favor of ‘quantity’ rather than ‘quality’. There was little possibility that if it redoubled its efforts to target the highest socioeconomic strata and actually managed to reach out to them, the audience measurement system would reward Star Plus accordingly. Star Plus decided therefore to shift to programming of a radically different nature from that of the early satellite era. At around the

⁴⁴ A portmanteau word made from the words Hindi and English conveying the peculiar mix of Hindi and English used for communication by significant numbers of Indians. An example is the phrase ‘cutting chai’ to refer to a half portion of tea, or ‘bheja fry’ to refer to a situation of extreme irritation, ‘bheja’ being a colloquialism for ‘brain’.

same time, the state's maneuvers were also making it easier to adopt mass audience approach.

The role of the state. As we have seen the state has remained intertwined with television from its earliest appearance in India. The commercialization of state television that happened with Nestle's sponsorship of *Hum Log* and the increased production targets for television production set by the state were two sides of the same coin. The objective at that point was to create a greater consumer subjectivity that was critical to achieving the objectives of the then government's economic policy. Fast forward to 1991, and the basic mechanism still remained the same. By this time the media had to play an even greater role in consumerism, especially when a multitude of multinationals were rushing into the country lured by the prospects of its huge consumer base. The fact that the liberalization of the economy took place hand in hand with the opening up of the airwaves to private and foreign media was not a coincidence.

By the end of the 1990s, the state was still playing a key role in the workings of television, if not anymore through direct control. One of the governing motivations for Star Plus to take the Hindi turn was the problems faced by Rupert Murdoch. But more than that, the state was taking by this time an even more neoliberal turn in its policies. The BJP government had by this time discarded *swadeshi* in everything but the name. It had started to focus strongly on the middle class and upper middle classes as the driver of India's economic engine. The retreat from the state's basic services to the

citizenry had also gathered momentum, and the philosophy of trickle down economics had taken consensual form among the political parties. This consensus was refracted in capital's 'bottom of the pyramid' approach, and as I have shown required television to reach out to bigger number of audiences than ever before.

But this reaching out to bigger and bigger audiences also needs an infrastructure to do so. This infrastructural support was again provided by the state as it began to ease legal restrictions on private and foreign broadcasters from the latter half of the 1990s, enabling them to uplink channels from Indian shores. On 25th July 2000 (barely three weeks after the launch of *Kyunki*), the BJP government introduced a new policy that allowed uplinking of any channel from India, including those with foreign equity of 49 percent (Rodrigues, 2008). This was an obvious boon to the likes of Star Plus, who could now rationalize their costs of production and uplinking of shows, something they had been at a disadvantage to compared with the likes of home grown Zee TV, which had fewer such restrictions. This would have helped free up budgets for production and marketing of the shows, enabling it to build on its successes further, and amping up the production values of the shows. The state, though at a remove, was still critical to the success of the K-series.

Tracking the shift and its results. Star Plus's shift would only be successful if it received advertiser support; and this was critical since television in India was in 2000 (as it is today) heavily dependent on advertising rather than viewer subscriptions. It is all very well and

good for channels to want to change their programming to attract a larger audience base but it is of no avail unless advertisers can be found who also want a larger audience base rather than ‘quality’ audiences. Star Plus’s desired shift would only have been possible in an environment where the sponsors and advertisers on these shows were also interested in getting huge numbers of viewers—in other words in targeting the bottom of the pyramid. As we have seen, this was exactly the condition that had developed by this point in time.

The emergent television industry of the 1980s with the state broadcaster Doordarshan at its centre had always assumed that the ‘middle class’ was its core target audience. In the words of Purnima Mankekar (1999), in the early years of Doordarshan “officials, policy makers, serial producers, and advertisers conceptualized the expanding middle classes as their ‘target audiences’” (p.9). Even now, in middle satellite era, the creators of television content were still ostensibly focusing on the middle class. But in reality, Star Plus’s decision to take the ‘Hindi turn’ meant in effect that it was crafting a remarkable shift in its programming based on the responses of viewers with *lower ability to purchase goods* that would be advertised on their channel.⁴⁵ This is, I submit, a significant shift in the trajectory of any television channel. The target consumer was still conceived as the ‘middle class’ but in reality Star Plus’s shift entailed

⁴⁵ As we noted earlier, INTAM worked on a “minuscule” sample; and as the audience disclosure scandal suggested, its data was possibly compromised all along. Yet, it was INTAM’s reporting of low channel shares for Star Plus that became a significant spur for the channel to commission the study that influenced the turn to full time Hindi language programming. Such are the ironies of audience measurement.

a change in focus from the elite to the non-elite class. This approach could only work if the number of viewers delivered by these new shows was truly huge.

It was obvious as well that Star Plus now had to get into the game of shaping aspirations and creating consumer subjectivity. As Shailaja Kejriwal, the head of programming (i.e. content creation) for Star Plus from 1998-2007 explained in 2010:

Unlike films, television is close to you, it sells aspirations and dreams which are achievable. Entertainment is nothing but an escape into the world of dreams...I will give you a simple example. When a person wants to celebrate, he will take his family to a five star restaurant. The food in a three star hotel is maybe better (sic) but he will prefer a five star. The reason is simple, it provides a good ambience and setting. It's the same logic that works here. The story may be seeped in ordinary middle class values but the projection is visually rich (Quoted in Munshi, 2010, p.62).

This shift into the territory of aspirations was remarkably successful for Star Plus, indicating therefore that the decision to focus on a wider but less economically significant viewer base paid off. In just the one year between 2000 and 2001, Star's revenues soared by a whopping 61%. Admittedly, a significant part of this was due to the success of *Kaun Banega Crorepati*, but the growth in revenues continued for the next few years as well. Three years on, on a much larger base, Star's revenues increased by as much as 14%. Michelle Guthrie, Star's then CEO publicly stated at that time, "I would get fired if I only delivered 9.8% annual growth" (Guthrie, quoted in 'Grow and Behold', 2004). By this time, all of the revenue growth was happening on the back of the K-serials and others of their ilk. After

the first year of the K-series, Star Plus hiked its advertising rates by a staggering 60% in one year ('STAR increases', 2001). These rates were nothing short of astronomical. At their peak in 2001, Star Plus was charging thrice as much for thirty seconds of advertising on *Kyunki* and *Kahaani* as the going rates for the World Cup of cricket (Bhattacharya & Chakravarty, 2003). In a country where cricket is virtually a religion, these rates are testimony to the perceived value the channel offered to advertisers.

Advertisers on Star Plus: What were they looking for?

Answering this question also points to who these advertisers actually thought these shows were reaching, outside of what the creators of these shows desired. Advertisers generally are able to get either 'quantity' (millions of possible customers) or 'quality' (few, but high income customers) by advertising on a specific television show. Rarely are they able to achieve both. Therefore, if you look at the list of advertisers on television, or on a particular show, you can sense whether they are interested in 'quantity' or 'quality'. But while revenue and advertising data for specific channels is extremely difficult to come by, we can get a sense of the top advertisers on Star Plus by looking at advertising in general and extrapolating from that.

First, we observe that 'mass entertainment' (the category in which Star Plus is slotted in India) in the early years of the 21st century had a disproportionate amount of the viewership and revenues. For example, in 2002 mass entertainment channels had 46.8% of the viewership and 57.4% of the revenues (Phadnis, 2002).

Knowing as we do that Star Plus was overwhelmingly dominant in this period allows us to safely conclude that a significant chunk of the revenues for the category would be going to Star Plus. These revenues in turn were coming from essentially one broad category of advertisers- the makers of FMCGs or fast moving consumer goods, essentially exactly the kinds of goods that could be (and were) sold in sachets to the bottom of the pyramid. Leading the pack of advertisers was Hindustan Lever, the Indian operations of Unilever, the organization that Prahalad and Hart (2002) approvingly called a “pioneer among MNCs exploring markets at the bottom of the pyramid” (p.5). While Unilever dominated television advertising on dramas/soaps (as per an analysis by Tam India) the top ten advertisers on this genre of television were all FMCG companies, among them the MNCs Reckitt Benckiser, Procter & Gamble, Johnson & Johnson and the home grown corporations Paras Pharmaceuticals and Dabur India (Ad Ex India 2003). In other words, makers of shampoos and soaps (those products that Prahalad, 2005, had talked about as being ‘aspirational’ for those at ‘the bottom of the pyramid’) overwhelmingly patronized the K-series (which its makers argued were aspirational or “visually rich” in presentation, even if steeped in “ordinary middle class values”).

Targeting the Hindutva Audience

In practice, though, this visually rich or aspirational presentation meant that the characters on screen were no longer lower middle class (like on *Hum Log*) or ‘middle class’ even like on

almost every show of the middle satellite era, but were from the highest economic strata of society. The precedent for shows featuring the rich or ultra-rich on television was not great. In Mankekar's (1999, 2004) works we see her lower-middle class and working class respondents failing to identify with the class of woman they see on screen (for example, *Udaan* on Doordarshan, and *Hasratein* from the early satellite era). In particular, the Doordarshan show *Khandan* which featured elite business families—and in that sense was the only precursor of the K-series—was not much appreciated by Mankekar's (1999) lower middle class respondents.

With the K-series, we now had the most affluent sections of the Indian population being represented on screen. Yet the audience strategy was to reach out to a very broad strata of society, at the bottom of the pyramid, SECs B,C and below. But the characters on the K-series depict an infinitely greater level of affluence than any of the characters on the Doordarshan or early satellite era shows do; in SEC terms they would be SEC A1 and above. That is, with the K-series there was now a huge gulf between the real material conditions of the key target audiences and the represented material conditions of the characters on screen.

One of the strategies explicitly adopted by the producers of these shows to bridge this gulf was to create 'aspiration.' But I would argue that this can prove limiting beyond a point if there seems to be little possibility for those dreams and aspirations to translate to reality, as was patently the case in the real world outside of television.

In addition, the viewership of the K-series had a significant male component, all of whom were certainly not tuning in to derive the differential pleasures that women supposedly derive from soaps. I would argue that it was banal Hindutva that worked to bridge the gulf between the characters on screen and the viewers watching them. If, as Straubhaar (2006) argues, soaps do play a role in fostering a national culture, then it is a Hindu nationalist definition of national culture that these shows foster.

But this could only happen if the audiences for Star Plus were in fact already receptive to such discourses. It is crediting the K-series—and media in general—with too much power otherwise. We will, therefore, explore the location of Star Plus's target audiences in geography and class to examine how strongly that overlapped with the target audiences of Hindu nationalism.

The audiences of the K-series: Their location in geography.

We had discussed earlier that the audience measurement system overlaid onto the SEC system the parameters of age, gender, and geographic location. But this geographic data differs in a key way from the American television audience measurement systems. Because American television is structured in a dual local and national fashion (with broadcast and cable systems reaching the national market by combining the audiences of local affiliated stations or local cable systems), the geographic boundaries within which viewers are enclosed do not necessarily mirror the political. Ratings systems in the United States are based, therefore, on Designated Market Areas

(DMAs). As Webster, Phalen and Lichty (2006) explain, “Each DMA is a collection of counties in which the preponderance of total viewing can be attributed to local or home-market stations” (p. 148). Naturally population shifts change the relative importance of the market but “because market areas are ultimately defined by viewing behavior, changes in programming, transmitters, cable penetration and so on can also alter market size and composition.” (p. 150). Clearly this is a dynamic system and the DMAs can change from year to year as Nielsen – the measurement agency – reconsiders every year how the markets should be constituted. The boundaries of these markets are not necessarily aligned to political boundaries within the USA. The DMA system is anchored to large cities such as New York and Los Angeles.

On the other hand, the geographic boundaries that are taken into account for audience measurement purposes are anchored to the geographic boundaries of the linguistic states in India. As we have seen the markets are categorised either according to large cities/ metros (each of which is obviously wholly contained within a particular state) or by population within a particular state i.e. Uttar Pradesh 1Mn+ or Uttar Pradesh 0.1-1Mn or Tamil Nadu 1Mn+ or Tamil Nadu 0.1-1Mn. Note that we had earlier remarked that the only level of niche-ification in Indian television (around the year 2000) was that based on language. However, it would be more accurate to state that the niche-ification was based on residence in a particular state rather than language. This would be different from the case in the

United States, where there are states which have more or less number of speakers of a particular language (say, Spanish), but the states are not *linguistic states*.⁴⁶ That is, even if a fair number of Tamil speakers were watching a Tamil language channel in a non-Tamil speaking state, they would hardly ever be valued in the calculations of the media planners and marketers since they would not be reflected in the ratings of Chennai (the capital city of Tamil Nadu), Tamil Nadu 0.1-1Mn or Tamil Nadu 1Mn+. It therefore is the case that high viewership numbers can be generated by an aggregation of viewers across SECs and/or by an aggregation of viewers across these markets. But this aggregation across markets is only possible across the states that speak a common language—most obviously the states of Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Haryana, and Himachal Pradesh, in all of which Hindi is spoken by a significant section of the population (Census, 2001). To sum up, then, the audiences that were being targeted by both makers of FMCG goods and Star Plus were the bottom of the pyramid (that is SECs B & C and below) audiences whose main language was Hindi. It so happens that this core target audience is the same one that Hindu nationalism, in particular the political arm of Hindu nationalism, the BJP, also sees as its base.

The BJP audience: Its location in geography. First, let us consider geography. I discussed above how the markets as defined by

⁴⁶ The original framers of the Indian constitution, including the first Prime Minister of India Jawaharlal Nehru had initially strongly resisted the formation of linguistic states under the argument that it would weaken the sense of Indian identity, but was later compelled to provide his assent. See Guha (2007).

the SEC system are entirely enclosed within the boundaries of the linguistic states. Each of these states, though, has a very distinctive political ethos. As Ludden (2005) describes:

State borders so heavily transect lines connecting Centre and localities that *each state constitutes a separate polity*. In this regional India, national trends are illusive, deceptive, or irrelevant; only state politics matter, even as each state is separately connected to the Centre (p. xvi, emphasis added)

To understand the contours of these state politics, and to see which political ideologies were dominant in the Hindi speaking states targeted by Star Plus, we turn to the results of the national parliamentary elections of 1999. (I have drawn all of the data below from the Indian election commission's official analysis at Election Commission of India, 1999). Every seat for the national level parliamentary elections is contested by a multiplicity of parties which includes a mix of parties have presence nationally (the Congress, the BJP, and the leftist CPIM prominent among them) and regional parties which have influence in only a limited number of states. In the 1999 elections the BJP won 20 out of 26 seats in Gujarat, 7 out of 7 seats in Delhi, 28 out of 48 seats in Maharashtra (including the tally of its ally, an even more rabidly Hindu nationalist party, the Shiv Sena), performing below expectations only in Uttar Pradesh, winning 29 seats out of 85 there. Its performance was equally strong in other northern states: the BJP won 16 out of 25 seats in Rajasthan, 3 out of 4 in Himachal Pradesh, 29 out of 40 in Madhya Pradesh and 5 out of 10 in Haryana. So at a national level, while the BJP had a lesser share

of the votes (23.75%) in 1999 as compared to the Congress (28.30%), it dominated the Congress in the northern and western states.

At this point, it will be useful to look closer at the four cities where the Star Plus viewer survey was conducted: Delhi, Kanpur, Ahmedabad, and Bombay. We have already seen evidence of the BJP's incredible sway in Delhi, but if we look at the other three cities up close, we only see further validation of the BJP's (or right wing Hindu nationalism's) continued influence in 1999. In Ahmedabad the BJP candidate won with 53.19% of the vote and in nearby Gandhinagar, the BJP candidate won with 61.14% of the vote. In Kanpur, the BJP candidate lost but garnered 40.77% of the vote. In 6 of the 9 seats in Bombay, the BJP-Shiv Sena combine won comfortably with victory margins often going up to 23 percentage points. Given the evidence of this electoral success, it would be safe to conclude that in these markets there was a strong appetite for the BJP's messages. In the language of the television industry, the BJP was doing really well in the Hindi Speaking Markets (HSM).⁴⁷ But what kinds of audiences was the BJP targeting in these geographies?

The BJP audience: Its location in class. As we have already remarked in earlier chapters, the last few years of the 20th century were a time of transition for the BJP as it tried to wrest power at the centre. But by looking at the election manifestos of the BJP we can get a clear idea of who their audiences are and where their priority lies. (Both the manifestos I study are the English language versions. The

⁴⁷ All television measurement related terminology and definitions can be found at the website of TAM India, www.tamindia.com

comparison between the English and the Hindi versions yields interesting differences which I don't have space to go into here).

In Chapter 4 of its 1998 manifesto, the BJP argues that what had happened in 1991 under the Congress was actually “phony liberalization” where it had actually “surrendered to IMF conditionalities” (BJP 1998b, para. 3). The result of this ‘phony liberalization’ (at least as the BJP saw it) was a disaster in every sphere. This could have been avoided if the 1991 government had followed the BJPs advice to “embark upon internal liberalization first and then embark upon globalization” (para. 6). It suggests that for every country in the world “while the declared agenda is free trade, the undeclared, but actual, agenda is economic nationalism” (para. 9).

One key theme running across the agenda is the need for Indian industries to be protected from the ravages of globalization and unfettered free trade. There is a constant repetition of the theme that Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) cannot solve all economic ills, and the need is to look inward rather than outward alone. As we have seen in chapter 3, a central plank of the BJP in the mid 90s was economic nationalism (or “swadeshi”). In this manifesto, a key element of this swadeshi is a “national agenda for Bhagidari sector (Un-incorporated sector)” (para. 26). As the manifesto complains, “Millions of un-incorporated enterprises in the country contributing 40 per cent of our national income did not deserve even a small paragraph in our Economic Surveys and Reserve Bank reports.”

The BJP goes on to make even more explicit who its core target audience is. It name checks in this category a whole host of industries and professions ranging from manufacturing, construction, transport, and trade to doctor, lawyer, accountant, goldsmith, plumber, porter, and tailor. It argues that the state has “neglected this sector (which is clubbed as part of households in our savings statistics) which constitute the largest segment of savers contributing around 60 per cent of our national saving” (para. 27). But in a significant transition in language, it goes on to argue that “the so-called reforms of the nineties did not address the serious issues of using the phenomenal and enormous savings rate of *our middle-class*”(para.28, emphasis added). The BJP asserts that not only has this middle class been neglected by successive governments, but it has often been “a target for all levels of the State machinery like politicians, policemen, tax officials and municipal authorities” (para.30). For the BJP, all ills of the nation can virtually be addressed by focusing on this middle class:

This sector has the greatest potentiality to grow with a quantum jump if this agenda is implemented. Any attempt to increase employment and to eradicate unemployment must begin here. This sector at once provides self-employment and multiplies employment. This single sector has the greatest potentiality to attack unemployment, poverty and hunger (para. 31).

In fact, the BJP argues that this middle class has been so under appreciated a class that “a national-level awareness programme of this sector's contribution and a national-level law to guard them against State excesses should also be formulated” (para 30). At the

same time, it wants to make “labour a proud partner in the nation’s progress” even as it suggests in a typical neoliberal sleight of hand that what it needs to achieve this partnership is to “rationalize and simplify labour laws” (para. 36). This overt focus on the middle class marks the BJP out from most of its rivals, including its key rival the Congress which historically portrayed itself as the party of the poor. (“Garibi Hatao” or “Eradicate Poverty” was one of the resonant slogans of the Congress in the 1970s). The focus on the ‘middle class’ in a country where the vast majority of the population lives in poverty distinctively marks out the BJP. Of course, as S. Sarkar (2005), suggests the principal base of the Hindu nationalist movement has always been “urban or small-town, predominantly high caste, lower middle class of professionals, clerks, and traders” (p.275); or as Vanaik (1997) argues, the petty bourgeois and the middle class are always critical components of the support for far right or fascist formations. I would argue that in the Indian political context, where all parties pay lip service to the poor, the explicit idolization of the middle class by a political party is quite noteworthy.

The BJP, therefore, not only perceives the ‘middle class’ to be its core constituents, but also sees this class as most significant to the future of the Indian nation. We have seen repeatedly though how the term ‘middle class’ is extremely difficult to pin down in the Indian context. Using the BJPs own explicit definition, we can approximately map its audiences to the SEC grid. Looking at the grid, Figure 2 above, we see that the BJPs “Un-incorporated sector” or the heroic

‘middle classes’ would constitute in SEC terms representatives from the categories of ‘skilled workers’, ‘petty traders’, ‘shop owners’, ‘self-employed professionals’, and ‘businessmen/industrialists’ (usually with less than 10 employees). If you look at the grid again, you can see that this core ‘middle class’ audience of the BJP falls into the SECs B and C, with a smattering of also coming from SECs D and A. Needless to say, the audience is also overwhelmingly urban.

To sum up then: in television/marketing terms, the audience classes that the BJP was most interested in were the SECs B and C. The geographical areas in which the BJP had the greatest success in the Hindi Speaking Markets (HSM), including the markets of Bombay, Delhi, Gujarat (which included Ahmedabad) and Uttar Pradesh (which included Kanpur), the cities from where respondents were chosen for Star’s viewership survey. SECs B & C were also the audiences that marketers at that time were most interested in—and it goes without saying that marketers would be happy with their messages reaching audiences, irrespective of the vehicle on which it reached those audiences.

In the 1999 NDA agenda, though, the strong stance against FDI is significantly diluted, even if the emphasis on Swadeshi remains. It asserts that it wants to “give to the entire national development efforts a humane face with total eradication of poverty as the ultimate goal” (para. 24). But the means to this end it is ‘Berozgari hatao’ (an obvious riff on ‘Garibi hatao’) or “eradicate unemployment.” And perhaps most significantly, the emphasis on Hindutva, Hinduism and

the building of the Ram temple is significantly diluted. Given that this election was occurring barely a year and a half after the last one, it was obvious that the absence of rabid Hindutva discourse on the BJP/NDA agenda was not an indication of the party's change of heart, but of the compulsions of coalition politics. But having spent decades—and a preceding election cycle—arguing that 'Indian' was equal to 'Hindu' allowed the BJP to transition to a model in the 1999 elections whereby the words 'Indian' and 'tradition' effortlessly stood in for the words 'Hindu' and 'Hindutva' to its core audience base, yet allowed those repelled by the most intolerant forms of Hindu nationalism to now embrace the BJP. We have seen above how audience research convinced Star Plus that its shows were too 'Westernized' or lacked 'tradition', and there was a need to de-Westernize or Indianize their shows. But the audiences surveyed for this research were located at the heart of the BJP's stronghold, both in geography and class terms. This was an audience among which the BJP's argument about the Hinduness of India had already been naturalized. It was then perhaps not entirely surprising that the serials that emerged from this process were significantly marked by an efflorescent Hinduness.

And so it came to pass that the core target audiences of both television and product marketers happened to overlap heavily with the core target audiences of Hindu nationalism, facilitated by the structure of the consumer targeting & audience measurement systems, both anchored in the SEC system. This ensured that Star Plus's 'Hindi turn' became in effect a 'Hindu turn'. As we will see in

the next chapter, the content of the K-serials was indeed heavily influenced by the discourse of Hindu nationalism, but the expression of it was not spectacular, but of a banal nature. We will also see how pertinent Michael Billig's (1995) comment is: "It would be wrong to assume that 'banal nationalism' is 'benign' because it seems to possess a reassuring normality, or because it appears to lack the violent passions of the extreme right" (p.8).

What we also see is that there are in fact strong connections between economic liberalization and Hindu nationalism. Thus when Rajagopal (2001) in his by now seminal work *Politics after Television* (2001) argues that there are no direct links to be found between the work of Hindu nationalism and the trajectories of economic liberalization, he is off the mark. He suggests instead that "the alliance between economic liberalization and Hindu nationalism was opportunistic and unstable" (p.34). In fact, I would argue, though, that in the era of commercial private satellite television, the alliance between Hindu nationalism and economic liberalisation becomes far less opportunistic (i.e far more intentionally intermeshed) and far more stable given that the core audiences of consumer marketing and Hindu nationalism so closely overlap.

Similarly, labeling commercial television as a 'non-ideological product', as Ohm (2007) does misses the very significant role it plays in industrial capitalism; or it is accepting capitalism as something immutable and something that cannot be transcended. And this reluctance to engage with commercial television's role in capitalism is

marked in Munshi's (2010) work as well. What she labels as the business aspects of television is merely the relationship between producers and television channels—rather than of the even more critical relationship between advertisers and the channels. Again, then, this avoidance (by intent or otherwise) of the core reality of the television industry results in missing out on the more direct links that actually exist between the trajectories of neoliberal capitalism and Hindu nationalism, as they intersect on television. As I have just shown, those links existed and because they did, it enabled banal Hindutva to become prominent on the K-serials.

But before we get into the textual analysis of the K-serials, though, a final note on why product marketers and television makers were not perturbed by the banal Hindu nationalism that marked the K-serials, given that this had the potential to alienate the approximately 15% of the Indian population that were not Hindus.

Muslims: The Unimaginable Consuming Class

As we have seen before, one of the most remarkable successes of the Hindu right in India lay in the fact that it managed to demonize a group that was among the worst off in the country in terms of all social indicators. The most comprehensive picture of the state of the Muslim population can be obtained from the landmark Sachar Commission Report, that was commissioned by the Indian government in 2006. According to the Sachar Report, the literacy rate of Muslims is significantly lower than the national average. In 2001, the literacy rate of Muslims was 59.1%, significantly below the

national average of 65.1% at that time. 61% of Muslims are self-employed (that is, work in low wage, often piece payment modes). They generally work as casual labourers and only 13% of them are engaged in salaried jobs. In urban areas, only about 27% of Muslims are engaged in regular jobs, with the corresponding figure for Hindus being 49%. In fact, even the traditionally disadvantaged lower castes and tribes referred to by the administrative label SC/ST (Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes) do better than Muslims on this account: 40% of them have regular jobs. While the SEC system (or television audience measurement systems) don't capture data on religion, if we look at the SEC grid, it is obvious from the observations above that Muslims fall at the lowest end of the 'occupation' axis as well as the lowest end of the 'education' axis. That is, Muslim are not only 'bottom of the pyramid' in India but they are at the bottom of the bottom. Data from 1999-2000 shows that while 22% of Hindus were in the bottom 20% of the population in terms of monthly consumption expenditure, the corresponding figure for Muslims was as high as 40%. Similarly, 17% of all Hindus were in the top 20% but only 6% of all Muslims (Shariff et.al, 2006). Furthermore, the opening up of the Indian economy to the world market led to a disproportionate loss of livelihood in Muslim dominated professions such as metalwork, lock making, handicrafts, etc. which in turn has exacerbated the lack of opportunities for Muslims. And so, even though there are more Muslims in India (138 million) than any other country in the world save Bangladesh and Indonesia, MNCs can afford to do without

targeting Muslims at the bottom of the pyramid. In other words Muslims disproportionately fall in the SECs E and D, and therefore not within the core targets of product marketers. And because Muslims could be ignored by marketers as potential consumers, they could therefore be ignored also by Star Plus. As we will see in the next chapter, K-series are scrubbed clean of all traces of Muslim influence, and Muslim characters are almost entirely missing.

However, in making the above points I do not want to inadvertently cast Muslims as a monolithic whole (something that Hindu nationalists incidentally are particularly good at doing). While in general, it is true, that Muslims are disadvantaged compared to Hindus and suffer from greater social exclusion, it is also the case that this is not uniform. The disparity often maps onto the general patterns of economic disparity in India, so that Muslims in the Northern and Eastern states are worse off than Muslims in the Southern states, just as for the population as a whole (Alam, 2010). Of course, it is in the Northern rather than the Southern states where the K-series are most popular so the general argument still stands. In addition, Muslims living in urban areas are more likely to be poor than those living in rural areas; and disparities in consumption between Muslims and Hindus are much wider in urban areas than in rural areas. Again, as we have just seen, the TAM system was exclusively focused on urban areas; and it isn't then a surprise that Muslims remained unimaginable as a consuming class in urban areas. And because they were not really relevant to the calculations of

marketers, there was no pressure on television to create content that was not so overtly Hindu. As we will see in the next chapter, this content was not soaked merely in Hindu discourse, but in Hindutva discourse.

Chapter 6

The K-serials and Banal Hindu Nationalism

We explored in the last chapter the conditions that led to the Hindi turn of Star Plus becoming in effect the Hindu turn. We also explored some of the key discourses of Hindu nationalism especially those pertaining to gender and culture. I also argued earlier that Hindu nationalism in the late 1990s took a turn from the spectacular to the banal and I explored some of the ways in which banal Hindutva might be expressed, in particular the rites and rituals that culturally set Hindus apart from their others along with a Brahminical version of Hinduism that gets positioned as the only possible Hinduism. In this chapter, we will explore the K-serials in depth, investigating these non-mythological television shows that ostensibly have nothing whatsoever to do with religion as a key site for the construction of this banal Hindu nationalism. In particular, we will see how the K-serials construct discourses around the family, gender, and tradition; and how these interrelate with each other. I will do this through a thorough textual analysis of 55 episodes each of *Kyunki* and *Kahaani*: the first fifty of each show and 5 other landmark episodes—the 100th, 500th, 1000th, 1500th and last ever. In all this represents an analysis of approximately 3000 minutes of content.

Kyunki ran continuously for around 8 years with 1833 episodes aired in all; and *Kahaani* too ran for 8 years by the end of which it had chocked up 1653 episodes. I limit my analysis however to mostly the first fifty episodes of each show for two reasons: one) to demonstrate

that banal Hindu nationalism had started to influence popular culture as early as 2000, and that too on television, the mass media platform with the greatest reach in India. The only other examination of the phenomenon of banal Hindu nationalism, Meera Nanda's (2010) book *The God Market*, neither looks at popular culture, nor does it go as far back as 2000; it tracks the spread of banal Hindu nationalism within state organs, industry, and education in the mid 2000s. By showing the extent to which the content of the K-series was influenced by the discourses of Hindu nationalism, I intend to show that this process was in full swing at least by the start of the 2000s. It is not a coincidence that as political Hindu nationalism reached its peak (1996-1999), it began to have an impact on culture; two) It is in the first set of episodes of a long running show that you can trace best the foundations on which the show is built. As a show runs in a ratings driven environment, it often goes in directions that are dictated by the pressure of ratings (and occasionally viewer responses). It becomes comparatively more difficult to separate out the foundations from the embellishments. (The choice of fifty shows of each is somewhat arbitrary, but governed by the fact that taking more than fifty episodes of each show makes the corpus too unwieldy to analyze in sufficient depth). The analysis of the texts themselves will be supplemented with an analysis of secondary material: existing interviews and statements made by some of the key personnel involved in the conception, production, and dissemination of the K-series such as Ekta Kapoor, the creator of the shows, various actors

who have acted in the shows, as well as executives from Star Plus and other satellite television channels.

I will first look at some key elements that defined the shows as being distinctive almost from the moment that they first appeared on screen; I will do this by looking at the opening credits of the two shows. The opening credits provide a very fertile site investigation for three reasons: 1) they encapsulate the basic themes of the show in a sequence of barely a couple of minutes; 2) they are the one element of a show that is repeated over and over again—in this repetition, as we have argued, lies the essence of banal nationalism; 3) because they appear at the start of a show, opening credits are seen by more viewers than any other part of the show. (See Webster, Phalen & Lichty, 2006, for a discussion of viewership patterns across the duration of a single episode of a show).

Setting the Tone for Banal Hindutva: The Opening Credits

***Kyunki* : The Opening.** Every episode of *Kyunki* opens with a young woman, dressed in a sari standing in front of a rather impressive looking wooden door- clearly the main entrance to the home. She looks straight at the camera and brings her hands together in a *namaskar* - the typical Indian salutation.⁴⁸ Immediately, though, something curious happens. In a direct breaking of the fourth wall this woman (whom we will soon know as Tulsi, the protagonist of the show), gestures to the viewers to follow her. She then pushes the door

⁴⁸ The origins of this particular mode of salutation are unclear. Hindu nationalist writings however make a lot of why a *namaskar* is preferable to a handshake! See the pseudo-scientific rationalization of this at the Hindu nationalist website hindujagruti.com (bit.ly/4Jux9H).

open and moves into the house, again urging us, the viewers to follow. And so the camera (the stand-in for the viewers) does, as she runs into one of the bedrooms of the house, again gesturing to viewers to follow her.

While this has not really been remarked upon so far, this act of Tulsi quite probably constitutes one of the first acts of breaking the fourth wall on a major Indian TV show—the actor(s) on screen directly engaging with the audience, acknowledging the presence of the camera and therefore a viewer on the other side, in a manner that comments on the artifice of storytelling itself. As Abelman & Atkin (2011) argue, “such acts of meta-television...pay homage to the audience’s sophistication and tel literacy. Viewers must be steeped in knowledge about TV genres and conventions, or these attempts to break the fourth wall will not be successful” (p.67). This breaking of the fourth wall happens roughly fifteen years after the emergence of the first shows on Indian television, and one could question whether the audience has had enough time to be ‘steeped in knowledge about TV genres and conventions’ in just these fifteen years. But if the Indian audience is not considered purely as a television audience but as an audience of moving images, then we can think of almost a hundred years of Indian cinema that would have sensitized the audiences to the understanding that the breaking of the fourth wall was indeed a significant departure from the accepted norms of on screen narration. Even in the sense of looking at the audience as an audience of moving images rather than an audience of a particular

medium, this is a significant departure from the convention—as it is hard to find *any* Indian movie which had significantly broken the fourth wall in the fashion that *Kyunki* does in its very first shot.⁴⁹

Abelman & Atkin (2011) contend that, among others, breaking the fourth wall can be done to provide social commentary, serve as a narrative device, or be a vehicle for added entertainment. In this case, the breaking of the fourth wall happens at the start of *every* episode. The purpose seems clear: Tulsi is inviting viewers into the family home. And one might argue, she is asking viewers to be a part of the family. This is a significant step since the kind of family home that we are seeing on the show is not one that most viewers (especially SEC B and C viewers who are, as we have seen, the key targets of the show) would ever have managed to step into. In light of the fact that this show marks one of the first representation on screen of so highly affluent a family, Tulsi's act must be read as one of making the audience feel at home. It is also a way of connecting the audience to this very affluent family—the connecting thread, I will argue, is provided by banal Hindutva.

Let's look at the rest of the opening credit sequence, most of which happens in one unbroken shot.⁵⁰ As Tulsi pushes the door open and walks in, we immediately realize that this is an extremely

⁴⁹ Of course, there were a spate of Bollywood movies released in the mid to late 2000s, for example *Om Shanti Om* (2007) and *Luck By Chance* (2009), that would make little sense unless you understood the intertextual references, but examples of meta-film in Bollywood cinema was few and far between before this period. What you had at most was some “self-referencing and in-joking”, as the critic Jai Arjun Singh (2009) points out.

⁵⁰ The video is available on youtube. See SmritiIrani23 (2011).

well to do home that we are entering. Throughout this sequence, Tulsi interacts again and again with the camera and therefore with us the viewers. It is being made very obvious to us throughout that this is a very well-off house indeed in the Indian context. There are pillars inside the house supporting the roof; the walls are made of what seems like marble; and there are expensive looking decorative pieces adorning the walls.

Tulsi takes us into a number of rooms in succession. In each room the occupants (usually a couple) also wave to the camera/ audience after they are gently prodded by Tulsi into doing so. Notably, the men are clearly coded as getting ready for work, shown dressed in formal shirts and trousers and either suits or ties—they are, without exception, in Western formal wear. The women, though, are all dressed up with nowhere to go—and they are all in traditional Indian attire. While Tulsi is wearing a sari as well as jewelry that can be recognized as being inexpensive, the women whose rooms Tulsi takes us into are wearing recognizably expensive sari and jewelry (and in one case an almost alarming amount of it!) Tulsi takes us into three rooms in succession, each of which is occupied by people of middle age. She then takes us into the lavishly furnished living room where four younger men and women are swaying to music with hands interlinked. They are (as we will find out) the third generation of the Virani family who all live under the same roof, the children of the couples we saw in those rooms that Tulsi has just taken us into. (Please refer the Virani family tree in the Appendix). It's only after she

moves away from this living room and is on the verge of stepping out into the courtyard of the home that she pauses a bit. She sees an elderly woman just outside the doorstep and on the courtyard, busy creating the traditional *rangoli* - an Indian decoration made with powdered color, usually done for auspicious occasions. Like she had done with all of the other characters, Tulsi makes this elderly woman (who we will come to know as Baa, the matriarch of the Virani family) aware as well of the camera; and unlike the others who had waved to the camera, Baa also joins her hands in a *namaskar* to the viewers. In this way, it is Baa and the much younger Tulsi who are symbolically linked. As this woman does the *namaskar*, the rest of the characters who we have already been introduced to come trooping out of the house one by one and gather around this elderly woman. Then, something very significant happens. Baa is seen handing over a set of keys to Tulsi, which she receives with a perceptible nod of gratitude. This indicates to the viewer that this woman, Tulsi, is going to be the holder of the keys to the family cupboard- that is, she is going to be the actual and symbolic repository of the wealth and trust of this family. This is also in a manner a presaging of the story since in the visuals that we see Tulsi bears none of the markers of the married woman—the red vermillion (*sindoor*) mark on her head, or the wearing of ornate bangles and the *mangalsutra*—all of which we see the middle aged women who are featured in the credit sequence wearing. Yet, because Tulsi is handed over the over the keys to the family cupboard, we know that she will become part of the family—this handing over of

keys usually signifies the acceptance (by the saas)of the eldest *bahu's* entrance into the family through the symbolic transfer of the keys to the family wealth.

The song that plays over the credit sequence emphasizes the pre-eminence of *rishton*- i.e. relationships. Its lyrics state (translation mine):

“Even relationships change their color
And are put in different moulds
This, embraces have known
And breaths have acknowledged
We are nothing without each other
Because the mother-in-law was once a daughter-in-law too.”

Tulsi, therefore, is symbolically inviting us, the viewers, into this home. At this moment, we don't yet know what the relationship of this girl in her early twenties is to the members of this family, but we know that she is certainly going to be the most significant character in this show. By making her the agent of breaking the fourth wall, and by her acting as the guide into the home, the show is both telling us that Tulsi will be central to the show as well as asking us to empathize with her.

The visuals of this huge mansion like residence that Tulsi guides the viewer into marked a significant departure from the milieu of other shows. A show like *Hasratein* was certainly set in an upper middle class milieu, as we have seen, but the opulence of the kind evident in every frame of even the opening credit sequence of *Kyunki* was unprecedented. Similarly the dress and the jewelry of the women characters are clear signifiers of the wealth of these characters. As

such, Tulsi functions not just as our guide into this world of wealth and opulence, but she functions also as a representative of the middle or lower middle classes into the world of the upper socioeconomic classes. Even more significantly, as we shall see later, she is the voice of Brahminical wisdom in a family of business people or *baniyas*.⁵¹

Whereas in *Hum Log* we are placed in a lower middle class milieu with the occasional incursions into or engagement with the upper classes, with *Kyunki* Indian television flips to the other end of the class spectrum, with the milieu of action being extremely upper class, with extremely limited engagement with the lower middle classes. This is also a family business owning upper class, not the professional class as was the focus of practically all of the other successful shows that we have talked about, for example, *Yeh Jo Hai Zindagi* and *Hasratein*.

As I have touched upon earlier, the nature of the family depicted in *Kyunki* (and also in *Kahaani*) is significantly different from most of the families we have seen on the Indian screen. Tulsi's quick tour of the family home—along with the lyrics to the title track—leaves us in no doubt that the *Kyunki* family is a joint family. In fact, it is an urban, upper caste Hindu, upper class, North Indian joint family. The style of clothing of the women (and the men) is the key signifier of this urbanity as well as the North Indianness: in particular the style of wearing the sari gives away the family as Gujarati. The Hinduness is not extremely overt in the opening credits but the fact that the family is Hindu is easily discernible from the *bindis* (decorative dots on the

⁵¹ The word is both a caste and an occupational marker.

forehead), *mangalsutras* (wedding necklaces, particularly common among North Indians), and *sindoor* (vermillion mark on the head signifying marital status) that the women are adorned with.

The fact that a number of people seem to be living under the same roof (the scenes are all of domesticity) indicates too that the family is a large joint family (i.e. one in which multiple generations stay under the same roof, sharing food from a common kitchen). After *Hum Log*, way back in 1984, this is perhaps the first significant instance in which a joint family of this nature is depicted on the small screen. (*Amanat*, which was the story of a widower and his seven daughters depicted a family which in technical terms is not a joint family but an ‘extended nuclear’ family). And this is most certainly the first depiction of this kind of a family after the shows of the early satellite era (1992-2000) almost all of which featured nuclear families. Significantly, as well, and evident from the lyrics to the title song of *Kyunki* (not to mention the very title itself) one of the central relationships depicted in these shows is that between the mother-in-law (henceforth *saas*) and the daughter-in-law (henceforth *bahu*).

The importance of the joint family and saas-bahu relationships.

The relationship between the *saas* and the *bahu* is a difficult one in many cultures (or so popular cultural depictions of this relationship would seem to indicate). But it seems to be especially so at least in the extremely patriarchal North Indian culture, and within that even more so in North Indian joint families. A wealth of anthropological research testifies to the tension inherent in this relationship within actually

existing family structures. For example, Vera-Sanso (1999) has shown that early studies of landed, North Indian joint families (like the Virani family on *Kyunki*) found that the *saas -bahu* relationship to be typified by a dominant *saas* and a submissive *bahu*. Moreover, as she shows (summarizing other studies), in a joint family:

A bride is seen as potentially threatening, for women and their children embody and accentuate the structural conflicts between the interests of joint families and their (potentially) nuclear family constituents; in this way wives are blamed for conflicts between brothers. As control over the bride and management of family relations are in the mother-in-law's hands, it falls to her to ensure that her daughter-in-law does not gain the loyalty of her son sufficient to encourage him to break the joint family (p.580).

That is, the structural conflicts that are written into the very nature of the property owning joint family are reflected most heavily in the relationship between the *saas* and the *bahu*. But this invocation of this theme at this juncture is the consequence of a number of sociocultural and economic forces acting together. Especially in the context of Indian popular culture (or at least Indian moving images), it is a significant one. The stereotypical representation of this relationship in Indian cinema is one of the cruel and vindictive mother-in-law doing all she can to preserve her status in her son's affections. As the distinguished Indian film critic Chidananda Das Gupta (1991) notes, commenting about cultural depictions of this relationship:

In that last high status [of *saas*], [a woman] can revenge herself upon society for destruction of her youth by visiting it upon her daughter-in-law. In so doing, she has the additional sadistic satisfaction of alienating her beloved son from his newly acquired wife, her rival for his affection (p.159).

The K-series borrow from these sociological and cultural understandings of this relationship as fundamentally antagonistic and then try to redefine it as a positive one. That is the thought expressed in the *Kyunki* title song lyrics; and indeed that is the thought presaged by M.M. Joshi, the BJP leader (as we saw in chapter 3). This, of course, falls within the larger anxiety about the integrity of the family that has been pretty central to the Sangh worldview almost ever since its inception. But the liberalization of the economy that started in the 1980s and gained momentum in the 1990s perhaps made these anxieties even more pronounced. As we have seen before, till the late 1990s, the BJP was not conceiving of the joint family as the central socioeconomic unit, but it was still espousing *swadeshi* or economic nationalism and criticizing the Congress's management of the economy. The K-series also play an important role in critiquing this management obliquely. According to Shailja Kejriwal, the creative head of Star Plus '[A]n important part of when *Kyunki* began was to show how the new bahu of the house, Tulsi, saw that her mother-in-law's generation was not taking good care of their elders.' This generation, the one whose representatives are Savita, Daksha, and Gayatri, are shown to be almost unremittingly materialistic and oblivious to their duties to the family, especially their duties and responsibilities towards their own *saas*, Baa. This is also the generation which has had access to the material goods suddenly available in the market in the first decade of India's economic

liberalization (i.e. 1991-1999). But the new generation that has emerged, the serial argues, is different: Tulsi is well educated and a fluent speaker of English, yet completely non-materialistic and completely in tune with her *sanskars*. She is a new type of consumer of the fruits of globalization, in tune with what the BJPs (1998) idea of “calibrated globalization.”

The bulwark of BJPs *swadeshi* or economic nationalism were the ‘middle class’ constituting of small businessmen, traders, and self-employed professionals. Within this, the BJP conceived of the family as economically important, not just socially. In a media policy that it released in 1998, the BJP expressed its fervent support for the “promotion of family values and extended family relationships to preserve its character as a basic socioeconomic and sociocultural unit” (‘Our policy on media’, 1998, para 4). That is, the preservation of the joint family becomes critical to the economic functioning of the Hindu nation, in addition to the sustenance and perpetuation of the nation, which we know is defined in cultural terms.

If we look at the empirical data on family size and relative affluence, we see that around 1998-99 there was a disproportionate concentration of the joint family form among the more affluent. Niranjana et. al. (2005) show that 54.7% of families with a ‘low standard of living’ are nuclear families and only 15.1% are joint families, whereas for families with a ‘high standard of living’, the proportion of joint families more than doubles to 33.5% while the proportion of nuclear families falls to 43.4%. Preserving the joint

family form, then, was also a way of preserving the affluence and economic power of domestic capital in the face of a threat from the forces of globalized capital.

In addition to the sociological reasons for why the joint family became such an object of concern in popular culture, using the joint family also gave scope to the writers of the show to play around with a large cast of characters. This ensured a kind of continuous experimentation so that when one story line was not ‘working’ (as reflected in the ratings for a sequence of episodes carrying that story line), the writers could move onto another story line focusing on others from the large rotating caste of characters. In addition, the joint family structure also enabled economic savings, obviating the need for multiple sets to accommodate multiple characters. This large cast of characters of the family is also characteristic of open ended serials, as *Kyunki* and *Kahaani* are. Before these shows arrived on the scene, you rarely had such a large cast of characters on screen. As with *Kyunki*, you could get familiar with that large cast of characters from the very first shot of the opening credit of *Kahaani* as well.

Kahaani: The Opening. It is obvious from the credits of *Kahaani Ghar Ghar Ki* that it too features more or less the same type of family as *Kyunki*. That is, the *Kahaani* family is also an urban, upper-class, upper-caste Hindu, North Indian joint family. What is interesting though is how much more overt the religious (specifically Hindu religious) motifs are in this title sequence. The very first shot is that of a hand lighting a brass *diya* (traditional lamp, lit mostly on religious

occasions) on a faded background, which immediately comes into focus to show two idols of Hindu deities standing side by side. While the idols are at a distance, their posture makes it clear that these are the idols of Rama and Sita. The next shot is a close-up of a married Hindu woman (as evidenced by the very prominent *sindoor* mark on her head), whose hand we now understand was lighting the *diya*. A reverse shot immediately follows, making the viewer aware that this woman is in the *puja ghar*, the room reserved for the idols and where ceremonial worship takes place. Note that even to the very casual Indian viewer, these few shots will immediately suggest that the woman belongs to an affluent family, for it is only an affluent family which will have the kind of brass lamps prominently featured, not to mention the size of the idols and their location a separate *puja ghar* (room of worship).

This woman—whom we will soon know as Parvati, the main protagonist of the show—smiles at the camera, but it is not clear whether she is smiling also at the audience beyond the camera. That is, Parvati, unlike Tulsi is not actively breaking the fourth wall. The remaining shots establish the other members of the family, though they do not establish couples within this joint family as schematically as the device of Tulsi running into different rooms does for the *Kyunki* title sequence. Instead, in succession, we see a number of disparate images: a group of young people playing the board game carrom (a near identical shot is used at the end of the sequence); a young man playfully stealing a bite from an ice cream that a young woman is

holding; an elderly woman feeding a middle aged man a traditional Indian sweet; a group of people in the living room rising up respectfully at the entry of an older woman; Parvati and another woman raising their saris over their head as an older woman blesses them in the *puja* room; an elderly gentleman puts his arm around his wife who is evidently crying tears of joy; two young girls making the near universal sign of indicating 'super' by bringing together the thumb and middle finger in an ovoid shape; Parvati wiping the tears off a younger man's face; and so on. Unlike the *Kyunki* sequence, it is not made immediately clear what the relationships of these people are to each other, even though it is clear that most of them belong to the same family, whom we will soon know as the Agarwal family. (Please refer to the Agarwal family tree in the Appendix.)

The fact that they all belong to the same family is made more evident by the title track playing over these images, rather than by the images alone. The lyrics of the track are (translation mine):

"Where relationships are worshipped
 The elderly are respected
 When affection overflows
 Tears become holy water
 There is laughing; and causing laughter
 There is crying; and causing tears
 There are losses; and there are gains
 And there is smiling again
 This is the story of each home
 This is the story of every home."

The title track, then, insistently upholds family relationships, just like the title track of *Kyunki*. Even more than *Kyunki*, this title track squarely places relationships in the sphere of the sacred. While in the translation above I have used the phrase 'holy water', the word

actually used in the original Hindi song is '*gangajal*' or water of the river Ganga. Ganga is considered the holiest river for devout Hindus, often personified and worshipped; and bathing in it supposedly cleanses one of sins and provides liberation from the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. It is one of the key cultural markers of a Hindu; and also the symbol at the heart of the Sangh's first success of spectacular nationalism in the 1980s, the Ekatmata Yatra. The title track is clearly telling viewers that suffering in the cause of the family is as close to piety as one can get.

Contrast this with the title track of *Hasratein*, which also talks about 'laughter' and 'tears.' I had observed that at the heart of *Hasratein* was individual desire, and the lyrics of the title track claimed that it was desire that led to laughter and tears. Here, in the title track of *Kahaani*, a show that started airing barely a few years after *Hasratein*, we again see the use of the phrase 'laughter and tears,' but this time it is relationships that are established as the cause of both laughter and tears. And very clearly, these relationships are identified as traditional familial relationships, rather than romantic ones, leave aside transgressive ones like those depicted in *Hasratein*.

As with *Hum Log*'s title and title track, which conveys the idea of 'We the People,' or *Ye Jo Hai Zindagi*, which talks in general terms of life as it is, the lyrics of the *Kahaani* title track too stakes claim to generalizability or representativeness. In fact, it goes a step further by asserting that this is the story of each and every home. This is a

significant rhetorical device since it is obvious even at first glance, that the home featured in the show is anything but the average Indian home, leave alone every Indian home. This is true in terms of the class position of the members of this household, their caste position, as well as their urban location. The members of this household can be considered representative only in the sense that they are clearly Hindus, and therefore belong to the majority religion of the country. Nonetheless, a strong claim is being made in terms of the *Kahaani* household being representative of the Indian household. Similarly, when the *Kyunki* title track states that the mother-in-law was once a daughter-in-law too, it stakes a similar claim to generalizability and representativeness, even if it does not vehemently assert that it is the story of every home. For that matter, the device of breaking the fourth wall that is used in the title sequence of *Kyunki* performs a similar function; that is, by inviting people symbolically into the obviously upper class, upper caste household, it seeks to elide these very differences of class and caste by which these characters stand distinct from the vast majority of Indians; and the markers of which difference are present in every aspect of the show's life.

The main rhetorical sleight of hand that these shows (or at least for now, the title tracks of these shows) perform is that in using the 'little words' (in the sense of Billig, 1995) such as *every* home, it seeks to bind its viewers on the common ground of Hinduness, ignoring the many differences that cleave Indians. But these differences are not addressed in any significant manner on these shows, only suppressed

and silenced. And this central positioning of familial relationships, in particular the location of these relationships in a particular kind of family structure, is I argue later, of crucial importance. Both of these shows clearly are obsessed with the sanctity of family relationships; and for both of these shows maintaining these relationships is a mark of *sanskar*, a word that is used repeatedly across the shows. (Please refer to Appendix A for the family trees of the Agarwal and Virani families in the following sections to make sense of the relationships being discussed.)

Sanskar and Sanskriti in the Service of Banal Hindu Nationalism

The word, *sanskar*, in the sense of both tradition and traditional values, occurs again and again in the K-series. We hear it in the very first episode of *Kahaani* when Babuji & Maaji tell the priest on the phone that the family they seek to get their daughter married into should have good *sanskar*. We hear it in the very first episode of *Kyunki* where Baa, the matriarch, praises Tulsi's widowed father for having inculcated good *sanskar* in her and we hear it in the second episode where Baa uses the same word to praise her own grandson Mihir. And we hear it again, and again, and again throughout the first fifty episodes of the two shows. In most cases, though, the *bahu* is the repository of *sanskar*. It is the *bahu* as mother who is responsible for her children learning *sanskar*. It is the *bahu* as *bahu* who is responsible for ensuring that her conduct is in tune with *sanskar*. At the same time, the threat to *sanskar* also comes from women, usually ones who are too westernized or 'modern'. Payal in *Kyunki*, for

example, threatens the family; and as far as the serial is concerned she can commit no bigger sin than labeling astrological studies that indicated incompatibility between her and her prospective husband Mihir as superstition. Mihir wastes no time in telling her that what she labels superstition is actually *shraddha* or respect for traditions.

Similarly, in *Kahaani*, when Sonali's parents lament that the hurried nature of her marriage meant that she was going to her in-laws *khaali haath* (i.e. bare handed, or not bearing any gifts), Tushar says, "Of course not, she is carrying with her the *sanskar* of this family." The vehicle for the transference of *sanskar* is marriage. As Babuji says in *Kahaani*, "Marriage is the bond between two families. And then this unbreakable bond becomes *sanskar* and flows in the veins." *Sanskar*, as will be obvious, is a banal word which flags the idea of Hindu nationhood. It is interesting to note that across the two shows, the word 'Hindu' is never ever heard. We see in front of our eyes unmistakably Hindu deities, Hindu rituals, and Hindu customs, but what we hear again and again are the words *sanskar* and *sanskriti*. As we have noted earlier, not saying the word Hindu (but using the word *Bharatiya* together with *sanskar*) was a strategic choice made by Hindu nationalist leaders, making it easier for them to conflate Indianness with Hinduness.

The most easily understood manifestation of *sanskar* is in words and actions around religion. Both *Kyunki* and *Kahaani* understand *sanskar* to be intimately connected with rites and rituals, as well as performances of daily habit connected to a Hindu subjectivity. The

very first sequence after the opening credits in the first episode of *Kyunki* is of Baa engaging in a ritualistic worship of a *tulsi* tree, as *mantras* (religious/ritual chants or invocations) play in the background. If there was any doubt after watching the opening credits of *Kyunki*, we know from this shot that we are in a Hindu home; not just any Hindu home, but a devoutly Hindu one. This religiosity, though, is not presented in a manner that draws our attention to the religious acts, imagery or sound. They are present there as the backdrop to the scene, to be noticed as a given, but not needing to be commented upon. That is, from the very first episode itself, we start encountering Hindutva in its banal form.

Banal Hindutva on the K-series is expressed through three key devices that all call into being the Hindu nation: 1) the highlighting of religious *practice* and doing so in great frequency; 2) the plethora of religious symbolism and talk within the spaces of the shows; and 3) the Brahminical nature of the discourse offered. The first device can be further subdivided into three types 1a) personal; 1b) domestic and 1c) social and the second occurs in two types of spaces 2a) religious and 2b) non religious. I will deal with each of these in succession; the schematic below will make clear this structure of expression of banal Hindutva on the K-series.

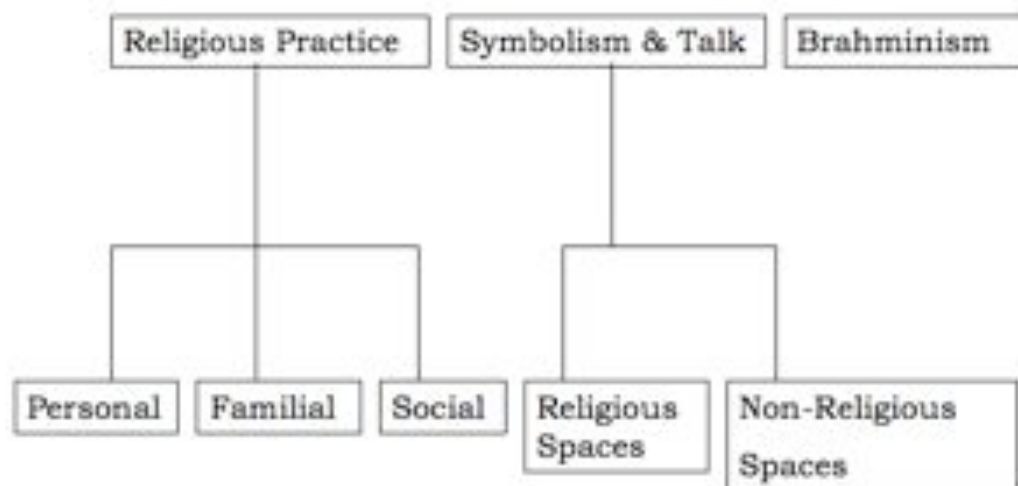


Diagram 1: Expressions of banal Hindutva on the K-serials

Religious practice. In chapter 3, I had shown how, for Savarkar, religious practice was of critical importance in distinguishing the Hindu from the non-Hindu—it is in the carrying out of rituals that one’s Hindutva is most manifestly expressed. Also, it is not so much the religious content of the rituals that is important as the public and visible conduct of it. In the K-serials, religious practice makes an appearance in almost every episode. The personal practice is the kind illustrated in the example earlier of Baa praying to the basil (*tulsi*) tree. This involves just the individual in some kind of communion with god. Usually, though, even the personal becomes performative on the shows: not just because the personal is never just personal in presence of the camera, but also because these personal actions of religious practice are either accompanied by the sound of religious *mantras* (invocations) being chanted in the background or the person on screen is articulating her thoughts and prayers as she

performs the act. So when Baa is worshipping the tulsi tree, we hear the chants of Om Bhur Bhuva Svah. This is the start of the famous Gayatri mantra, chanted by Brahmins and a key signifier of Vedic/Sanskritic Hinduism: on hearing the Gayatri mantra, the viewer knows immediately that this is a Hindu home, but it is clearly a Hindu home where Brahminical Hinduism, rather than folk Hinduism dominates. The Gayatri mantra is widely discussed in many texts of Vedic literature, and was at a time the preserve of Brahmin males. But Hindu revivalist movements, the precursors of Hindu nationalism, spread the chanting of the mantra among hitherto marginalized groups such as women and lower castes (Lipner, 1998). The use of the Gayatri mantra in this context therefore carries strong traces of Hindutva. The mantra is not just invoking a deity but every time it does so it is calling into being the Hindu nation. But it has become so effectively banalized that the mantra does not get noticed as an expression of Hindutva! And the personal affiliation of faith is transformed into an expression of banal Hindutva.

Similarly, scattered throughout the two serials we see various characters engaged in ritual prayer or performing activities connected to religious rites. For example, in the first few moments of the first episode of *Kahaani*, we see Parvati decorating alone the *puja* room (room of ritual worship) with a pattern of colored rice powder called a *rangoli*, soon after which the family worships in the room collectively and ritually. For the most part, ritual worship is also depicted collectively, and performatively. The personal aspect of prayer or silent

communion is rarely highlighted, partly because it perhaps does not lend itself dramatization as easily. Spirituality which is internal to the individual and not necessarily connected to religious practice is not of interest to these serials. But, I would argue this is because what is being depicted on screen is not *spirituality* but *religiosity* and specifically a Hindu religiosity. In this kind of performative prayer the idol of the deity or deities is framed as another character in the scene. Just as a conversation on screen has the shot switching from the first character to the second and back, so also such scenes have the shot switching from the person praying to the idol and back. So when Dadi is praying for the recovery of Parvati, the shot switches back and forth between the idols and Dadi (see images 1a and 1b), giving us repeated shots



Image 1a & 1b: Performative prayer: Idols and worshippers of the idols.

This on-screen depiction of a character interacting with a deity is not new. Similar devices have been used in Bollywood film before. Two of the most famous examples of this are superstar Amitabh Bachhan's monologue in front of an idol in the movie *Deewar* ('The

Wall', 1975), or the *mandir* (i.e. temple) scene in India's most watched movie of all time *Sholay*.⁵² In both of these scenes the idol in question is that of Lord Shiva. Yet, it is obvious to the viewer even from the slightly distant shot of the idols here that Dadi is speaking to idols of Ram and Sita. This use of Ram as the addressee of the devotee on screen is a comparatively recent development for Indian popular culture: Bollywood movie has rarely used Ram in this fashion.

But Ram, as we have already seen, is the most politicized Hindu god of recent times, the very embodiment of Hindutva more than any other god. The politicization of Ram has a long history and his worship was political from the very start (Doniger, 2009). We have also noted the change in aspect in Ram from generous to martial which was highlighted by Hindu nationalism. The repeated shots anyway are an indication of banal Hindutva at play, but any doubts about the aspect of Ram being highlighted in the show are removed by a couple of subsequent shots which, taken from behind the idol, highlight Ram's martial aspect through his prominent quiver.



Image 2: The Ram of Hindutva (with his quiver)

⁵² The scenes can be watched on youtube (albeit without subtitles) at prasharraajiv (2011) and kingsonu14 (2008) respectively.

In the K-serials the personal level of expression of Hindutva is less common than the familial level of expression of Hindutva. That, in its basic form consists of the family gathering together for ritual worship. Again, this is never limited to silent prayer or gathering in front of the idols, but full fledged depiction of rituals being conducted accompanied by *mantras* being chanted, *arati* (moving lit lamps in systematic fashion in front of the idol) being conducted or religious songs playing in the background. We see the Virani family gathering together in front of the temple early in the second episode of *Kyunki* and an elaborate set of rituals being performed in front of the Agarwal family in the very first episode of *Kahaani*. Similar gatherings in prayer take place every couple of episodes at least, especially in *Kahaani*.

The third level of expression of religious practice has to do with ceremonies, mostly wedding ceremonies. For serials that are obsessed with marriage and the family (see below), it is not unusual that weddings will be depicted on screen. What does make these depictions unusual is the length of depiction of weddings and within that the foci of these depictions. For one, we see no civil ceremonies at all: every wedding depicted on screen is a religious ceremony. And each ceremony is depicted at length, especially the typically Hindu ritual of the bride and the groom's seven circumambulations around the holy fire. Admittedly, given the length of time available to a TV serial, a depiction of wedding would be longer than that you would find in a movie, say. But this extended depiction of wedding rituals further

serves to mark the characters of the show as upper caste Hindu.

Added to it is the fact that the social aspects of these weddings are not given as much play as the religious ones. This again helps in the performance of Hindutva.

This presence of religious practice at the personal, familial, and social levels certainly seems excessive to the analytical eye, especially when compared to serials of early eras (whether Doordarshan or early satellite ones). For that matter, it is excessive even when compared to Bollywood movies, especially the 1994 hit *Hum Aapke Hain Koun* (HAHK) which shares some surface similarities with the K-series: it too features urban upper caste Hindu joint family settings and elaborate depiction of weddings. But in HAHK, it is the social aspect of the weddings that is foregrounded rather than the rituals, while in the K-series it is the reverse. It is in the K-series that we see banal Hindu nationalism play out even more strongly than in contemporaneous Bollywood film.

Religious rituals in the K-series is also repetitive. The repetition occurs at one level within an individual show as the same life events are repeated in the lives of multiple characters. With multiple children in the joint family, each life event can be and is multiply depicted, and accompanying each is an elaborate depiction of rituals. At another level the repetition occurs across the shows. That is, a viewer would see a wedding ceremony depicted in an episode of *Kyunki* and again after a month or two in an episode of *Kahaani*.

Part of the reason for this repetition is clearly economies of scale. Since both of these shows were produced by the same production house, it would often make sense for them to re-use sets once created for a purpose. If a set for a wedding area (with wedding fire and guest reception area) has been created once for a, say, *Kyunki*, it would make economic sense for it to be used again within not too long a period for an episode of *Kahaani*. There was therefore, I would suggest, an economic reason as well for the repetition of rites and rituals across these serials. But because these serials were shown back to back with *Kahaani* airing at 10:00 pm followed by *Kyunki* at 10:30pm, the huge common viewership of these shows would imbibe this repetition. The net effect of the repetition is to contribute to the entrenchment of banal Hindu nationalism in a significant section of the population.

Symbolism and Talk. The K-serials overflow with religious symbolism and conversation that is bookended by or shot through with religious references. In its most basic form, religious symbolism in the K-serials is seen in the salutations or greetings that characters offer each other. In these shows the most common salutation is '*jai shri Krishna*' or 'victory to Lord Krishna', followed by the salutation '*jai ram ji ki*', both obviously Hindu salutations. '*Jai shri Krishna*' is not an uncommon greeting, but it is certainly far less common than you would believe to be the case if you watched the serials. The greeting is not just exchanged between members of the older generation, but between younger and older as well; and occasionally by the young

among themselves. In the context of Indian popular cultural forms, this is certainly very unusual indeed; in contemporary Bollywood movies if formal salutation has to be used, it is the *namaste* that is used. In Bollywood film, it would be well nigh impossible to find two young people exchanging this salutation. More importantly, even if these salutations are used in society, without a doubt they are politicized by association with the Ram Janmabhoomi movement, the battle cry of which was *Jai Shri Ram*.

References to Hindu deities are not limited to salutations alone: they are scattered throughout the show in ordinary conversation. In fact, along with Hindu deities there is an abundance of *pandits* (ritual priests), gurus and other assorted holy men—sometimes in words, sometimes in images. References to *babas* and *maharajs* and *kulgurus* (all terms for various kinds of Hindu gurus) are dropped into conversation willy nilly. Not once are any of these figures critiqued or their actions or words even mildly interrogated. In fact, they seem to profit every time there is an occasion for celebration in the Virani or Agarwal families! In a scene of *Kahaani*, one of the first things that Vishwanath Agarwal (see family tree in Appendix A) does when he learns that his daughter-in-law Parvati does not in fact have a malignant tumor is to call up an *ashram* (a religious-charitable-social organization headed by a *guru*) and bequeath one lakh (hundred thousand) rupees in the name of “our *bahu* Parvati.” *Gurus* and *ashrams* command the respect of the characters in the K-series as a matter of course. This penetration of *gurus* and *ashrams* into everyday

life is of course one of Nanda's (2010) key arguments about the excessive religiosity in the Indian public sphere that she tracks from about the mid 2000s. This is not new, though: *gurus* have always been an integral part of upper caste, affluent business families in India, as McKean (1996) has illustrated. With the K-series we see the process of naturalizing of *gurudom* getting a significant hand through the wide reach of the K-series.

Speaking of deities being invoked time and again, the names of the lead characters (Tulsi from *Kyunki* and Parvati from *Kahaani*) are clearly not accidental or coincidental choices. The tulsi (or holy basil) plant is worshipped by traditional Hindus and is associated with the legend of Krishna, another incarnation of the god Vishnu. Krishna is, of course, also the god that resides in the Virani temple where Tulsi's father is a priest. This religio-mythical association of Tulsi's name is played upon constantly by the creators of the show. For example in episode 15, when Baa comes to meet Tulsi, she (Tulsi) offers her *prasad* (sweetmeats consecrated through religious offering) but tells her to also take some *tulsi* (i.e. the holy basil leaf) with it since 'prasad is incomplete without *tulsi*.' And Baa herself says later on, playing on *tulsi*, the name of the plant and Tulsi, the name of her granddaughter-in-law "People should worship Tulsi, not insult it/her. And in the home where this happens, there can be no peace and quiet."

Similarly, in *Kahaani*, the choice of the heroine's name is strategically chosen as well. Parvati is not only the name of the mother goddess, benign consort of Shiva, but also one of the names

by which Bharat Mata--the symbolic space of the motherland worshipped as a goddess--is referred to in Samiti literature. Note here, the transition in names of women protagonists of Indian TV shows. Renu (of *Yeh Jo Hai Zindagi*) and Kalyani (of *Udaan*) are obviously Hindu names, but they are not as freighted with religiosity. But while Parvati in Hindu myth is a benign goddess, in Samiti literature Bharat Mata-Parvati is variously referred to as 'protector of society' and 'the very source of all power' (Bacchetta, 2004). In all of the Sangh literature, there is repeated reference to Bharat Mata and the threat to her being from rapacious Muslim hordes. The very naming of the lead character plays cleverly with this duality of Parvati—on the one hand the gentle deity of age old myth, on the other hand the aggressive protector of society of more recent Samiti myth.

In addition to Hindu deities and gurus, Hindu religious texts also play quite a central role. Of these the *Ramayana* is perhaps the most often referenced. We have already seen Gaurav advice his pregnant wife to listen to *Ramayana* recitations every evening. But perhaps this is not so unusual in someone whose father had welcomed his new daughter in law with a gift of the *Ramayana*. As he handed out the gift, Vishwanath Agarwal had said, "*Ramayana* is the symbol of ideal relationships all over the world. Just as Sita *ji* had helped Shri Ram every step of the way and had helped to make him *maryada purshottam* [i.e.valorous superhuman], similarly you must complete the *Ramayana* of this small Ayodhya of ours". This use of the phrase *maryada purshottam* is clearly a direct use of 20th century

Hindu nationalist understanding of Ram's attributes rather than a classical one. As we have seen in chapter 3, one of the key transformations that Hindu nationalists effected was to turn Ram from a paragon of *udarta* [generosity] who lacked masculine aggression into *maryada purshottam*. In other words, every time we hear the words Ram and *Ramayana* in *Kahaani*, it is the specifically Hindutva-ised Ram that is being referenced rather than the Ram of multiple meanings, tellings, and fluid narratives.

Ordinary conversation is peppered with analogies and references to religion, religious texts, religious symbols and religious myths. This covers almost all aspects of mundane life. The key point here is that when the serials can find a way to bring in religion in the conversation, they often do so. For example:

- To indicate how connected he was to his homeland even when he was in the United States, Mihir says, "In the middle of fat English language tomes you would find my *Bhagwad Gita*; in the middle of rock n' roll and jazz, I used to chant using my prayer beads"
- When asked if she has a boyfriend or not, to evade the question Tulsi says, "My boyfriend is Murli Manohar." Both of these are names of Lord Krishna, indicating different attributes of his being.
- Gaurav, the second Agarwal son in *Kahaani*, is depicted as a caring husband. This is achieved by having him say, "Don't read books with so much violence when pregnant; I'll tell my mother to get you some religious texts. And you should join her in listening to the *Ramayan* recitation every evening."

Staggeringly, out of the 110 episodes analyzed, episodes in which there is a complete absence of reference to god or religion, either in words or in images can be counted on the fingers of one hand. Some have more and some have less, but nearly *every* episode has either words or symbols or images referring to Hinduism.

Note also the extensive use of little words across the serials. As we have seen Billig (1995) argues that it is in these little words such as ‘we’ and ‘us’ that banal nationalism passes unnoticed. This starts with the very title track of *Kahaani* that we hear at the start of every episode, and versions of which are then played at every conceivable opportunity in the episodes. It explicitly says that this is *kahaani har ghar ki*, that is, this is the story of every home. This insistence on the *har* is a classic example of a little word performing a big role. No depiction of *ghar* can represent every *ghar* but the Agarwal *ghar* is particularly ill suited to do ing so since it is so full of the signs, symbols, and performances of a strongly Hindu life; unless of course one can assume that every *ghar* in India is in fact a Hindu ghar.

The words *sanskriti* and *sanskar* when used are often used in conjunction with words such as *humaare* (our). As a new bride is told in an episode of *Kahaani* before ritualistically stepping onto a plate of vermillion when entering the home for the first time, “This is the centuries old tradition of our *sanskriti*.” Similarly, when Mihir from *Kyunki* berates Payal for saying she thinks matching horoscopes is nothing but superstition, he says, “Being modern does not mean your forget your *sanskriti*.” The specific references to *sanskriti* here are to

do with clearly Hindu rites, rituals, and beliefs, yet the little words seek to generalize them to all of India. This is of course the same rhetorical sleight of hand that the producers and marketers of the show indulged in. According to Ekta Kapoor, “the one subject which holds eternal interest for Indians is the family —every Indian family is bound by traditions, festivals, etc., and every family tends to celebrate occasions with relatives...” (Quoted in Lalwani, 2003a). Talking about how *Kahaani* came about, she says, “I wanted to make a modern Ramayan. Doesn't *every* home have a Ram? That's how Kahaani... took shape” (Quoted in Lalwani, 2003b). Again, there is the implication that every home in India can be explained or understood using the Ram and *Ramayan* analogy.

It goes without saying of course that all of the gods referred to within the shows (and in discussions around the show) are Hindu gods. In fact, it's not only Hindu gods that are referred to, these gods are almost always incarnations of Vishnu: Rama or Krishna. Rama and Sita are all over *Kahaani* and Krishna dominates *Kyunki*. A key aspect of the Hindu religion as we have seen before is the diversity of religious practice, especially in the worship of local gods. *Kyunki* and *Kahaani* are not only overtly Hindu, they provide a very narrow interpretation of Hinduism itself. Only once in the course of these 110 episodes do we hear a reference to a character originating in religious mythology outside of this upper caste, upper class, Hindutva inspired Hinduism. Because it occurs only that once it strikes the viewer as being out of place. This is a reference to Jesus Christ that is dropped

in by Baa in episode 44 when she is talking about those who had conspired to besmirch her name: “These are the same people who were envious of Christ the Messiah and hammered nails into his body; but God had forgiven them, didn’t he?”

This single instance of a reference to Christian mythology is quite curious. It is possible that what the serial is trying here is attempting to negotiate India’s secular history; or at least trying to convey that Baa despite her age and devotion to Lord Krishna is ‘broadminded’ enough to draw morals from other religions. But the effect it has is possibly the opposite of what was intended—this single reference to Christian mythology in among the plethora of references to Hindu mythology sticks out like a sore thumb. But note also the manner of speaking about Christ. The symbolism of Christ on the cross with nails being hammered into him is very *meaningfully* used here by Baa, to make a very specific point. Even the tone and manner of speaking do not assume that the Christ story is universally known—especially the conclusion to it involving God’s forgiveness of Christ’s persecutors. The symbolism around Christ does not reappear in the show again after this, unlike the *meaningless* and therefore banally Hindu nationalist repetition of Hindu deities.

The feeling that Baa’s example of Christ is being used instrumentally by the creators of the content to demonstrate her secularism is reinforced if we go back just one episode from this one and note what Baa had told Daksha when she had asked why she (Baa) worships the Tulsi tree: “It’s about who sees god in what. Some

see god in stones, some in idols, and some sense them inside themselves.” The show is completely oblivious to the fact that this formulation excludes adherents of Islam for example for whom graven images are forbidden. The net effect of this one time usage of Christian mythology, if anything, reinforces the strident Hindu-ness of the serials.

Equally prominent are the idols or pictures of Hindu gods and goddesses that are found scattered all over the Agarwal and the Virani homes and offices, especially the former. What makes this unusual is that these idols or pictures of gods and goddesses are found in every conceivable space, not just in those marked out as rooms of worship. A very significant portion of the action in *Kahaani* takes place in the living room of the Agarwals, and occupying the pride of place in the Agarwal home is the idol of Ram and Sita that we see in the opening credits of the show. Consequently, there is barely a scene taking place in the living room that does not feature these idols either in the background or foreground (see image 3)



Image 3: Ram and Sita idols in the Agarwal family living room, from Kahaani

Part of the reason of course is that this is a not very creatively subtle way of conveying parallels in the story with that of the *Ramayan*: for Ekta Kapoor, the creator of the show, *Kahaani* is another telling of the *Ramayan* (Lalwani, 2003b). But this does not convey the full import of this prominent placement of gods and goddesses. We see Hindu idols prominently placed in the offices as well. See for example image 4, which is from a scene set in the room of the boss of the third Agarwal son, Ajay.

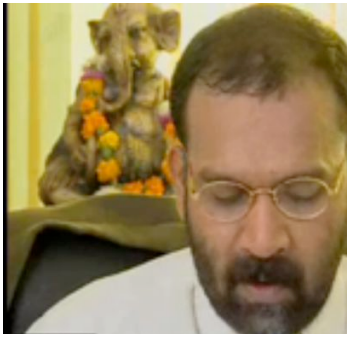


Image 4: The idol of Ganesh over the shoulder of Ajay's boss, from Kahaani

Notice that over the right shoulder of the character on screen is an image of the Hindu god Ganesh. Now, in isolation, this is again perhaps not terribly interesting. It is certainly the case that many Indian offices do have images of gods and goddesses placed within the office building. But look at the awkward framing of this shot, in which the idol appears to be sitting on the shoulder of the character on screen. No camera person worth her salt would have shot this frame unless there was a deliberate reason to have the idol in there. And the only conceivable purpose that the idol can serve here is to code that the person on screen is Hindu. It gets doubly interesting when we

note that small business owners (as this character is, owner of a reputable but small law firm) are overwhelmingly supporters of the BJP—and as noted earlier were even lauded openly in BJP election manifestos.

We can see similar examples of Hindu iconography in *Kyunki* as well. Consider image 5 below, a frame from a scene set in the Virani conference room of the Virani business office. We can see a picture of the god Balaji over the right shoulder of the character on screen.



Image 5: Picture of Balaji in the Virani boardroom, from Kyunki

Once again, there is no reason for this to be in the shot, but to convey the Hinduness of the milieu that we are operating in. In this case, though, it would be safe to speculate that the reason for this *particular* god (out of the millions of Hindu gods available) to appear in this scene is that it was most probably shot in the conference room of Ekta Kapoor's production house, which if you remember is called Balaji Telefilms, after the god Balaji or Venkateswara. Right in front of the picture of Balaji is a red colored statue of Ganesh.

In many other scenes, one can also see a small red statue of a laughing Buddha. One can read this as an example of religious diversity at play, but it is most likely only there on camera for luck:

Ekta Kapoor is known to be extremely superstitious (see Lalwani, 2003a, for example). This suspicion that the Buddha here is not performing any religious functions whatsoever but is on camera for purely superstitious reasons reinforced when we observe that the Buddha is often shown in odd positions, as in image 4, where it is turned towards the wall, yet prominently captured on camera.



Image 6: The (lucky?) laughing Buddha

More importantly, though, even if this has a religious connotation, one must remember that in Hindu nationalist discourse Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism are not foreign religions, and adherents of those religions can be happily accommodated within the capacious Hindu religion as one of many sects. Or even more accurately, since they were born within the borders of India, they are not un-Hindu in the first place. However hard you scan the shows, however, you will not find a single religious object associated with either Islam or Christianity, either in the homes or offices depicted on screen.

Sometimes the use of religious symbolism is even more overt. Take for example, a sequence in episode 15 of *Kyunki* where Mihir and Tulsi are talking with each other to resolve a crisis caused by Mihir's scheming fiancée Payal. What's most interesting in this

sequence, though, is how Tulsi and Mihir are framed. They are shown sitting at quite a distance apart from each other, each with their backs against one of the pillars of the Virani family temple. We can hear Mihir speak, but we can't quite discern the features of his face because it is out of focus. Instead, occupying a third of the screen, and in focus is the distinctive blue skinned idol of Krishna (see image 7a, below). Similarly, when Tulsi speaks, the focus is on Krishna's consort Radha (see Image 7b below).



Image 7a: Mihir (out of focus)
and Krishna (in focus)



Image 7b: Tulsi (out of focus)
and Radha (in focus)

This is again creatively a rather unsubtle⁵³ effort at establishing equivalence between the central pair in the show and the most memorably amorous pair in Hindu mythology, Radha and Krishna. One could argue that in the context of the show, where Tulsi is the temple priest's daughter, the location for their meeting is not strange either. Obviously, though, the choice of framing and composition is unusual and the producer or the director assumed that these idols of Radha and Krishna are the easiest visual reference for audiences to comprehend. At the very least, it assumes that to the vast majority of

⁵³ Within the parameters of Indian television, this would be considered quite daring stylistic innovation, even if the cameraperson here is borrowing from innovations that stretch at least as far back as Gregg Toland's work in *Citizen Kane* (1941).

the viewing audiences, if not all, the Radha-Krishna legend is completely familiar; and consequently the scene will have added resonance for viewers if framed and shot in this fashion. This assumption can only be made in a milieu where the common sense understanding of 'Indian' is 'Hindu.'

It is noteworthy here that not only do we see Hindu religious iconography and symbolism on screen repeatedly, we see it in contexts where they need not be there. Someone praying in front of an idol is commonplace in these serials, and therefore appears excessive to the analyst. Statues and icons of gods and goddesses keep cropping up in this excessive fashion in all kinds of scenes that ordinarily have nothing to do with rituals or prayer. Even though Bollywood film would rarely shy away completely from showing Hindu gods and goddesses (as we saw in the *Deewar* and *Sholay* examples above), and their protagonists would generally be identifiable as Hindu, these would not be underlined again and again. These would only be specific scenes taking up a very small portion of total screen time (unless of course the movie in question was a Hindu mythological.) That is, the insistent and continuous use of Hindu religious iconography and the associated strong coding of characters as Hindu on the K-serials is quite a departure from mass cultural norms, especially when compared to Bollywood film. As Steve Derne (1995) says:

To allow any viewers to identify with the films heroes and heroines, filmmakers create characters not easily identified as members of particular regions or castes and often use an urban upper-class

background where caste and regional differences disappear in a Westernized uniformity (p.195)

In the K-series, conversely, an urban upper-class background is used for *exactly the opposite purpose*: to identify the characters as members of a specific region (North India), religion (Hindu) and caste (upper).

The devices in simultaneous operation. We can see banal Hindutva in action through many of these devices in the opening few minutes of the very first episode of *Kahaani* itself. We know that the title track has set a platform for considering this home and this family as representative of the national family. Soon, a lot of light and sound cues viewers that celebrations are in the air; an explosion of fireworks in the sky in the first shot itself indicates to all Indian viewers that the festival being celebrated is Diwali, the Hindu⁵⁴ festival of lights. The second shot (which is repeated twice more in the episode, at the start of every new segment following a commercial break) is that of a palatial building draped from top to bottom in strings of decorative electric lights. Both of these shots (i.e. that of the fireworks and that of the building) last barely for a couple of seconds each before we travel inside this building. There we see a young woman heavily bedecked in gold jewelry, sitting on the floor in a huge *puja* room (i.e. room of worship). She is creating a *rangoli*, an elaborate floor decoration of

⁵⁴ While it is the Hindu festival of lights, Diwali—at least the social aspects of it, particularly the use of elaborate fireworks, is not necessarily limited to Hindus alone.

coloured powder, usually created for auspicious occasions (see image 8).



Image 8: Parvati creating a rangoli in episode 1 of Kahaani

The camera tracks her as she works on creating the *rangoli*, places a ceremonial lamp (*diya*) in the centre of the newly created design, and gets other paraphernalia ready for the impending *puja* (a session of ritual worship). On the soundtrack we hear only a popular *bhajan* (a devotional song) playing:

“*Mangal bhavan amangal haari;*

Dravahusu Dasharatha Ajir Bihari”

In translation, this is:

“He who is the abode of all happiness and prosperity, and who defeats all misery and unhappiness

He who dwells playfully in Dashrath’s⁵⁵ frontyard, please be merciful with me”.

Incredibly, for almost two and a half minutes, all that is depicted on screen is this—the young woman, whom we will soon know as Parvati, the daughter in law of the Agarwal family resident in this mansion, prepares the space for ritual worship, while this song/ *bhajan* plays in

⁵⁵ Dashrath is Ram’s father.

the background. And so it begins— a set of sequences, images and words one after the other that calls the Hindu nation into being; and leaves one in no doubt that this is a family for whom religion is pretty central to their lives. Let us track these sequences in order:

- a) Parvati goes into the room of Dadima (i.e. grandmother) who is found in front of a desktop computer. But on her computer is a website which at that moment has the image of the Lakshmi, the Hindu goddess of wealth and prosperity. Dadima demonstrates how, by moving your cursor, you can do online *arati* - the ritual moving of a lit lamp in front of an icon or idol of the deity. Parvati then gifts her a “software *kundali*” —software for creating astrological horoscopes.
- b) Babuji & Maaji (father and mother, the “ji” is a honorific indicating respect) are shown discussing a daughter’s marriage, mainly how and when they are going to get a prospective groom whose *janam kundali* (astrological birth chart) is going to match that of the daughter.
- c) Om, Parvati’s husband, tells her that she is the Lakshmi of the family; and wonders lightheartedly whether he should worship her right there instead of going to the *puja* room. (Lakshmi is the goddess usually worshipped on Diwali, especially in North Indian homes).
- d) Babuji’s conversation with the *pandit* (Brahmin priest) who has telephoned with news of a suitable boy for the Agarwal daughter ends on the salutation “*Jai Ram ji ki*” or “victory to lord Ram.”

- e) There is an extended sequence of the entire family gathered together in front of the idols, with a priest chanting invocations and the family praying together. Another *bhajan*, this time dedicated to Lakshmi and entitled *Om Jaya Lakshmi Mata* ('Glory to mother Lakshmi') plays on the soundtrack, and the camera focuses up close on to an image of the goddess.
- f) Babuji, while explaining the significance of the iconography on silver coins being handed out to the younger generation of the family explains: "In every daughter and daughter in law, I see [the goddess] Lakshmi. In every son I see [the god] Lord Ganesh, who removes all obstructions and maintains the prestige of the home."
- g) Babuji gifts the *jap mala* (prayer beads) to Parvati, in the presence of all other members of the family stating that it represents the family. He states that just as the beads are different but strung together on a thread, similarly the members of the family are different but united by the thread that is the daughter in law, i.e. Parvati.

The camera person or the director of these scenes do not (in the way they shoot them) visually comment on the scenes as depicting anything out of the ordinary. We can see religiosity expressed here through the personal and familial aspects of religious practice and emphasized through deities in word and image. Even ordinary talk is conducted through Hindu symbolism. At the very start of the serial, it emphasizes its Hinduness in a manner rarely done before the K-serials.

This foregrounding of Hindu ritual and symbolism is a significant move. I would argue that this is an even more significant move than the airing of *Ramayan* on Doordarshan. As I have discussed before, the multiple tellings of the *Ramayan* did get fixed by the televised version, and the show in itself often acted as an object of worship. But *Ramayan* itself did not showcase ritual practice, even if the show was ritually worshipped by some audiences. With *Ramayan* you undoubtedly had the movement of a Hindu mythological into the ostensibly secular space of state television. But that space was not wholly occupied by Hindu religious texts. As we have seen, other shows did penetrate that space. So, there was a possibility for non-Hindus who considered the *Ramayan* to be a Hindu religious text to avoid it from the very start, on the same grounds that non-Hindus might want to avoid Hindu temples. This avoidance might have alienated those viewers from what was significantly in the cultural mainstream, but as I have discussed, there were other offerings from Doordarshan for those viewers as well.

With the K-series, though, Hindu rituals and rites get baked into the everyday in a manner that certainly does not happen with Muslim or Christian rituals and rites. This is analogous to a situation where a non-Hindu wants to eat in a restaurant but is told she can do so only if she is happy to eat in front of an idol of Ram, while listening to Hindu religious songs. And increasingly, given the amount of religious symbolism going on within the shows being a Hindu would be a necessary, if not a sufficient condition to be able to read these

cultural texts successfully. This, I would argue, is a much more pernicious state of affairs and the situation only gets compounded when other general entertainment channels imitate the excessive depiction of Hinduism in an attempt to crack the code that led to Star Plus's success. In fact, as Chougule (2003) shows, channels were by 2003 giving explicit instructions to television producers to depict characters as extremely religious and ritualistic. From 2001 onwards, it was almost as if the institution of private satellite television was telling the viewer that if she wanted her entertainment she would have to take it with a generous dose of Brahminical rites, rituals, symbolism and worldview, which are naturalized and presented as 'Indian tradition' and more often than not calling the Hindu nation into being.

Brahminism. One of the central thrusts of Hindutva has been to eliminate diversity from religious practice, centralizing and homogenizing Hindu religion. That is, Hindu nationalism seeks to Sanskritize practice, creating a central canon of practice that is, in essence, Brahminical practice. This thrust is also present in the K-series in no small measure. Very notably, the religious rituals that we see on the K-series is Brahminical or Sanskritic rather than borrowing from folk tradition or from the Hinduism of other sects. As we have discussed already, a key objective of the Hindutva movement has been to purge Indian traditions and practices of their local and folk forms. In fact, in the movie *Hum Aapke Hain Koun*, which was also marked by Hindu rituals, the Sanskritic rituals are intriguingly

pushed to the background and folk practices (i.e. common practices, but not originating from the scriptures) dominate. As Uberoi (2003) shows, in *Hum Aapke Hain Koun*, life-crisis rituals (such as wedding, childbirth, pregnancy, etc.) are presented “in their non-Sanskritic idioms, albeit purged of the ‘obscenity’ with which they are often associated” (p.324). She goes on to say that this is most pronounced in the marriage ceremony, the heart of the movie itself where, “the sacramental *saptapadi* [seven steps] marriage rite, the seven circumambulations of the sacred fire, is no more than a suggestive backdrop or the enactment of the ‘teasing’ of the young men of the groom’s party by the bride’s sisters and friends” (p.324). In the K-series, this ratio of folk to Sanskritic rituals is flipped on its head. There are still some depictions of folk practice inflected rituals such as the *sikka dhoondna* game⁵⁶ that both Kiran and Aarti in *Kyunki* and Tushar and Sonali in *Kahaani* are shown playing. But the amount of time devoted to the depiction of Sanskritic rituals is substantially more than the amount of time devoted to depicting folk rituals.

It is not just the depiction of Sanskritic rituals that mark out the serials as carriers of Brahminism, but that the conductors of those rituals—the Brahmins—are regarded as the repository of wisdom and goodness. The most significant of these is the *pujari* (priest) of the Virani family temple, who also happens to be the father of Tulsi. Tulsi is clearly from a lower socioeconomic strata and her

⁵⁶ A post wedding game where the bride and the groom try to find a coin hidden in a bowl of milk, with the winner deemed to be the one who will dominate the other for the rest of their married life. Other than the groom, men are usually not present on these occasions.

saas Savita reminds her of this at every possible opportunity. But this representative family from the lower socioeconomic strata happens to be a Brahmin family—consisting of the priest and his daughter. Of the many castes that a protagonist from a lower class could have been chosen from, it is interesting that she is chosen from the uppermost. Tulsi is of course not just the main character in the opening sequence, but she is also the main protagonist of the show. It is her that we as viewers are always asked to empathize with. She is repeatedly held up in the show as an exemplar of duty and bearer of *sanskar*. Her virtues are Brahminical virtues.

For that matter, both Tulsi and her father are paragons of virtue, with nary a blemish to tar their conduct. The *pujari* is shown as being patient, wise, and understanding. Importantly, the *pujari* is never named in the show. He is just known as *pujari*, often with the honorific *ji* attached becoming *pujariji*. This is because again and again the serial assures us that the *qualities expressed in the pujari is not that of the individual, but of Brahmins*. In episode 31 for example, the *pujari* when asked to eat after being humiliated at the Virani house, refuses. This humiliation is caused mainly by Savita, who is embarrassed that her son Mihir has chosen to marry a girl from a poor family. So when the *pujari* addresses her as *samdhan* ('relation'), Savita reminds her that she is his client first, and *samdhan* later. Yet, despite the humiliation, the *pujari* does not lose his moral compass or his sense of what is right and wrong; nor does he retort in kind. All he says is, "I am a Brahmin, fasting is a part of my habits."

A few episodes later, when requested by Govardhan Virani to forget this insult and conduct the rites at the wedding of his Mihir's brother Kiran, the *pujari* accepts, exclaiming, "Conducting the rites of wedding is a pure task: for us Brahmins, to join two lives together is a holy task." Brahmins might be poor, but the one thing that they do have, the show tells us, is a lot of self-respect. When Tulsi explains to Mihir why her father should not officiate at Kiran's wedding, "My father is an ordinary man; if he has any wealth left after my wedding, it is his self-respect. That is why, though he is *samanya* (ordinary), he is still *ananya* (unique)." At the same time, then, the Brahmin is of a lower class socioeconomically, but he is of a higher class as a human being.

The class positioning of the Brahmins who are professional priests is quite accurate sociologically, with many such Brahmins doing poorly economically, even as *gurus* (who do not need to belong to the Brahmin caste) became more and more prominent and successful in India (See for example McKean, 1996; Nanda, 2010; and Chakrabarti, 2012, for more on the role played by *gurus* in contemporary India). But at the same time, the Brahmin is being positioned on a superior plane. The viewer's sympathies are made to lie completely with the *pujari* and of course the *pujari's* daughter Tulsi. The superior moral qualities that Tulsi embodies are also clearly those that have been imparted to her by the *pujari*. When Tulsi is praised, it is often accompanied by an approving comment about the *sanskar* that the *pujari* has imparted in his daughter. By

association, then, if the qualities of the *pujari* are actually qualities that inhere in Brahmins, and these are the qualities that have been imparted in Tulsi, she becomes then the embodiment of the superior moral attributes that derive from Brahminical texts and Brahminical wisdom. The *pujari* is less a fully formed character than a cipher standing in for Brahminical wisdom: he rarely speaks with specific reference to the context, but by drawing on general tropes from Brahminical texts.

The Brahminism of the serials is not limited to the scenes in which actual Brahmins are present. It is the worldview itself that is deeply Brahminical. In episode 23 of *Kahaani*, there is what might be called the only instance of a near eschatological discussion between Parvati and the youngest Agarwal son, the adopted Neeraj. Neeraj claims to be an atheist and Parvati insists that one day he too will believe in god. Neeraj's atheism, though, is not allowed to be a clearly reasoned and rational position: it appears to be an atheism born out of anguish. As he says, "Why should I believe? One day he suddenly took away my parents from me when I was a wee lad. And why doesn't he do something about those children on the streets when he sees them suffering? At least I have everything in this home; what about the orphan children who beg on the streets? What do they have?" Parvati's response is instructive. She says, "All of this is the result of our sins in our last lives, because of which we suffer in this one." This invocation of the circle of birth, death, and rebirth is central to the Brahminical worldview. It also allows for a disengagement from the

actual material conditions of society, by displacing the cause for suffering in the actual world to a past life and ensuring that critiques of present structures are unnecessary. All the ills of society and the nation can be cured if only every *bahu* had the *sanskar* that Tulsi and Parvati did.

Banal Hindu Nationalism, Naturalization, and Soap Operas

As Billig (1995) has argued, nationalism is almost always detected in its spectacular form, and rarely remarked upon in its far more banal form. In a sense, Billig's understanding of banal nationalism, especially in its essence of being unremarked upon, has similarities with the way in which Stuart Hall understands the effectiveness of ideologies. To repeat, for Hall (2003) ideologies work most effectively

when we are not aware that how we formulate and construct a statement about the world is underpinned by ideological premises; when our formations seem to be simply descriptive statements about how things are (i.e. must be), or of what we can "take-for-granted." Ideologies tend to disappear from view into the taken-for-granted "naturalized" world of common sense (Quoted in Kumar, 2010, p.255)

The difference between Hall's (2003) and Billig's (1995) understanding is that for Hall ideologies "disappear from view" to become common sense, but for Billig nationalism (in its banal form) is flagged within plain view (though unobtrusively) yet is not recognized at all as an ideology, even as common sense. In that sense, of course, banal nationalism is the most effective ideology of all!

In this dissertation, I use the term ‘banal nationalism’ to indicate the moments when the Hindu nation imagined by Savarkar and Golwalkar is called into being through the use of religious practice, symbolism and talk, or Brahmanism. Following Billig (1995) and Hall (2003) then, it stands to reason that the rituals and symbols on the K-series hold enormous meaning *exactly* when they are felt by observers to no longer hold meaning in themselves. But these rituals and symbols through their omnipresence continue to do their work silently, continuously flagging the Hindu nation. So, when there is a significant rise in the depiction of gods and rituals on television, on the one hand it is taken for granted under a naturalized understanding of India as a Hindu nation; on the other hand the mere presence of icons and symbols is not read as easily as evidence of Hindu nationalism at work unlike marches, processions, and violent riots.

The repetition of symbols and rituals is integral to the K-series. This repetition, then, marks a movement from “symbolic mindfulness to mindlessness,” to borrow a phrase from Billig (1995, p.42). When they are used in specific spaces and specific contexts (say the Ekatmata Yatra), symbols (such as the image of Ganga as goddess) are used mindfully by Hindu nationalists. But this mindful use in those particular spaces also dictates that the spread of the image remains limited. The sparsely used symbols carry a potent charge alright, but it speaks to a limited set of individuals. In the next stage (i.e. when spectacular Hindu nationalism starts to become banal), the

symbols proliferate in all directions. It is now no longer used only by Hindu nationalists, and nor is it being used as mindfully; it is now used by a far larger number of people and often used, as Billig would say “mindlessly.” But even as they proliferate, they are no longer uncommon or obtrusive; and can continue to do the work of flagging their ideology without being remarked upon.

Banal nationalism, however, only gets entrenched through a process of routine formation. As Bilig (1995) describes:

Patterns of social life become habitual or routine, and in so doing embody the past. One might describe this process of routine-formation as *enhabitation*: thoughts, reactions and symbols become turned into routine habits and, thus, they become *enhabited*. (p.43-44, emphasis in the original)

The incessant and routine depiction and invocation of deities, rites, rituals, symbols, and texts in almost every aspect of daily life in these serials lead then to them being ‘enhabited’ in the viewer. This *enhabitation* can obviously only take place in the viewer’s interaction with television (or for that matter on any mass media) when the act of viewing also is routinized. That is exactly what the soap opera form is very well equipped to do. One of the lesser remarked aspects of a television soap opera is its periodicity or regularity. I would argue that this regularity or periodicity is critical to the ideological and pedagogic functions of television. It is inevitable that the need to produce television content for every day of the week for years on end will partly have to be met with repetition. But repetition, as we know, is key to pedagogy.

With the K-series airing every weekday at the same appointed time back to back, and Hindu content repeated within and across the serials, aspects of Hindu-ness (or specifically Brahminical Hindutva) becomes routine habit, and then becomes ingrained values. This works in two ways for two different sets of audiences. For an audience that is already bought in to the Hindutva messages—and we saw in the earlier chapter that the Sangh/BJP audience overlapped strongly with the Star Plus audience—it is a reinforcement. For an audience that considers itself to be Hindu but not perhaps a supporter of the Sangh or the BJP, the self-definition as Hindu begins to move towards the Hindutva definition of Hindu over the course of thousands of K-serial episodes. In other words, the K-series play a role also in naturalizing Brahminical, ritualistic Hinduism as Hinduism proper. For the rest of the audience, the K-series emphasize that the normative way of being Indian is to be Hindu.

Of course, attempts to naturalize Hinduness as Indianness have now been ongoing in India for almost a century and a half. These have been most potent in (though not limited to) the Hindi speaking northern and western states of India. Given that almost all of the television content producers hail from those parts, it is perhaps not that surprising that we have some empirical evidence for this naturalization occurring in the Hindi television industry.

Banal nationalism and the Indian TV industry. The successful transformation of spectacular Hindutva into banal Hindutva lies in the fact that Hindutva is no longer recognized as

such. As I noted earlier, the academic debate around the serials did not debate the presence of Hindutva ideologies in those serials. The debate was centered around whether they were ‘regressive’ or not, or differently phrased, whether it was a good or a bad thing that these shows featured ‘traditional’ Indian women. We have seen Munshi (2010), for example, not probing further when told by her respondents that “there is no deliberate attempt on [our] part for this predominance of Hindu identities” (p.Munshi, 2010,p.179). Within the TV industry as well, other than the single exception of the journalist A.L. Chougule (2003), no commentator interrogated the centrality of Hindu rites, rituals, and symbolism in the shows; and there was no interrogation of banal Hindutva on the K-serials in the trade press whatsoever.

When discussing the issue, industry figures often tended to trivialize it, claiming that “Hindu symbolism just gives you a lot to play with” or “rituals and symbols are mere indicators in the plot, they don’t hold any meaning in themselves” (Anonymous respondents quoted in Ohm, 2007,p.297). That is, a profusion of religious symbols is being considered meaningless. One could argue that this profusion is anything but ‘banal’. But I am using the word ‘banal’ here (and everywhere in this dissertation) in the strict sense of Billig (1995). In that specific technical sense the excess of the signs and symbols of Hindutva on these shows is very much compatible with banal nationalism; in fact the excess is key to the banality. However, it is not

the excess alone that makes this nationalism banal, but that such excess is not recognized as such by almost anyone.

Sometimes, industry respondents accept that there is increasing religiosity on television, but they offer a justification for it. For example in the comments of Zarina Mehta, a leading industry figure (who is incidentally not a Hindu), we see naturalization at work:

“Religion is not the mainstay. The serials do not emphasize on religion and religious beliefs but deep faith in God. In any case, we are living in a Hindu majority country. Therefore Hindu religious elements are bound to be there” (Quoted in Chougule, 2003, para. 3). The ‘queen of soaps,’ Ekta Kapoor, too argues that her serials are about “faith,” not religion, as does Tarun Katial, then the head of programming at Star Plus. But as I have established in the sections above, the claim that the shows depict “faith in God” and not “religion and religious beliefs” is empirically untrue. These shows very much depict religion, and a Hindutva version of religion at that. Second, and perhaps of even more concern, though, is the statement that since “we are living in a Hindu majority country, therefore Hindu religious elements are bound to be there.” These have almost shockingly loud echoes of Golwalkar or Savarkar, the foundation of whose ideologies is based on the fact that Hindus are in a majority in India, and India should therefore be considered a Hindu country.

Ekta Kapoor further argues that what is foregrounded in her serials is ‘tradition.’ She insists that “it’s wrong to look at programs from religious angle. Indians being traditional and religious, religion is

an offshoot of the traditional element in serials.” (Kapoor, quoted in Chougule, 2003, para. 7). It is taken for granted, here, that ‘religion’ means Hinduism. It is also taken for granted, therefore, that ‘Indian tradition’ and Hinduism are quite closely connected. Similarly, the programming director of Sony tells Chougule (2003) that, “Joint families, prayer meetings, devotion to God, devotion to family and rituals all find a mirror in the shows on television these days. It's a function of reaching out to a larger mass and pinning down a commonality among them” (Mandloi, quoted in para. 6). Another producer-director admits that he has been specifically instructed by the channel (in this case Zee TV) to bring in more religiosity into his show.

We find here the only open admissions that ‘religion’ is consciously used as a device to build a bridge across various kinds of audiences divided by caste and class. As I have argued earlier, it also serves to build a bridge across the pronounced difference in socioeconomic status between the characters on screen and the audiences viewing those characters. There is no discussion, at least by these industry figures that an excessive reliance on the Hindu religion to find ‘commonality’ by definition excludes Muslims and other minorities. As I have argued before, this happens because even as Hindutva has largely naturalized the notion of India being a Hindu country, Muslims do not come into the calculations of advertisers and marketers at all due to their position at the bottom of the bottom of the pyramid. Of course, none of what I have described above is

evidence that any of the channel representatives or producers are votaries of Hindutva themselves. What is inarguable, though, from these examples is that the logic of Hindutva had become quite naturalized in the TV industry. Star Plus's Hindi turn was not just a Hindu turn, but a Hindutva turn.

Yet, the pedagogic function of the K-serials isn't limited to an inculcation of Hindutva and the ritualistic enactment of "Hindu" identity. What we see at work is also the creation of an environment hospitable to consumerism. The emphasis on *sanskar* and *sanskriti* is accompanied by an emphasis on the affluence of the characters and the families. The repetition of religious idols and icons also extends to very desacralized elements as we will see below. This process, along with that of banal Hindutva, together goes to create a Hinduized consumer subjectivity.

Cultivating the Hindu Consumer through 'Middle Class' Values

During an interview with industry publication indiantelelevision.com, Ekta Kapoor is asked the question: "Why are most of your serials in keeping with the country's cultural values?".

The answer makes for fascinating reading. Ekta argues:

Most of the rich people do not need values, most of the poor do not have time for them. Hence, middle class values are what my serials are about. These middle-class values are incidentally in keeping with the cultural ethos of the country. As far as I am concerned, economically I belong to the high class, but morally to the middle class...I created realism by creating real life characters, I created idealism by creating a family. And of course, I kept my flag of middle-class values flying (Kapoor, quoted in Lalwani, 2003).

It is highly instructive that Ekta considers “middle-class values” to be “in keeping with the cultural ethos of the country.” We have already seen that the value set that is held up as normative throughout the serials is a Brahminical value set. Not only are these values supposed to be synonymous with the “cultural ethos of the country,” they are redundant for the rich or the poor, though on very different grounds. As would be obvious from our discussions in chapter 4, Ekta clearly is talking about the values of an affluent class when she uses the phrase ‘middle class’ values. This set of values dictates that the prestige of the family is wrapped up in the person of the *bahu*, and who therefore remains mostly home bound. But this flies in the face of the economic realities that compel women from lower socioeconomic strata to join the ranks of the marginalized and extorted working class, as was happening during the 1990s (J. Ghosh, 2009).

As the disparity in Indian society was increasing under the influence of market regimes, and as the government in power at that time (the BJP) was moving more and more towards the ‘middle class,’ a huge gap was opening up between the thin layer of haves and the very broad layer of have nots. The K-serials were trying to bridge the divides by deploying this kind of banal Hindutva outlined above. These serials were actively also performing a pedagogic function. As Shobha Kapoor, the producer of the shows suggests, the depiction of Hindu prayers and rituals in these serials “has taught the younger generation about them, since they do not really know about all *our*

festivals or the rituals associated with them” (quoted in Munshi, 2010, p. 180, emphasis added). Clearly in this formulation, *our* can only refer to “Indian.” So not only was there an active attempt to deploy Brahminism pedagogically, there was also an attempt to create a greater consumer subjectivity in citizens from the lower socioeconomic strata. Given the socioeconomic status of Muslims, Ekta and Shobha Kapoor are also without doubt talking about the ‘values’ and ‘cultural ethos’ of Hindus. That is, the K-series were attempting to create a Hindu consumer subjectivity.

On these serials there is barely the mention of a working class or anyone from a lower socioeconomic class. On *Kyunki* there is repeated mention of unions and ‘union problems’ occurring in the Virani factories, and union leaders are presented as venal and untrustworthy, and possibly involved in criminal acts. Occasionally, we see domestic helps of these families popping up, but rarely for too long, and never as active agents. The only relationship that these families have with other classes are through commodities which are truly obtrusively presented throughout.

Shaping aspirations through commodities. We have seen Shailja Kejriwal of Star Plus saying that the K-series were in the business of selling “aspirations and dreams that are achievable” and that they were “visually rich.” But what does Kejriwal mean by ‘visually rich’? Here, I would like to draw attention to a key stylistic device in these shows—the obtrusive presentation of commodities.

This operates in two key ways. One is by self-consciously placing the camera in a position to look through commodities, or is often blocked by them, thereby making sure that those commodities just cannot be ignored. The other is by framing shots in manner that the jewelry and saris that women wear become significant in the frame. Let me illustrate this with examples from the two shows.

In image 9 below, which is from the second episode of *Kahaani* we see one of the three characters in the scene continually hold up to the camera something which looks like a jewelry box. Throughout this two minute long scene, this jewelry box is held in that unusual position. While this mirrors some of the more obtrusive examples of product placement in Hollywood movies, what we see here is not classic product placement. More often than not the camera emphasizes products but not brands. In fact, one of the noticeable aspects of the K-serials in this regard is how absent brands in general are from the screen.

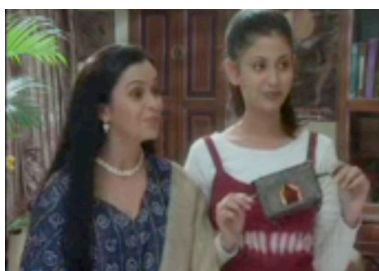


Image 9: The persistent jewelry box from Kahaani

In Image 10a, we see a shot that is quite representative of the visual choices in these shows. This particular shot is from *Kyunki* and gives a general sense of how a scene in *Kyunki* is always framed in a manner that emphasizes the decor of the room and the various

knickknacks and gewgaws always present in the room. 10b is again for the K-serials a rather standard shot, drawing attention to commodities placed prominently within the frame. These kinds of shots are held long enough for these commodities to register fully. These objects are in the foreground so that our attention is drawn to them—the idea being to establish that there is enough economic ability in this family to consume commodities that serve no conceivable utilitarian function.



Images 10a & 10b: Knick knacks, gewgaws and the coding of affluence

In Image 11 below, we see the standard fashion in which a mobile phone or a cell phone is depicted when there is a need to show a call between two parties. Again, the shot is held on the phone longer than is necessary for conveying information about the role of the phone in the narrative.



Image 11: The more prominent than required cell phone

In images 12a & 12b, we see strangely composed shots with the frame bisected or multi-sected by objects neatly by a standing lamp. But this serves no other purpose than to draw attention to these objects. The bisection of the frame in image 10a makes no metaphorical statement since Mihir and Payal, the two characters in the scene both eventually sit on the right hand side of the bisected frame. Similarly the chair placed right in front of the camera has no other function but to draw attention to itself.



Image 12a & 12b: The pointlessly obtrusive commodities

In all of these shots, and in many many more like these, the camera self-consciously draws attention to the commodities, often lingering on them even at the cost of becoming a visual distraction. Some of the shots are arguably constructed in this fashion so as to enable the camera to capture the widest field of view possible. But more often than not these images end up being so visually incoherent (like that of the lamp or chair above) that it suggests that the only reason for framing the shots in these ways is to convey the affluence of the home.

The other kind of visual coding is in the jewelry and saris that women wear, at all times, even when they are at home. In Images 13a, 13b, and 13c we see women sitting inside the home, with no intention

of going out immediately after, but still bedecked in the kind of sari and jewelry that would rarely be worn by any Indian woman outside of special occasions like weddings. Compare this with the depiction of Priya (image 14) the main protagonist of the very



Images 13a,b, and c: What passes for everyday wear in the K-series



Image 14: Everyday wear in the serial *Saans*

successful middle satellite era show *Saans* ('Breath', Star Plus, 1998-1999). Priya in *Saans* is a homemaker as well when the serial begins, and she is also from the upper middle classes, though her family is an extended nuclear family rather than a joint family. Notice though the difference between Priya (image 14) in a serial that started

in 1998 and Parvati (image 13b), in a serial that started barely two years later. Priya is wearing a relatively unadorned housecoat, with no jewelry and no make up while Parvati is wearing an expensive sari and is adorned with expensive gold jewelry—in fact by the usual standards of the show, she is wearing relatively light jewelry in this scene. It is obvious that the women on the K-serials are from extremely affluent families, in addition to being from Hindu families. Coupled with the banal Hindutva on the shows, the net effect is to create a distinctively Hindu consumer subjectivity.

But even though what we see on screen are mostly unbranded commodities, there is still an economic role that their depiction on screen plays. In Kejriwal's term, it is these commodities in the environment that they are placed in that makes for a rich "projection." This projection was impactful enough to influence viewer consumption. The saris and jewelry depicted on these shows gave rise to fashion trends (Munshi, 2010). In fact, even the costume designer of these shows became a mini celebrity in her own right ('There's no place better', 2003). Since these goods were unbranded (or at least the brands were never visible on screen), these were copied and reproduced by local and often small businesses (traders and shopkeepers) all over the Hindi Speaking Markets, which as we have seen constituted the core support for the BJP. That is, the greatest benefit from the trade in these goods accrued the core audiences of the BJP. That is, the K-serials create a uniquely Hindutva circuit of economics.

But the economic work of the K-serials is not limited to this; the more important work is obviously done by the environment it creates for advertising that surrounds it. We know that the K-serials became the most preferred vehicle for consumer advertising. If the K-serials were creating aspiration through the overt placement of these objects, we know from Prahalad and Hart's (2002) arguments that advertisers were sending aspirational messages even when they were hawking shampoo and soap. I would argue that it was critical for the aspirational message to work that the environment created by the content and the environment created by the advertising did not look out of sync with each other. The objects of decoration, the saris, and the jewelry together ensured that the world presented within the K-serials was not radically different from the world presented in the advertising. There are some resonances here with the role that American television played in the 1950s in creating a consumer subjectivity, though what is being created here is not a middle class subjectivity, but a bottom of the pyramid subjectivity.

Together the advertising and the content presents a world in which the only discord present is intra-familial discord. The content of the K-serials did not touch upon any larger social concerns, unlike the serials of the Doordarshan era which were, as we have seen in Roy (2008), concerned with larger socio-economic issues. Unlike *Eastenders* and other British soaps, the K-serials showed no interest in engaging with issues that the material world outside the serials was grappling with.

Aspiration and the ‘middle class’. It is when we look at the socioeconomic reality of the world outside the K-serials that Star Plus content head Shailja Kejriwal’s use of the term ‘aspiration’ takes on an ironic meaning. If it has to have any meaning, a society that promotes aspiration needs to be one that creates at least some pathways towards fulfilling that aspiration. For quite a few women viewers of the K-serials, soaps and shampoos were to remain forever the upper limits of their aspirations: one of the side effects of the neoliberalization of the Indian economy has been to push more and more women into the workforce into exploitative low wage jobs (J. Ghosh, 2009). It was critically important to make these women, particularly, feel a part of the imagined Hindu nation.

It is not as if Ekta Kapoor, the creator of the K-serials did not understand this intuitively. To repeat Ekta Kapoor’s comments, “Most of the rich people do not need values, *most of the poor do not have time for them*. Hence, middle class values are what my serials are about” (Kapoor, quoted in Lalwani, 2003a, emphasis added). This statement indicates that Kapoor—and Kejriwal of Star Plus who also talked about ‘middle class values’—was clearly aware of the ideological work that these serials were doing. As we have seen what they were peddling were the values of a Brahminical elite, the same that were peddled by Hindu nationalists, and which were now being reached out to a wide ‘bottom of the pyramid’ mass through the aegis of television.

The repeated invocation of the term ‘middle class’ is one of the most interesting discursive devices in Munshi’s (2010) work as well. This keyword makes its first appearance on page 4, where Munshi notes that her book is “important because it studies the ‘popular’ and ‘everyday’ (and profitable!) while also concentrating on the middle class” (Munshi, 2010). A page later she suggests mistakenly that this middle class “numbers more than 400 million, a substantial body of people to base research on” (p.5). She goes on to approvingly quote Ekta Kapoor as saying that she (Kapoor) “makes soaps for the middle and lower middle classes, not for women who live in the posh seafront localities of Mumbai” (Munshi, 2010, p.5). Soon enough, on page 9, Munshi is suggesting that “[t]he realism in Indian soaps is largely drawn from middle-class sensibilities” (p.9).

This ‘middle class’ or its sensibilities are never quite explicitly defined. But a little later on Munshi gives us a slightly stronger sense of who she views as the middle class. In trying to account for the popularity of the K-series, she suggests that once the global information technology (IT) bubble burst in 2001 “there was no coping mechanism and middle class Indians were seeing for the first time what it felt like to be part of a capitalist economy” (p.69). Leave aside the patently facile argument that this was the first time Indians were living in a capitalist economy, it is interesting to note the implicit assumption here that ‘middle class Indians’ are the ones who suffer the most from the negative effects of the capitalist economy. It is then argued that this middle class viewership has aspirational tendencies

towards the families portrayed on these shows, since they show “rich, joint families which have businesses worth millions” (p.94).

Apparently, it is “the lavish lifestyles of the wealthy soap families that serve as objects of consumption” (p.177). Yet later on, Munshi argues that on these soaps the “glamorous, expensive lifestyles” are “reflective, of a consumerist, middle class India” (p.210). We are never really clear at any point who this supposed middle class is given that there is never any adequate definition of it. This is doubly strange given how complicated it has proven for sociologists to understand what the term ‘middle class’ might mean in the Indian context. Munshi acknowledges this complexity only in a footnote, accepting that ‘middle class’ is a “challenging concept” (Munshi, 2010, p.28).

This rhetorical (and therefore definitionally unspecified) deployment of the keyword ‘middle class’ is used repeatedly by the creators, sellers, and marketers of these shows—in fact the entire television apparatus, including its viewers. For example (and to repeat an earlier quote), this is what Ekta Kapoor argued in a May 2003 interview to the industry publication indiantelevision.com:

As far as I am concerned, economically I belong to the high class, but morally to the middle class....I created realism by creating real life characters, I created idealism by creating a family. And of course, I kept my flag of middle-class values flying (Quoted in Lalwani, 2003).

In reality, when television industry mavens invoke the term ‘middle class’, or when even academics like Munshi (2010) suggest that the “realism in Indian soaps is largely drawn from middle-class

sensibilities” (p.9) they are talking ideologically. In reality, this class that they are referring to as a ‘middle class’ is a narrow slice of 58 million people at the top of the pyramid. And there is of course a group of people who are never part of this middle class, ideological or otherwise.

The Absent Presence: Muslims

India is the third largest Muslim country in the world: 10.3% of the world’s Muslims live in the country (Pew Forum, 2009). You wouldn’t know this from watching the K-serials; there isn’t a single Muslim character of note in the serials, not even in highly caricaturized or stereotypical characterizations (as Bollywood movies would regularly depict). (For that matter, there are no significant Christians, Buddhists, or Sikhs either on any of the 1833 episodes of *Kyunki* or the 1653 episodes of *Kahaani*). This absence of Muslims in the K-serials, I would argue, is not accidental. We have already seen how the socioeconomic status of Muslims in India ensured that they were unimaginable as part of the middle-class, leave alone the upper class. But we have also seen how the project of Hindu nationalism has always held Muslims to be the threatening other and has actively demonized Muslims. As we have seen spectacular Hindu nationalism was accompanied by bouts of violence directed against Muslims. But as spectacular Hindu nationalism was displaced by a more banal form of Hindu nationalism, this violence was displaced by marginalization and exclusion, aided largely by the fact that the dynamics of neoliberal market economics disproportionately discriminated against

Muslims. It is this marginalization and exclusion⁵⁷ that we see represented on the K-serials. But the marginalization and exclusion is not complete: Muslims are present on the shows as absent presences, hovering on the periphery but never crossing over into the centre.

So rare is the presence of Muslims on the K-serials that one almost gives a start when you do hear them, as in episode 19 of *Kyunki* when Chirag says out loud the names of his friends he would for a family wedding reception. After listing a few other friends, we hear Chirag say that “Parvez, Zahid, and Abbas would also have to be called for the wedding” if other friends are called. We are of course neither introduced to Parvez, Zahid, and Abbas nor do we hear of them again. More significantly, the names Parvez, Zahid and Abbas are articulated together in a group by themselves. These names are not uttered individually within a group of other names of Hindu friends. The Muslim is present in the K-serial only by naming; yet it’s their Muslimness that comes to the fore even in the naming rather than their individual subjectivities.

Another such act of naming happens in *Kahaani*. A very minor detour in the show has Vandy Maasi (the unmarried sister of Maaji) dreaming unrealistic dreams of stardom, when an employee from dry cleaning services calls up and leaves a message for an “old and fat woman”. But this employee identifies himself as “Gafoor from Modern

⁵⁷ Note that this is not to suggest that there was discrimination against Muslims as far as the cast and crew are concerned. Some of the cast members are Muslims, for example Hussein Kuwajerwala, the actor who plays Chirag in *Kyunki*, and Ali Asghar, the actor who plays Kamal in *Kahaani*. There are a number of Muslims in the crew as well, albeit rarely in power roles such as producer or director.

Dry Cleaners.” In essence, he plays the straight foil to Vandy Maasi’s comic pronouncements, and that too for only a few brief moments on camera. This seems to be a situation where a character is being identified by name as Muslim just to ensure that there are some Muslim names used in the show. Similarly, when asked at a wedding what sari she was wearing, Savita replies that it is by the designer Shabina Khan. There happens to be a real life designer called Shabina Khan, but she is mainly a costume designer for Bollywood movies. Most well known Indian fashion designers, especially those who do design saris, are non Muslims. It seems again that the use of a Muslim name here seems to have been done purely for the sake of using a Muslim name. This is yet another Muslim who we hear the name of but never get to see or interact with.

There is, however, a Muslim character who we actually see: the police inspector Khan. (In the worldview of the K-series *all* Muslims seem to have the surname Khan!). He is brought into the picture in episode 33 when the second son of Govardhan Virani, Himmat, is kidnapped. He is shown as a very competent police officer, who manages in the end to shoot dead the main kidnapper. Yet when he is in the Virani household, he is no longer referred to as “Inspector Khan” but “police”. His identity as a policeman dominates his identity as a Muslim. He drops in the term “Inshallah” once, but other than this and the name Khan, there is no sign of anything else to mark him as Muslim. He is clean shaven - and obviously in uniform. By the end of the plot line, Inspector Khan and his ragged band of rather scrawny

looking policemen do manage to arrest the kidnapping ring leader. Govardhan Virani is so grateful that he invites Inspector Khan to his grandson Kiran's wedding telling him, "You must come to my grandson Kiran's wedding and bless him." Inspector Khan graciously replies, "If you have invited me I most certainly will." One begins to think that this might be the start of a beautiful friendship, but we simply do not see Inspector Khan after that, not even at the wedding. The manner in which this character is introduced and the role he plays within it are reminiscent of the way the trope of the "good Muslim" works in contemporary films such as *Sarfarosh* (See Hirji, 2008). Inspector Khan is, in fact, a good Muslim as defined by Hindu nationalists—he bears no visible cultural markers of his Muslim identity.

The serials are of course obsessed with maintaining the specific kind of family depicted in this show. We have also seen how they are not interested in any bonds other than kinship bonds. Muslims are not just unimaginable as the middle class, they are most certainly unimaginable as members of the upper socio economic classes of India, who are the focus of the K-serials. But even more than that they are unimaginable as members of the family. Since all of the relationships established with others seem to be through the institution of marriage, it stands to reason that Muslims are not depicted on the show (given the rare occurrence of religious inter-marriage in India, anyway anathema to Hindutva). As they are sought to be written out of the national family by Hindu nationalists, so they

are written out of the televisual national family. Note that the two Muslims who are depicted on screen for any length of time, Gafoor the dry-cleaner and Khan the inspector, are both working class. It seems that even for the creators of the serials, Muslims are unimaginable as belonging to the same class as the Viranis and the Agarwals; or for that matter as members of the professional or white collar classes. It is also interesting that the Muslim character who is given most screen time on television is a police officer. This seems clearly to be a borrowing from contemporary Bollywood movies which created a polarity between the 'bad' Muslim, out to destroy India from the inside, and the 'good' Muslim, who was proud to be an Indian and would defend her from all threats. As Hirji (2008) argues, the only trustworthy Muslims in movies like *Sarfarosh* are those who place India first. No wonder then that Inspector Khan is saddled with a speech to Govardhan Virani in which he commends the latter for informing the police about the kidnapping and being therefore a "true citizen of Bharat."

At the most basic of levels, though, exclusion can start from the very choice of language itself. The Hindi spoken in the show is very different from the kind of Hindi you would have heard on shows of the early satellite era. A lot of the language here uses the Sanskritized Hindi that was born from the Hindustani language as a result of Hindu revivalist campaigns of the 20th century. As Farmer (2005) argues, "Clearly...language can be used as a method for lending communal interpretation to messages that otherwise carry no

communal content” (p.100). The use of Sanskritized Hindi, certainly something which is far less colloquial than used in say *Saans* or *Hasratein* or *Amanat* or in any of the Doordarshan shows, is again a political gesture (even if not an intentional one on the part of the producers). The use of Sanskritised Hindi as opposed to colloquial Hindi or Hindustani leads to exclusion being written into something as banal as the nomenclature of awards categories. The nomenclature of family relationships are different in Hindi and Urdu, the language that many Muslims in North India speak. But in the Star Parivar Awards (which we will explore further in the next chapter) for example, the category of Favourite Pita uses the Sanskritised Hindi word ‘Pita’ for father; in formal Urdu it would be Favourite Waalid, whereas the popular form would simply be Papa.

This erasure of Muslims from televisual space is also historically unprecedented when seen in the context of Indian mass media. The absence of Muslims in the K-series is in stark contrast with the show that is often credited with being one of the key inspirations behind the K-series. This was also the show that was dominant in the ratings charts till the K-series dethroned it: the Zee TV show *Amanat* (1997). *Amanat* is the story of seven sisters and their father Lahori Ram who, as the name indicates, came over from Lahore in Pakistan after India’s partition in 1947 into the two countries of India and Pakistan. Nonetheless, Lahori Ram’s best friend is Muslim, called Ahmed Chacha (uncle) by Lahori’s daughters, and he appears in a significant number of the episodes and is part of significant plot developments.

This absence of minority characters in the K-serials is also glaring when compared to the the shows on state controlled Doordarshan. These shows were more overtly influenced by the Indian state's official secularism and not only featured minority characters prominently, they were often situated in minority communities and strongly advocated secular tendencies (at least when the state was not trying to play soft Hindutva politics by airing Hindu mythological epics like the Ramayana). Sanjay Asthana (2008) has shown how Doordarshan serials like *Gul Gulshan Gulfam* (1990) and *Choli Daman* (1989) engaged religion and secularism on the same plane, not only featuring Muslim or Sikh characters as co-protagonists but also focusing on issues of inter-community engagement and trends towards desecularization. The K-serials, though, never engage with issues of conflicts and controversies around the two major issues that continue to define India even in the second decade of the twenty first century: religion and caste.

It is not just that the characters were Hindu and no Muslims were seen anywhere close to them; it is, as we have seen, that the Hindu-ness portrayed was overt and indivisible from the identities of the characters on screen. The characters in the K-serials epitomized the consuming rich but they wore their Hindu identity on their sleeves; and just as Savarkar had insisted, this identity was strongly established through the banal yet detailed depiction of rites and rituals, particularly the marriage rituals. The excess depiction of Hindu rites and rituals is again unprecedented in the popular cultural

space. As Steve Derne (1995) remarks with respect to Bollywood film, “Though religious themes are prominent in Hindi film, they are nonetheless often vague and condensed, perhaps because so many of their viewers are Muslims- and because filmmakers believe that Muslims constitute much of the repeat view audience” (p.200). In the K-serials, though, these themes are anything but vague and condensed; as we have seen this is related to the fact that whether or not Muslims were viewing these shows was irrelevant to the success of the shows, and therefore to the marketers that advertise on the shows.

The creators of the shows who insist again and again that these shows feature *Indian* tradition choose to ignore the fact that so-called Indian tradition is not Brahminical Hindu tradition alone. Eid and Christmas are as much Indian festivals as Diwali and Dussehra. Yet we never see anyone on the shows celebrating any non-Hindu festival. For that matter, we don’t hear any words of solace or wisdom from the Quran ever appearing on the show, even though (as we have seen) a positive reference to Jesus does appear once. This absence of any element that could be associated with Islam is extremely unrepresentative of reality, to say the least.

In reality, the strains of Islamicate culture are so deeply ingrained in Indian culture at large, that it is futile to even try to unweave these strands. As Bhaskar & Allen (2010) argue, the term Islamicate “is used to discriminate Islamic-derived idioms and forms of social life from the Islamic religion and to acknowledge that their

influence is not reducible to purely Muslim contexts” (p.79). In fact, the word “strain” used here is almost misleading. As Doniger (2009) has accurately stated, “ Muslim input into Hindu culture is far more extensive than mere numbers would imply” (p.31). But the work of Hindu nationalism is fundamentally geared to eliminate all non-Hindu elements in Indian culture. The discourse of Hindutva insists that a) all Muslim aspects of culture are alien to India and/or b) are reminders of oppressive Muslim rule over Hindus and therefore need to be removed.

In serials that are so obsessed with *sanskar* and *sanskriti*, the ideological bases of which are derived from Hindutva, it is perhaps no surprise that Islamicate culture is marked by its absence. There is no mention whatsoever of any food that might have Mughal origins, for example *biryani*. There is not a single utterance of the name of the common dress *salwar kameez*, even though characters wear it every now and then. The language, as discussed earlier, is a Sanskritized Hindi, and there are no Urdu words to be heard on the serials. In a show about women, the only Muslim woman who has any kind of a presence in the aforementioned designer Shabina Khan; and her presence is merely as a name, not on-screen. It goes without saying of course that there are no markers of Muslim identity to be seen anywhere on screen, not even in the stereotypical forms that you would see them on Bollywood movies.

Desecularization and exclusion on television. Whether it be in the sense of a complete absence of religion from the public sphere,

or even in the unusual Indian sense of equal respect for all religions, the K-series fail the secularism test. The visual and aural vocabulary of serials from the Doordarshan, and for that matter the early satellite era, are quite different in this regard. Characters in the Doordarshan and early satellite serials are not deeply marked by signs of their religious affiliation, and we do not see religious deities and icons prominently within the home—we most certainly do not see them in work spaces. Religious rites and rituals are almost never depicted on screen. The dialogue is not inundated with a vocabulary of religiosity, and conversation takes place without the use of metaphors derived from Hindu myth and religion.

The success of banal Hindu nationalism lies in the fact that it is not seen as nationalism. The world created on the K-series, as I have shown, is very much created in the model of the ideal Hindu nation desired of Hindu nationalists. Further, as we have noted, the symbols and rituals of Hindu nationalism are the rituals and symbols of Brahminism. This explosion of Brahminism on the K-series is quite unprecedented in India's media history. As we have seen, Hindu themes, symbolism, and iconography have been present in media at most times in India's media history. This included imagery of and symbolism from the folk traditions as well as Brahminical traditions; nor were the themes, symbolism, and iconography of other religions absent from these media. In other words, *all* media, in responding to the market has historically accommodated religious imagery drawing from multiple religious traditions within the broader media sphere—

whether they be multiple traditions within the broader umbrella of what one might call Hinduism; or religions other than Hinduism.

Yet, in the 2000s, Star Plus is scrubbed clean of both non-Hindu and non-Brahminical influences. Star Plus's lead is followed by other channels, as we see from Chougule's (2003) report. That is, the folk traditions and diverse practices which are typical of the work of religions in India become increasingly marginalized on television. There are two significant consequences of this. One, when Hindutva becomes the dominant mode of practising Hinduism, it effectively ensures that the dialectical relationship between Sanskritic and folk rituals is destroyed. As we have noted, religious practice in India (and for that matter social practice) has operated in both directions: local and folk practices have absorbed Sanskritic or Vedic practices, but so have Sanskritic practices absorbed local practices. This has resulted in the diversity that every student of India remarks upon. But when Sanskritic practices are absorbed from the powerful medium of television, the direction of absorption becomes obviously just one way. While I wouldn't go so far as Nandy (2002) to argue that in people's practices lie the key to religious tolerance, it is certainly the case that any process that provides a barrier to this dialectical relationship between folk and textual practices is not to be welcomed.

Two, when ostensibly secular entertainment starts to get so heavily imbued with religiosity, it creates some barriers for the adherents of other religions to consume that entertainment. As a result they are eliminated from the cultural mainstream. Moreover, it

is not as if there can easily be alternative television media that can be created for marginalized audiences. As I have noted, Muslims were not really viewed as consumers by capital, and therefore the possibility that television might in some way be exclusively geared towards Muslims would have a really difficult time coming into existence.

As I have argued, this marginalization is central to the ambitions of Hindu nationalism. Accompanying the marginalization is an attempt at centralization by upholding Brahminical modes of practice as somehow more authentic and truly representative of Hinduism. This is therefore the playing out on television of the strategy of the Hindu right to paper over the acute differences that exist in Indian society: of class, caste, and gender. (In the next chapter I will specifically examine the construction of gender on the K-series). As Corbridge & Harris (2003) have termed it, the twin forces of Hindu nationalism and economic liberalization were both 'elite revolts', in one case that of the upper castes, and in another case that of the upper classes. On the K-series, we can see both aspects of this elite revolt play out: in its repeated near pedagogical depiction of Sanskritic rites and rituals, and its depiction of affluence and wealth to which consumers were expected to aspire. In short, on the K-series we see the Hindu nation of Savarkar and Golwalkar writ large. We see the banal form of Hindu nationalism deeply entrenched. And we see the slow dying of the idea of India beloved of Nehru and Tagore.

Chapter 7

Gender, Hindutva, and the K-Serials

We saw earlier that the television industry respondents denied that the profusion of religious symbolism on the K-serials was anything out of the ordinary. The BJP, though, fully recognized the K-serials for what they were. *Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi* debuted on 3rd July, 2000 heralding an era in which affluent, urban, upper caste Hindu joint families seemed to take over TV. While the Hindu right and the BJP government had been extremely negative about the television serials of the early satellite era (as we saw in chapter 2), they embraced the K-serials rather more warmly. For example, an article in the RSS mouthpiece *Organiser* called Smriti Irani, the actress who played the protagonist Tulsi on *Kyunki*, ‘the ideal daughter-in-law that the television has ever shown’ (sic) (Nigam, 2005, p.41).

But this embrace would not have come as too much of a surprise to observers of the BJP. In its ‘Policy on Media, Cinema, Arts’ released concurrently with the 1998 election manifesto, the BJP had made it quite clear what it considered to be suitable entertainment, and indeed what the functions of such entertainment was to be. The BJP’s policy was anchored in the belief that no democracy can “long endure without the consensus of the majority of its citizens to some normative moral code” (‘Our policy on media’, 1998, para. 3). Cultural diversity was desirable, it argued, but only within this code. This moral code or moral order was provided by the “age-old ‘dharma’,

which is distinct from religious practice” (para. 4). But the origin of the term ‘dharma’ can be traced back to the Rig Vedas. In other words, Vedic prescriptions were to guide modern day media policy! (You almost have to admire how the BJP finds a way to build in exclusionary language even in a media policy document.)

The BJP then helpfully listed the elements of this code. It included right at the top the “promotion of family values and extended family relationships to preserve its character as a basic socio-economic and socio-cultural unit” (para 4). This was immediately followed by “the importance of religious faith in moulding human life” and then “projection of regard and respect for women and motherhood” (para. 4). As would be obvious by now, a TV show that was explicitly created with these guidelines in mind would surely look no different from the K-series. Little wonder then that Irani was made a BJP candidate for the Lok Sabha in the 2004 elections and became in 2010, the president of its women’s wing, and member of the National Executive team of Nitin Gadkari, the new and more hardline president of the BJP (‘Smriti Irani takes over’, 2010). Given how little Irani was known before taking on the role of Tulsi, the BJP were clearly aligning themselves with the idea that the character Tulsi embodied, and the ideals that the K-series propagated.

I have shown earlier how the construction of women in Sangh discourse was quite layered, especially when we take into account the discourses of the Rashtra Sevika Samiti. I have also shown how during the 1990s there was an attempt within Hindu nationalism to

tamp down on the spectacular activity of women at the height of the Ram Janmabhoomi agitation, and bring them back into the fold of family, albeit with no restrictions on their consumerism (see chapter 3). The construction of gender on the K-series is fascinating and seems to mirror the transition of women from outside the home to inside. This is especially so when we take into account the construction of women on the serials on Indian television in the early satellite era (i.e. the serials immediately preceding the K-series).

To quickly recapitulate, serials of the early satellite era presented women as complex beings, often working as professionals and exerting their agency outside the sphere of the home. They also highlighted women's erotic desire in a relatively open manner, quite unprecedented in Indian popular media. On the K-series, though, women no longer exert their agency outside the home. More importantly, it is not *expected by any of the characters in the serials, male or female*, that women might want to have a career and a life outside the home. But this is not to say that there is any active discrimination of girls or women in the show. In fact, the characters are quite explicit about not differentiating between men and women. For example, in an episode of *Kahaani*, one day a neighbor drops by the Agarwal home with sweets to celebrate the birth of her grandson and offers unsolicited advice on the rituals that should be followed by the pregnant Shilpa to have a son. She is immediately rebuffed both by Shilpa and her mother-in-law, with Shilpa categorically stating that she is not bothered about the gender of the child, only that it be

healthy. Or, in an episode of *Kyunki*, Mihir states equally emphatically that he does not believe that women should not go out alone at night or not “feel free” (he uses this exact English phrase). Yet, as we shall see, in practice, the arena within which women can operate is extremely constricted indeed. In fact, this constriction happens in various ways, depending on the roles that they are expected to play.

Women as Assets of the Family

On *Kyunki* and *Kahaani*, women are defined by their marriages and their place in the family home. That is why women are considered to be *paraya dhan* - that is, someone else’s wealth. In episode 7 of *Kahaani* for example we see a father lamenting the fact that parents bring up their daughters with love and affection and then suddenly make them *paraya*— a term that has the dual meaning of ‘alien’ and ‘belonging to another.’ His wife consoles him by saying, “ A daughter is *paraya dhan*: you have to say goodbye to her one day or the other”. Exactly this phrase (and almost this phrasing) is repeated by Gayatri in episode 50 of *Kyunki*: “A girl is *paraya dhan*. One day, she does have to go away from her childhood home—this is the rule of life.” In episode 23 of *Kahaani* , Shilpa reminds Sonali that *every* girl has to get married and go away from her home. This, she adds, is what god above has decided and what no one can change. So, even if there are no actively discriminatory statements made by any of the characters on the show, the notion of women as property is completely naturalized. While a boy or a girl might be equally welcome in the family, the roles they play are marked quite clearly in terms of power,

agency, and hierarchy. Contrast this with Kalyani, the complex, ambitious, and driven policewoman in the serial *Udaan* whom we encountered earlier—and who viewers encountered more than 13 years before the K-series—and it is clear how much of a backward step the K-series actually are.

Across the episodes of *Kyunki* and *Kahaani*, we are again and again reminded of how consequential every action of the *bahu* is to the safeguarding of the family's prestige or *izzat*, which of course, is related to keeping the family together. Given this criticality of the *bahu* to the family, what kind of a woman should in the first place be imported into the family? The K-series give us a number of clues. The woman needs to be first of all from a *sanskaron waale* family i.e. a family that has held on to tradition. A woman cannot even be considered as a prospect for *bahudom* unless she has *sanskar*. Conversely, having *sanskar* is the greatest attribute of them all. Tulsi is praised in the very first episode of *Kyunki* by Baa who is impressed by the *sanskar* that Tulsi's father has imparted to his motherless daughter. On the flip side, Payal is shown as lacking the qualities that make a good *bahu* primarily because of her lack of *sanskar*. Among others, this even seems to include reading English potboilers before going to bed. In general the K-series seem to believe that reading English fiction does no good for the *sanskar* of an Indian woman—Payal, Tulsi's key antagonist, and Pallavi, Parvati's key antagonist in *Kahaani* — are both shown as avid readers of English fiction!

A corollary of having *sanskar* is that she should not be “too modern,” which Payal clearly is. While it is never expressly stated what being “too modern” means, it is often articulated (with approval) what the opposite of “too modern” is. In the worldview of the K-serials, being modern is a problem in a *bahu*. As Mihir tells Payal, being “modern” does not mean that you forget your *sanskar*; in fact he questions what kind of a *Bharatiya* (a Hindi word for Indian, but a word that we have seen is strongly associated with the project of Hindu nationalism) woman she actually is. Clearly, a truly Indian woman would find a way to reconcile her modernity with *sanskar*, something that Payal expressly fails at. In episode 17, Mihir describes all that Payal has failed at. She failed to turn up for Sejal’s dance recital; she was absent when Chirag was recovering from a near drowning, having instead gone to a movie; and horror of horrors, no one could even remember when she had last touched Baa’s feet to get her blessings. The fact that Payal is expected to do all of this *even before she has married into the family* is glossed over as being of no significance. If she is engaged to Mihir, she is, in effect a *bahu* already—and being a *bahu* means that you subsume your own needs and desires to that of the family. Payal, in refusing to do that, is “too modern.”

To be modern is also to have lost one’s simplicity. This polarity is expressly articulated by Vishwanath Agarwal when he is sitting with his wife and elder son looking at pictures of prospective brides for his third son. Going through these photographs—and dismissing them

like discarded vegetables at a market— Agarwal says, “I don’t like this one. She is a bit too modern. What I want for Ajay is a simple girl who will not think of us as in-laws but as parents.” When Agarwal uses the word ‘simple’ here, he uses it as the opposite of ‘uncomplicated’ or, indeed, as he explains, someone who will have no problems thinking of her in-laws as her parents. His wife repeats the same formulation while going through the photographs: “Some of these are too modern, and some of them are too simple.” However, the word ‘simple’ as used by her is not used in the same sense as her husband. When used by her, in the context that she uses, it has one of two possible meanings. ‘Simple’ here could either connote ‘plain looking’ or it could connote an evidently lower class. On the basis of the internal evidence of the serials, it is likely that she is referring to the looks, and not to class.

Gender, *sanskar*, and class. One of the interesting dynamics in the K-series is how gender intersects with class and *sanskar*. Even as the milieu of the serials is one of great affluence, and the families are at the uppermost echelons of affluence, they insist that the most important quality in a prospective *bahu* is her *sanskar*. We are told on *Kahaani* that Parvati comes from a less affluent family as compared to the Agarwals. On *Kyunki*, the significantly lower class position of Tulsi is repeatedly iterated. Yet it is Tulsi who becomes Mihir’s wife and the *bahu* of the Virani family and not Payal, even though Payal comes from the same kind of business family as the Viranis. The serials emphasize that for women at least, having *sanskar* is more valuable

than their class position. As I will show below, they also argue against any signs of ambition in a woman that are not related to family.

But this does not imply that the K-serials demonstrate any level of progressive class politics. It repeatedly denigrates labor, and presents union leaders as venal and corrupt. It depicts the domestic help working in the Virani household as easily swayed into misdeeds by the inducement of money or as the objects of the Virani family's paternalism. In other words, the K-serials are not remotely interested in class, other than to show how having *sanskar* is a quality more valued in a prospective *bahu* than almost anything else. The ideal *bahu*, then, needs to have *sanskar*, be good looking, yet not be "too modern."

At the same time that exceptions are being made for lower class women to enter upper class families on the basis of their impeccable *sanskar*, it is accepted that a necessary condition a good marriage is that the bride and the groom both be from equally good *khandaans*. The word *khandaan* is a synonym for family but is not a word that would be used to refer to one's family in ordinary conversation—the use of it always occurs in a grander context, to convey ideas like prestige, timelessness, and position of the family in society. In that sense the word is close to the English 'dynasty.' The use of the word *khandaan* also codes class, and for the most part it is used approvingly. So for example, Baa in *Kyunki* promises that she will feed the poor and offer a *puja* if Suhaasi gets married to a 'good boy' from a 'good *khandaan*.' In *Kahaani*, one of the marks against Sonali when

she gets married is that she does not look *khandaani* enough. Here *khandaani* is almost a literal translation of the English word ‘classy.’ It goes without saying that marriage and family are considered to be absolutely central to every woman’s life in the K-serials.

The Centrality of Marriage and Family

Marriage and family form the centre of practically every woman’s life, even those who initially display an independent spirit. In the first episode that we see her in it is established that Pallavi, a prospective bride for Ajay Agarwal from *Kahaani*, is studying to get a Masters degree in science. She is also a voracious and eclectic reader as a tracking shot of a row of her English language books establishes. She is shown to be so accomplished that her mother says that it will be hard for Pallavi to find a husband in their own community.⁵⁸ Pallavi is better educated than most of the men; as her mother explains, there just aren’t too many highly qualified young men in their community, most of them being traders. For her part, Pallavi makes it absolutely clear to her parents that any prospective husband must be “smart” and “educated” and in sync with her worldview. But even these marriage related aspirations are only paid lip service to. As with most arranged marriages in India, the first meeting of the couple to be is in the presence of the entire family. After a little bit of chit chat the couple are left on their own and start the process of getting to know

⁵⁸ The exact word used here is *biradari*, which refers to kinship, and very strictly speaking refers to people (usually males) originating from the same village. In the loose sense, it can mean a community, usually a linguistic or caste community. Specifically in this context, Pallavi’s mother might be referring to the Bhandaris as a caste community.

each other a bit. Ajay (her prospective groom) talks extensively about his ambitions of becoming not just a lawyer but the best lawyer in the country. But when it is her turn to talk about her dreams, all that Pallavi says with a shy smile is this: "I too have many dreams, and it looks like one of those is about to become real very soon." Clearly, the fact that she might be an MSc student has no bearing to her ultimate station in life, that of being a *bahu*. But it gets worse. When this marriage is called off, the Agarwals propose that Ajay's younger brother Kamal be married to Pallavi instead; and that marriage to the simpleton Kamal actually goes through. The ostensible reason for the marriage is astrological, but in the worldview of the serial it is completely acceptable for a rich heiress pursuing an MSc degree to settle for a marriage with someone far less qualified and completely incompatible intellectually. Not only that, Pallavi's desires are given very short shrift, and the feckless Kamal is portrayed as almost doing Pallavi a favor by agreeing to marry her. He says, "If my saying yes will help preserve the respect of a girl in society and the relationship between two families is not broken, I am ready to do whatever you ask me to." So, a highly educated woman, with independent desires and wishes can be saved from the stigma of a broken engagement simply by an underqualified, albeit lovable, simpleton agreeing to marry her. The only justification offered for why the accomplished Pallavi would agree to this marriage is her desire for revenge. From that point on Pallavi becomes Parvati's *bete noire* and she is shown as devoting all her energies to the destruction of the Agarwal family. We simply don't

hear anything else about her education or her love of books, or her intellectual pursuits.

The K-serials put forward an ideology that irrespective of their level of education, and the aspirations that they may have, the greatest dream must relate to their marriages. Let's remind ourselves here of Golwalkar's (1966) comments: "Literacy campaign among women is one more important programme, which our educated mothers alone can successfully tackle. But here also, *inculcating noble samskars in them should be given the priority, teaching of alphabets should come second*"(p.286, emphasis added). Like Pallavi, the minor character of Siri who has an American degree under her belt is also shown to be terribly disappointed and aggrieved that her sister's brother-in-law Tushar has married someone other than her. Her dream, we are told, was to become a *bahu* in the Malhotra *khandaan*. As she complains to her sister, "You had said don't fall in love with someone in America: you will become a *bahu* of the Malhotra family. And I kept waiting for that dream to be realized".

Those who are unable to realize this dream are clearly objects of condescension, if not ridicule. The character of Vandy *maasi* (mother's sister) in *Kahaani* is a classic case in point. Vandy *maasi*, sister of Krishna Agarwal, is an older woman depicted as continually deluding herself that she is still young, and still desirous of marriage. She uses phrases like *jawan ladki* (i.e. young girl) and 'slim trim' to describe herself when she is evidently neither young nor that slim. She believes that she is as good looking as Bollywood and Hollywood stars, and

even responds to an ad for a film audition that explicitly asks for a young woman. She becomes the brunt of jokes and laughter. She is there in the show to mostly provide comic relief—and the script encourages the audience to laugh at her, not with her. This is not done subtly: the musical track accompanying her is almost always that of comic sounds such as honks and screeches. By playing her situation for laughs, the serial is telling us that not getting married is a fate that is not to be wished on any woman.

The Woman's Work: Shaping Herself for the Sake of the Family

But the moment when a woman has finally gotten married is the moment when her work really starts. First of all, *Kyunki* and *Kahaani* make it absolutely clear that when a woman gets married, she gets married to the entire family. In episode 17 Parvati tells her brother in law (who is reluctant to agree to a marriage arranged by his mother), “Your mother will choose a girl who will not just take care of husband but the entire family. The right girl will be one who will fulfill well the relationships of not just a wife but a *bahu*, a *devrani* [younger sister in law], a *jethani* [older sister in law], in fact, all such relationships. And only the mother's eyes can detect this.” In *Kyunki*, Savita emphasizes to her daughter in law Tulsi, “A girl's relationship is with the entire family. With this, she gets a new position and with that position come new responsibilities.⁵⁹ And I want that my *bahu* should never shirk

⁵⁹ Note: the English words ‘position’ and ‘responsibilities’ are used here. ‘Position’ is used in the colloquial/Hinglish sense of the term here, which refers to the rank someone holds in an organizational or bureaucratic hierarchy. So when Savita says that a *bahu* gets a new ‘position’ she means that being a *bahu* brings with it an automatic higher status in a hierarchy.

from any responsibility whatsoever". That's because, as Vishwanath Agarwal tells Parvati in the very first episode of *Kahaani*, the *bahu* is the thread that binds every member of the family even though they may be different from each other. The joint family not only needs to be maintained but the responsibility for maintaining it rests almost exclusively on the *bahu*. The anxiety around the preservation of the joint family is real even if the joint family is not a sociological fact. As Uberoi (1994), says the joint family is certainly a "deeply held traditional *value* that continues to provide the underlying principles of household-building strategies in South Asia" (p.327). For the Samiti, though, there is an even greater charge to preserving the joint family. Samiti ideology holds that the Hindu nation has been weakened and in need of rediscovering the fundamental principles of Hindutva, and it has largely been because the ideal family has been destroyed by intermarriage (Bacchetta,2004).

The anxiety about the break up of the joint family is certainly not new in India: Uberoi (1994) argues that this anxiety has been present in the public sphere for at least a century and a half in India. Popular cultural depictions centered around this anxiety are also a dime a dozen, especially in Bollywood cinema. While the introduction of this anxiety as a central motivating engine of the K-serial plots is certainly quite novel in the context of Indian television, what makes it even more noteworthy is that Bollywood movies had largely discarded these kinds of plot lines by the late 1980s- early 1990s. *Hum Aapke Hain Koun*, even though it depicts a joint family, achieves the

“affirmation of joint family ideals...through the constant erasure of the set of factors that characteristically puts the joint family under strain” (Uberoi, 1994, p. 328), such as tension between brothers or between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law. But most of all, what is truly unique in the K-serials is that it affirms the joint family ideal in a milieu that is overtly and obviously Hindu, thus negating the key advantage that a film like *Hum Aapke Hain Koun* has: the ability to cut across barriers since “unlike class, caste, and religion, the family manifests as an especially unifying institution throughout Indian society” (Uberoi, p.339). (As we have seen in chapter 4, this maneuver is only possible because the political economy of television dictated that Muslims and other minorities could be ignored as consumers). Further, also uniquely, the K-serials advocated that the maintenance of the joint family is almost exclusively the result of the actions of the *bahus* of the family.

This emphasis on the *bahu* as the nodal point of all family relationships is reiterated again and again through the two serials. She must sublimate her own desires to those of the family; in fact, in her early days in her new home, she must sublimate her own personality to that of the family. Rarely in the 110 odd episodes analyzed for this dissertation do we encounter a any situation where the good *bahu* does anything for her *personal* fulfillment. Everything she does is for the family. This sublimation of the individual within the family is considered to be the mark of a good *bahu*, one who has *sanskar*. A remarkable sequence in episode 20 of *Kahaani* makes clear

just how strong this sublimation is supposed to be. In it, Parvati holds out her hand to a *pandit* cum astrologer to read her palm. This is all that he says:

The lines on your hand show that you are a *bahu* who binds her *khandaan* together. The calmness of the moon; and the friendliness of the *guru* are both in you: these qualities will put a stop to the fragmentation of your family. Your hands will forever bring about the well-being of your family. Make sure that you keep these qualities clasped in your palm.

Parvati is thrilled to hear these words. As the *pandit* is speaking she beams and smiles coyly. At the end of his words she promises herself that she is never going to let her family disintegrate. Here we have a situation where even the lines of her palm can tell the future of Parvati the *bahu*, but have nothing to say about Parvati the individual.

Bahus are expected to stoically bear this burden of keeping the family together. Even in the face of relentless humiliation from her mother-in-law and sister-in-law, it is Sonali who urges her husband Tushar to not react against his own family: “ My grandmother says that whichever home a daughter goes to, she should go like water shaping herself to fill whichever vessel she is poured into...” (A similar metaphor is used in episode 9 of *Kyunki* when the priest says that it is the duty and responsibility of every girl that she mould herself to fit her in law’s home). In the next episode of *Kahaani*, Sonali again restrains Tushar by stating, “My sister-in-law [i.e. Parvati] says that if after marriage you embrace your new home so tightly that each object, each voice and each breath there becomes your own, you will soon see that no one will seem alien, and your mother-in-law will become like

your mother, father-in-law your father, *nanad* [husband's sister] like your own sister and *dewar* [husband's younger brother], your own younger brother." If there was any doubt as to authorial intent after the attribution of this advice to Parvati (the ideal *bahu*), the background music removes it here, as a female voice and a flute borrows from Bollywood musical tropes to indicate approval. Her husband Tushar also remarks approvingly, "How practical the thinking of your *bhabhi* is!" Five episodes later, Sonali offers further reasoning for why she is still resolute in the face of even further insults from her in-laws: "One day everything will become alright, everyone will start to understand each other and home will become heaven. And if that is the case, can't we suffer a bit for that". As Hansen (1994) says, "Forgetting oneself, discovering the pleasure of giving and serving rather than receiving, nurturing the virtues of forgiving and compassion, and putting the service of the nation above all else are the main themes in the ideology of the Sevika Samiti" [the women's wing of the Sangh] (p.87).

But all of the responsibility for turning home to heaven is vested in the *bahu*. She must be patient and understanding, and she has to embrace her new family as her own. The family that she has married into seems to have no obligations whatsoever. Despite this, the weight of the safeguarding the family's prestige rests with the *bahu*. As a result, every now and then we hear discussions about how the *khandaan* is going to be affected as a result of the *bahu*'s actions. *Khandaan*, as we noted above, is sometimes used interchangeably

with *parivar* to mean family, even though a closer translation is 'dynasty'. In general, and in the way the word is used in the show, it always has an externalized aspect to it, and the prestige of the *khandaan* is tied up with the *bahu*. In episode 37 of *Kyunki*, both Mihir and his mother are aghast that Tulsi might want to go to the home of Kiran's prospective bride Aarti to decorate her hands with *mehndi*.⁶⁰ Mihir tells her Tulsi that she shouldn't do so because she is now the eldest *bahu* of the Virani *khandaan* and her *sthaan* (i.e. place or status) and *samman* (i.e. respect) are of a different order now. Even though Tulsi protests that her applying *mehndi* on Aarti's hands has no connection with the status of the *khandaan*, she does not eventually go.

In fact, the K-series are fraught with anxiety about dissolving families: and in almost every case, it is the *bahus* who are vested with all of the responsibility for keeping the family together. Good *bahus* like Parvati accept this as a near divine duty while bad *bahus* like Pallavi actively conspire to break up families, often from within. Men, in that sense, are not really capable of breaking up families. They might stray, they might have extramarital affairs, or even children from extramarital affairs, but these do not threaten the family. In fact, these children from extramarital affairs are brought into the fold of the family by good *bahus* like Tulsi; and the straying husbands usually forgiven for the good of the family. Sonali suffers all kinds of humiliation without protest as she does not want to be the person

⁶⁰ Henna decorations that are applied on the hands of North Indian women during weddings

responsible for causing a broken family. The reasoning runs something like this: a *bahu* should be willing to have the forbearance of Job lest it lead to friction in the family which will in turn cause the family to fragment. So her silent and *passive* assent to her own mistreatment is considered as an *active* method of keeping the family together; and keeping the family together is keeping the nation together, at least as far as the Samiti is concerned. (This is also the logic that certain scholars like Munshi, 2010, also mirror.)

If Hindu nationalism has always given primacy to the creation of the Hindu nation, within it the Samiti believes that the institution upon which the nation is based is that of the Hindu family. As Tanika Sarkar (1991) argues:

Much of the Samiti's activity is then informal and directed at constructing an ideal; totalitarian RSS family. The concept of expansion is a family-by family, mind-by-mind, building up of the Hindu nation—an incredibly patient, long-term strategy. It is, to stretch a concept of Gramsci, a form of hegemony built up on a molecular model (p.2060).

The discourses of marriage exhibited by the K-serials have huge overlaps with those of the Samiti, in particular the idea that a woman's self "implies not just the individual self but also family, society, nation, religion and culture [and is thus] relational, and merged in other (always bi-gendered) entities" (Bacchetta, 2005, p. 112). The *bahu* is forever anchored to her family (*parivaar*), she is responsible for maintaining the prestige of the family in society, she is the embodiment of religiosity and above all she is the repository of culture and tradition (*sanskar*).

This emphasis on the family comes directly from the brain behind the K-serials- Ekta Kapoor. According to her, “The one subject which holds eternal interest for *Indians* is the family—every *Indian* family is bound by traditions, festivals, etc., and every family tends to celebrate occasions with relatives...’ (Munshi, 2010, p. x, emphasis added). This Indian family, Ekta argues, is what she depicts on her shows. But the representation of the family in the K-serials is very clearly urban, upper caste joint Hindu family. For Ekta, therefore, the normative *Indian* family is this very specific form of a Hindu family. Not also what is interesting in this formulation by Ekta: there is no mention of any element of society that is not tied by kinship bonds. And obviously, then, there is no space for religious minorities, given the rare occurrence of inter-religious marriage in India. Equally, there is no space for sisterhood or friendship either.

The Absence of Friendship. Across the length and breadth of the K-serials, we simply do not hear or see anything about the friends Tulsi or Parvati may have. There are no instances when these characters share their sorrows or joys with close friends. In fact, in the first fifty episodes of *Kyunki* there is no mention of even a single friend of Tulsi’s (other than Mihir, with whom she is childhood friends) but this is not articulated as a problem. As Tulsi herself reminds him after their marriage, “We have become husband and wife, but we are still friends”. Nor do these serials depict in any great detail the spaces within domesticity where feminine rituals are directly counterposed to the strictures of Brahminical or Sanskritic rituals. The serials

therefore place the bonds of kinship, especially those derived through marriage, above the bonds of friendship.

Friendship is particularly unimportant in *Kyunki* but in episode 10 of *Kahaani*, though, we suddenly get an inkling that it might actually be significant. A dramatic turn of events takes place when Parvati, acting quite contrarily, refuses to inaugurate a new floor of the show room that her father-in-law owns. She suggests that this is because she has a prior commitment to meet with a group of nine friends at the house of a friend named Rama. When her husband Om suggests that this would embarrass or hurt her father-in-law, Parvati flares up because it was just this once in the year that she had made plans with friends. But the fact that an adult woman makes plans to meet her friends only *once* a year is not considered unusual. Even more, we learn a couple of episodes later that there were in fact no plans that Parvati had made to go out with friends: it was all a ruse to keep hidden from her family that she had possibly developed a malignant tumor. The family is what she lives for and all that she truly needs, and she dissembled only to keep them from being pained.

This emphasis on the family also came from the producers and marketers working in Star Plus. The family became central not only to the narratives of the shows but also in marketing and promotional efforts that Star Plus carried out to push these shows. A key marketing innovation was the creation of a televised awards show where the *winners would be the characters and not the actors playing these characters* (Unnikrishnan, 2003). The show was named The

STAR Parivaar Awards (The STAR Family Awards) and the award categories were Favourite Son, Favourite Daughter-in-Law, Favourite Mother-In-Law, Favourite Paternal Grandfather and so on. The communication and theme song for these awards spelt out the family thematic clearly, proclaiming that the viewer and the characters on Plus soaps belonged to one undivided family. “We had come as guests once,” the lyrics went, “Little did we know that we would become one of your family. And the relationships we depicted on screen would be formed with you as well....”

The depictions of the nuclear family with its ‘modern’ women on Indian television was thrown into the ash can of history. A new definition of a very *Indian* kind of modernity was being put forward in the depictions of the *bahu*. This decline (and eventual disappearance) of the nuclear family and the resurgence of the joint family on Indian television was taking place (as we have seen) in an environment where the joint family was being celebrated as a bulwark against both the supposed excesses of the emancipated woman and the purportedly rampaging Muslim population growth. The representation of this Hindu joint family on television is, I argue therefore, a political act created in the cauldron of vicious Hindutva propaganda around Muslim families. But we have also seen that this joint family was considered by the BJP to be the fundamental socioeconomic unit. Yet, women members of the family are not encouraged to contribute economically to the family. Their roles are rigidly defined and heavily politicized, drawing again from Hindutva discourse.

Women: Work, Ambition, Aspiration

As Parvati describes in episode 14, when she was married into the Agarwal family her father-in-law had gifted her an hourglass, and told her that she was henceforth be responsible for the family's present and future. But even if he did not state it explicitly, it was clear that he was referring to her role *inside* the home, and only inside the home. In fact, it is taken for granted that the woman's place is above all inside the home. In these serials, men are shown dressing for work, setting off for work, at work, and talking about work at home; and if not work, education that is a stepping stone to success at work. In *Kahaani*, for example, we hear Ajay, the third Agarwal son talking passionately about his dreams of becoming a highly successful lawyer. A significant plot point in *Kyunki* revolves around Mihir's cousin Hemant following in Mihir and Kiran's footsteps and going to 'America' to study, and Daksha feeling aggrieved about it as she wants her son Chirag to be sent there. Yet, when it comes to the women, we hear absolutely nothing. Even if we don't consider the married *bahus* of various generations, even the women or girls of the same generation as the Mihirs and Kirans and Hemants and Ajays seem to have no career aspirations—or if they have it is considered to be subordinate to their main role of becoming *bahus*. So we have the sisters in the Agarwal and Virani families either already married when the show starts (Chhaya in *Kahaani* and Pragya in *Kyunki*) or getting married within the first fifty episodes (Suhasi in *Kyunki* and Sonali in *Kahaani*).

It is also taken for granted that once they are married, they will devote all their energies to shaping themselves to fit into the in-law's home. The question of working outside that home arises even less. For example, in *Kahaani*, Sonali's *saas* Pammi continually expresses her contempt for her *bahu* who is supposedly from a *khandaan* of lower status. But one of the markers of this low status is the fact that Sonali decided to cook a meal for her in-laws. As Pammi says, a *bahu* from a *khandaan* of equal status would not have made dinner "like a cook"; if at all she did step into the kitchen it would be to at most to make dessert. This scene is constructed so that the viewer has full sympathy with Sonali and not her *saas*. That is, the serials fully approve of the *bahu* making food for the entire family. In fact, not taking an interest in cooking, and that too for the whole family is considered a mark against a *bahu*. In a number of episodes of *Kyunki* the second generation *bahus* Savita, Daksha, and Gayatri (who, remember, are also the *saases* for Tulsi's generation) express their disinclination to get into the kitchen, sometimes even lying to get out of it. The serial makes it abundantly clear that these are not acts to be commended. The fact that Payal cannot cook or does not express any desire to cook is another black mark against her. As with many other things, food and its preparation too are symbols of Indian culture and related to a *khandaan*'s tradition. When Gayatri complains about having to prepare food for the entire family one day, she argues that the domestic helps were of not much use since they could at most cut the vegetables. She is the one who would have to prepare the food

using recipes according to the family's tradition; and she is the one who would have to make the *roti* (round Indian flatbread.) Again, Dadaji praises Baa saying, "You have created a miracle: you have inculcated the *sanskar* of eating *gur papri* [a sweet made of jaggery] in this hamburger, hotdog, pizza eating generation." Food here becomes one of the ways of expressing anxieties around globalization; and preparing it at home by the *bahu* is a way in which those anxieties are resisted, or at least managed.

But if the *bahu* is to prepare food for a joint family that could easily have as many as ten members or more, it clearly is in itself a full time job. By definition, then, the *bahu* does not have the liberty to have a full time professional career. The key issue here is of course one of choice. Being a *bahu* is not presented as a choice that one might choose to exercise or not. *Every girl*, we are told, *becomes a bahu one day*.

This does not mean, though, that *bahus* are depicted as lacking education or that unmarried women in the family do not go to college. They very much do: otherwise it would be discriminatory even in the worldview of the serials. Tulsi, for example, is shown as capable of teaching Chirag college level physics. Yet, never again in the serial is there any discussion of what Tulsi does with her education. For the most part, the education of the women rarely extends to anything other than a basic college degree, and certainly not a professional degree like an MBA that the third generation men (e.g. Mihir) pursue.

In fact, we never get to hear about what the college going girls in *Kyunki* and *Kahaani* study; or what they are interested in, apart from some sketchy descriptions of Sejal's interest in theatre. We never hear what degrees, if any, the second generation women might possess. The question is not one of whether or not homemaking is not complex or demanding work: it clearly is. The issue is that as far as the K-serials are concerned there seems to be no question of exercising a choice to become a home maker. It is a given that women will be defined by their marriages and their *bahuness*. We do occasionally hear of dreams that a *bahu* has outside of her family—but not from Tulsi or Parvati. But usually, the *bahu* who has dreams or aspirations of a personal nature is represented as a bad person, if not actively evil.

Gayatri, one of the second generation *bahus* from *Kyunki*, is shown to possess classical dance skills and as dreaming of opening a dance school of her own. She lacks the funds to do so; her husband is unwilling to ask for funds from his father and in the world of *Kyunki* it is inconceivable that she raise the money herself. In a convoluted (and scarcely credible) plot point that follows, Savita convinces Gayatri that a way to make her dream come true was to ensure that Tulsi's marriage to Mihir breaks up. Once that happened, Payal would become Mihir's wife, and Payal's father would be happy to fund Gayatri's dance school. So eager is Gayatri for her dreams to be realized, that she is easily manipulated by her *jethani* Savita into

maligning Tulsi's reputation. Ambition in a woman has almost inevitably led to evil.

In fact, these serials repeatedly emphasize that any ambition in a woman that is of a personal nature is not just undesirable but to be actively avoided. Any woman who actually works outside of the home is rarely, if ever, portrayed as a good human being. We do not see women as the equal of men in the workplace; and if we do that woman is either presented in a non-managerial/executive role or she is represented as a bad person. The serials believe that career aspirations on the one hand and maternal instincts (or familial responsibilities) cannot reside in the same individual. So Tulsi's nemesis Payal works outside of the home, albeit in her father's organization, but she is conniving, manipulating, and dishonest. When she is shown in a corporate setting in the Virani office conference room, Payal is dressed in a white suit and red shirt that visually recalls suits worn by villains in Bollywood movies of the 1970s. The scene depicts Payal's apparent magnanimity in letting go of a tender that the Malhotras had won, but the show is not charitable towards the character at all. If anything, the viewer is constantly led to believe that the only way Payal could have won the tender is by underhanded or corrupt means. Not only does the serial deny Payal her humanity, but it also suggests that the only way in which this woman might be successful in business is by deviating from the straight and narrow.

Another character (albeit less significant) who works outside the home is the Agarwal daughter Sonali's *saas* Pammi—the rare *saas* who believes that women shouldn't actually cook in the home (and is disapproved of by the script). She is viciously mean to Sonali, constantly reminding her of her supposedly lower family status. Pammi also lacks maternal instincts. When Sonali's husband Tushar explains why he had left his home in Delhi and moved to Bombay, all he needs to say is "In front of me was not my mother, but a businesswoman." No clarification or further exposition is required, and none is offered by the show: it is taken as self-evident that "mother" and "businesswoman" are clearly not roles that can coexist successfully in the same individual. Even if women are shown as having to work in the world outside the home, it is never in a profession that they have pursued for themselves. At most, they are allowed to work in the family business, and as an emergency measure geared *ultimately at keeping the family together*. But even this does not last too long in the life of the serials, partly because the audience apparently refuses to accept the idea of women outside the home. When a plot point in *Kahaani* required Parvati to step out and take over the reins of the family business, it was met by viewer disapproval. As Sakshi Tanwar, the actress playing Parvati says:

Could you believe that women who met me said 'Oh, you shouldn't be going to office, then who will look after the home?' This is the mindset. And that's where the market comes in. We realised that people don't like it when Parvati is going to office, so then it had to be changed. She is not going to the office, she's looking after the house. People don't accept it, people don't want to see these changes (Tanwar, quoted in Ohm, 2007, p.334).

This seems to be the working out of the contradictions we had noted among Gokulsing's (2004) respondents where they both agreed that women should be empowered yet disapproved of the fact that women might take decisions without consulting their husbands and in-laws. But these restrictions on the women of the K-serials underscores once again the Samiti version of female empowerment (if at all we can call it that), which preaches understanding and sacrifice in the interest of preserving the family structure. This is an illusory view of power, as it severely restricts and often completely strips women of agency.

In this eternal structure, women don't really work unless compelled to by financial pressures. For example, women activists of the Hindu right tell Hansen (1994) that while women do need to work for money in contemporary times, if the family does not need money there is no need for women to work. In the worldview of the Hindu right then, women do not work for their own fulfillment or developing subjectivity outside of the home, but they do it out of compulsion. And so on the K-serials, women do not work outside of the home. If they are sometimes called to work, it is usually in the family business and that too because the male workers are absent from the picture (usually due to contrived plot reasons).

Reconciling Tensions, or Having Their Cake and Eating it Too

The fact that viewers in the early 2000s might have disapproved of the representation of women at work is intriguing when we consider that there are no reports of such viewer disapproval around depictions

of women at work on television of the 80s and 90s. Renu, Rajani, and Kalyani (from those 80s Doordarshan shows) were often successful in the outside world and their identities were constituted not merely by their status in the family unit but their roles as office workers, social activists, and policewomen respectively. Nor were the characters in the shows of the early C&S era (1991-1999) bound as rigidly by the strictures of tradition or the walls of the family home as much as the heroines of the K-series. Even a perfunctory look at these serials reveals certain actions by women which become unimaginable in the era of the K-series: Tara was shown smoking and drinking without apology (which managed to shock a legion of puritanical TV viewers); Saavi was shown leaving her husband to live in with her lover; Priya and Pooja are able to find their own identities distinct from their philandering husbands.

While one can argue that these are indeed not more than limited indicators of agency, Mankekar (2004) has suggested that even these depictions were quite radical for Indian popular culture, especially considering the fact that the traditional Indian family remained central to the narrative of contemporaneous Bollywood film. She goes on to argue that the emergence of the supposedly traditional Indian family form in the K-series constituted a backlash to these depictions of desire and independence in the Indian woman. But there are other factors to be considered in addition to this. For one, to this must be added the understanding of audiences that we have discussed earlier. We know that while the shows of the early satellite era with their

radical depictions of womanhood, and the shows of middle satellite era with their not-so-radical depictions of womanhood took place on the same channels, *they were not directed at the same audiences*. Or at least, the audiences that were to be the prime targets had changed within the television industry as the early satellite period drew to a close. This was a process that articulated seamlessly with the revised understanding of consumption in which a consumer could be found as much at the bottom of the pyramid as at the top.

But this radical change in the depictions of family and womanhood comes at a cost, and results in a tension that is quite apparent in the serials. At the time that the serials were launched, there were more and more women entering the workplace. As a proportion, the greatest number of women joining the workforce were from the lowest socioeconomic strata, affected most severely by the turmoil caused by neoliberal market doctrines (Gupta, 2009). But as we have seen in chapter 4, these were also the women who were being targeted by marketers using the bottom of the pyramid strategy, and also consequently by Star Plus, whose executives were peddling ‘aspirations’ clothed in ‘middle class values.’ We have seen that these ‘middle class values’ were, in fact, Brahminical values. That is, women from the lower economic strata who are out of the home for economic necessity are being told that the place of the *bahu* is at home. At the same time they are also being introduced to commodities in the form of saris, jewelry, furniture, and objets d’ art, as we have seen above. The consequence, one would imagine, would be a greater pressure to

conform to the norms of *bahudom* peddled in the serials, but without the support structures—a living wage, childcare, limited working hours, etc.—required to make that conformity possible. This introduces some tension between a worldview that suggests that the woman's place is at home, and that celebrates the “traditional” view of marriage and family; and the sociological reality of women in the world outside their home. This tension introduces momentary ripples of interrogation in a world that is usually as calm and pre-ordained as can be. We can see that expressed in the contradictory messages about women that occasionally emerge within the serials.

Complexity and contradiction in the K-serials. In order to speak to these women, the message in the K-serials about femininity was contradictory, imbuing the female characters with agency from time to time. Thus we see a number of instances in the serials of women raising their voices against patriarchal norms; and the relationships between men and women exhibit surprising levels of surface equality at times. For example, women are very much allowed to chastise or berate their husbands. For example, when it has been resolved that something Mihir and the family were blaming Tulsi for was not her fault, she gives a rather soul stirring speech:

When we do the *fera* [circumambulation around the fire], the husband vows to protect his wife and to uphold her respect. And the wife promises to share her life with her husband. The two vow by the holy fire to have faith in each other; and you broke those vows so easily....But I can say with confidence that if it were me in your place; and the entire family was against you, I would have stood by you; because I had complete faith in you. But to rebuild the trust lost between us will take a lot of time.

Yet, this speech does not lead to any substantial change in their relationships. Within a couple of episodes (a mere blip in soap opera time), things are back to their usual state; with the motor of the plot being driven again by the politics of the family rather than the issue of loss of trust in a married couple.

A similar instance of Parvati challenging her husband occurs when she declines to inaugurate the new floor of the Agarwal family mall. The conversation that takes place between her and Om is as follows:

Om: Do the wishes of this family count for nothing in front of your friends?

Parvati: And what about my wishes? Can't I go anywhere on my own volition?

Om: You have never talked like this till today?

Parvati: What do you want? That I stop saying anything? I become dumb? Look, I am sorry, but that is a prior commitment.

Om: That's fine, then, but we will wait for you.

Parvati: I'll try, but I cannot promise.

On the surface it seems that Parvati is chafing at the bonds of family and expressing a desire to break free. Om's countenance when he says "that's fine" is not necessarily angry or aggressive; it is one of genuine puzzlement that Parvati seems to be doing something quite contrary to her personality. The show goes on to establish that Parvati does not ultimately arrive at the showroom. But the fact that she doesn't, i.e. the fact that she prioritizes friends over family, becomes a

mini moment of crisis with everyone in the family wondering if she has any care for the *izzat* of the family. But this mini act of rebellion against the bonds of family are soon shown to be completely illusory: the only reason that Parvati was acting in the way she was acting was because she was trying to spare the family pain from the knowledge of knowing she had developed a possibly malignant tumour.

So, every time the serials make gestures to female empowerment, it also establishes that this empowerment is nowhere close to complete. This is what I mean by a 'having your cake and eating it too' strategy. Take for example, the series of events that are depicted when two of the young girls of the Virani family, Sejal and Suhaasi, are late in returning home. They were ostensibly out shopping with Payal, Mihir's fiancée, but had then gone on to the disco, not returning even though it was well past midnight. We see the whole family congregated in the living room arguing about what to do. When someone suggests informing the police, the patriarch Govardhan Virani is livid, suggesting that this would besmirch the *izzat* of the family, especially when the news would spread from the police to the media. When the girls eventually return and Mihir offers to drop Payal home, she refuses, saying (in English), "I am not a baby." She asserts that one a.m. is not too late and she is accustomed to returning home by herself that late at night. This is met with glances of severe disapproval by everyone in the family. Clearly, women are not supposed to be out on their own at night. This is further underlined when Sejal and Suhaasi's mothers, Gayatri and

Daksha respectively, are shown berating their daughters. While a part of the discussion is about their irresponsibility in not informing people at home that they would be late, the majority of the discussion is around the implications of young women being out at night. As Gayatri says, “It is not the tradition of the Virani family that young girls are out gallivanting till late in the night.” Yet, when Sejal’s father J.D. comes into the room, he says, “I accept there is nothing wrong with going to the disco. But you should at least inform us at home.” Similarly, when the girls go to Mihir to apologize for their ‘errors,’ Mihir says, “I do not believe that there is anything wrong in going to the disco; or that women should not go out alone late at night or not feel free; but whatever you do you should take your parents into confidence when you do it”.

Two things stand out from this. One, that women are purportedly free to do whatever they want to do, but only as long as they have the consent of the family in doing so. The other aspect that stands out is that the women (Gayatri and Daksha) are the ones who are opposed to the indicators of freedom (such as going to the disco) whereas the men (Mihir and JD) have a nuanced (though still ultimately patriarchal) take on it. That being said, even as the shows uphold patriarchy in almost all its forms, there are every now and then contradictory moments which show the characters straddling ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity.’

In serials that are so invested in marriage and family, it is no surprise the mechanics of the marriage process itself are often held up

to the light. These are not serials that explicitly claim that marriages not arranged by the family (i.e. “love marriages”) are doomed to failure. Technically speaking, the marriage between Tulsi and Mihir is a love marriage. But it is one that has the explicit approval and consent of Baa and Dadaji, and the immediate acceptance by the males in the Virani family. The only opposition to it comes from the three *saas*-es. That is, even this romantic relationship has an imprimatur of approval from the family, especially since Tulsi is a girl who personifies *sanskar*.

To be fair to the producers of these shows, though, the initial relationship between Mihir and Tulsi, the development of their relationship from friendship to love, and the obvious chemistry between them is depicted with a lot of economy and sensitivity. There are moments of playfulness such as the exchange between Mihir and Tulsi in episode 24:

Mihir: After marriage, it is the duty of the wife to order the husband.

Tulsi: After marriage, it is the duty of the husband to listen to such orders.

Or in episode 26, we see Mihir wholeheartedly agreeing with Tulsi’s statement, “We may have become husband and wife, but we should not forget that we are still friends.”

Yet, within this, it is never unclear that the basic norms of patriarchy are not being questioned. It is easy to miss the transition, but we see that after marriage, Tulsi’s mode of address towards Mihir

changes. Whereas before marriage, she would address Mihir in the second person as the familiar '*tum*,' after the marriage she starts addressing him in the second person as the far more formal, polite and respectful '*aap*'. Equally Tulsi makes it clear again and again that while she might have married Mihir, her world now encompassed not just him, but his whole family. Additionally, women on the K-series no longer seem to have any erotic desire, unlike characters such as Saavi on *Hasratein*, the show that started just a couple of years before the K-series. Men have affairs, and they transgress, but they are almost always welcomed back by the *bahu* in the interests of the family. The *bahus* on these shows of the middle satellite era (2000-2007) are completely desexualized, marking a 180 degree turn from the shows of the early satellite era (1992-2000). Their lives are to revolve around the family; their bodies and their sexualities are considered irrelevant to this. The only women with overt sexual desire are again and again presented as bad women.

When it comes to romantic relationships, there is certainly protest from the family at times, especially when the lover in question is not from the same community, or more pertinently not from the same social class (especially in the case of Tulsi). However, it is a given that all such relationships must necessarily end in marriage: otherwise it can besmirch the reputation of the girl. More often than not, though, the 'having your cake and eating it too' principle kicks in with the insistence that marriages arranged by the family are marked by deep love between the couple. For one, the depiction of the process

of marriages getting arranged is almost always in the idiom of romantic love. In episode 50 of *Kyunki*, the first meeting between Suhaasi and her prospective groom Rakesh is shot and composed in ‘meet cute’ style (the cinematic trope in which a romantic couple first meet in an overly contrived or comic circumstances. See, for example, Ebert, 1999). They both try to sit at the same time; accidentally touch each other lightly and apologize simultaneously; they start to speak at the same time and stop awkwardly; and while this is happening the background music here emphasizes romance, borrowing from well known romantic songs from Bollywood film. Yet the power imbalance is marked. Rakesh admits that he has “seen” six girls before—and here “seeing” means meeting the girl at her home in the presence of her parents and deciding on the basis of that one meeting whether to marry or “reject” her. Suhaasi even ribs him gently for already having “rejected” six girls, and tells him that she needs some time to decide. Yet, the moment the two of them are back in the living room where everyone in the family is gathered together, she admits to her cousin Kiran that she likes him.

In the worldview of the serials—and admittedly in the worldview of many Indians—this instantaneous liking (and even loving) is possible because the *khandaans* are similar. In fact, love between a married couple is depicted at its zenith when the marriage has been arranged by the family. Om and Parvati are shown to have a deep current of love running between them; and the serial rarely misses an opportunity to let us know that Parvati was chosen for Om by Om’s

mother. Om had no say in the matter. Yet, their relationship is one of very great love. The serials insist that the meeting of minds has very little to do with the individuals themselves, but to do with the families. As a Brahmin priest in a scene in *Kahaani* exclaims, “If the *kundali* [horoscopes, specifically birth charts], *khandaan* [family], and *pasand* [liking] sync, worldviews will automatically sync”. In order, then, fate, as pre-ordained in the religious horoscope, family, and a modicum of liking for each other are more important than a common worldview or attitude towards the world for a marriage to work. If the horoscope and the family can together ensure that an arranged marriage is full of romantic love, why then bother with the dangers of transgressive romantic love?

The Wisdom of the Males

We have already touched upon the *pujari* as the fount of Brahminical wisdom. But in general, males seem to be more grounded and rational than women in the K-series—with the possible exception of the protagonist Tulsi or Parvati. While women for the most part are plotting, conniving, and railing against each other, the men are the oases of calmness and counsel. In almost every male-female pairing in the K-series, especially in the second generation, the male voice is the wiser voice. This starts right at the top with Dadaji and Baa in *Kyunki*. In episode after episode, we see Dadaji counselling and dispensing advice to Baa. Time and again, Baa throws herself into a tizzy about something and Dadaji counsels her. In episode 43, for example, when she suggests that an evil eye must have caused the problems of the

family, Dadaji suggests that what's evil is the wandering mind of humans, and that to attain control on one's mind is a great achievement. Or again, when she complains about her own *bahus* not treating her well, Dadaji suggests that when a *bahu* becomes *saas* then the *saas* needs to start easing up on bonds of family and affection; otherwise she would keep suffering. But it is not only Dadaji who is depicted as a wiser male figure than his partner.

In most of the families we see on screen, the male is generally depicted as having greater wisdom than the female. So, while Tushar's mother in *Kahaani* refuses to accept her into the home, it is his father who is the voice of reason. (This is, however, complicated by the depiction of Tushar's father as unable to stand up to his wife.) Similarly, it is Payal's father who cautions reason and rationality while her mother is up in arms about imagined slights. The men can even be shouted at by their wives, or mocked for their failings (albeit in private) but in the end they almost always come out on top. Tulsi and Parvati are perhaps exceptions to this, but I would argue that patience and forbearance are the qualities for which Tulsi and Parvati are most celebrated in these serials; though they are certainly not depicted as being devoid of wisdom or sagacity.

Yet, men are generally depicted as being above the fray while their wives and daughters engage in all kinds of family politics. In fact almost without fail, women are the worst enemies of other women on the K-serials, consistently wreaking emotional violence on their sisters. Much of the plot in the first fifty episodes of *Kyunki* are driven

by women conspiring against other women. These serials locate the problems faced by women in general and *bahus* in particular in other women and in *saases*. Sometimes, the problem is with the generation of *saases* who have come of age during liberalization and getting too involved in material things, have forgotten their *sanskars*. At other times, the problem is with younger women of Tulsi's generation who do not have *sanskar* to start with. Obviously, locating the cause of women's problems in other women gives patriarchy a pass.

At its height, this wisdom of the male can even translate into violence with the approval of the show. While JD in *Kyunki* is depicted as a happy-go-lucky character and is often berated by his wife Gayatri for his lack of professional accomplishments, ultimately he is by far the sager individual in the relationship. The role he seems to serve in the serial is that of a *vidushak*: while an apparent object of laughter, he is more than a holy fool or a court jester, who takes life lightly but has deep reservoirs of wisdom. But at key moments, he can speak to his wife as rudely as he wants and in time even resort to violence. When it is discovered that his wife Gayatri had lied and connived to humiliate Tulsi, he is both embarrassed and livid and chastises her harshly. But when Gayatri asks him why his heart was going out so much for "that bitch", JD slaps her. After the slap, the camera is on him and we see that his expression is one of righteous anger; it is clear that the authorial voice is saying that she deserved it. That is, there are occasions when the man is in fact justified in using violence against the woman. With this kind of a worldview in place, it is hard

to commend the serials for actually depicting ‘strong women’ as Munshi (2010) argues the K-serials do.

Reading Agency in the K-serials

As I have shown the trajectory of representation of women on Indian television has parallels with the trajectory of women’s agency within Hindu nationalism. The transition from the independent minded, symbolically equal, not-coded-as-Hindu working woman Renu of *Yeh Jo Hai Zindagi* in 1984 to the complex, introspective, and ambitious Kalyani on *Udaan* in 1990 seems a natural progression. Even when we go from Kalyani in 1990 to Saavi of *Hasratein* in 1998, we can still sense some forward movement in depictions of female autonomy, even though Saavi (unlike Kalyani) is depicted in the traditional sari and is ultimately punished by the serial for her transgressive erotic desires. But we witness a regression in the depictions when we move from Saavi to Tulsi and Parvati in 2000. This seems to in some way parallel the ‘controlled emancipation,’ of Hindu nationalist women, when they were permitted to venture out into the world in the late 80s and early 90s, but were then encouraged to retreat into domesticity in the late 1990s.

Some recent scholarship however differs from the argument here. Munshi (2010) suggests that Tulsi and Parvati are ‘fighter[s] in the struggles against evil’ (p.193). However, the source of evil in many (if not all) cases is other women, and often women within the family. Munshi further contends that that ‘the unflinching, uncompromising capacity to suffer endlessly and follow the right moral path...even

when faced with familial displeasure-permits soap heroines [of the K-serials] to assume a strong and powerful position that, in fact, questions patriarchal authority' (p.217-18). Munshi here seems to be almost directly drawing from depictions of Hindu mythological women like Ram's consort Sita, a mythological exemplar of the perfect wife, commended for her capacity to suffer emotional pain in silence, staying true to her own moral compass, even while devoting her life to her husband, or Savitri, another such exemplar, whose devotion to her husband brought him back from the dead. In fact, more accurately, Munshi seems to be drawing from the Samiti construction of Sita. In this construction, Sita "evokes a sense of duty in her husband, is loyal to him [but] puts national interests above her personal interests and expects her husband to do the same" (Bacchetta, 2005, p.133). Thus, a space is opened up within which the wife can evaluate her husband and refuse to follow him unconditionally when he acts against the interests of the nation.

But patriarchy seems to be alive and well in India still despite years of such Sita and Savitri like behavior. If indeed this 'Sita syndrome'⁶¹ were so empowering, the country that ostensibly reveres Sita would perhaps still not feature in global surveys of gender experts as one of the five worst places for women. (See Bowcott, 2012). Throughout the K-serial episodes examined, women are shown as having responsibilities but very few commensurate rights. Leaving

⁶¹ I thank Deepa Kumar for this coinage.

aside the critiques of the liberal discourse of rights, it seems rather difficult for empowerment to exist in the absence of rights.

Munshi's argument is also ahistorical. Even if we assume that suffering fights patriarchy, why do the women on the K-serials not fight evil in the wider world like Rajani or Kalyani did on Doordarshan way back in the 80s and 90s? Why is patriarchy now fought only within the family? Strong as these women on the K-serials might be, even in the early years of the twenty first century they are not allowed to walk out on their families or on philandering husbands; they do not work outside the home in workplaces not owned by the family; or allowed to exist as beings with a sexual identity of their own. This is especially striking when one considers that a whole set of shows aired in the early satellite years just before the K-serials "showed women actively, sometimes aggressively, pursuing erotic pleasure and facing the social and emotional consequences of doing so" (Mankekar, 2004, p.422). One only need to compare these to Doordarshan shows like *Udaan* where the protagonist is a police officer and or even *Yeh Jo Hai Zindagi* where Renu works in an office to know why accusations of being regressive greeted the advent of the K-serials.

This reading of women on the K-serials as 'strong women' is at best incomplete. The fact that Tulsi and Parvati's strength, if any, is demonstrated in such a constricted sphere makes that strength extremely limited. But Tulsi and Parvati are not the only female characters on the show. When we examine the depictions of other women, who are shown as manipulative, conniving, materialist, and

amoral, the situation gets worse. It is only women who are thus depicted: the male characters on these serials—at least in these early episodes—do not fit any of these adjectives.

But equally importantly, reading strength off the gender discourse of the K-serials is only possible if one ignores the gender discourses of the Hindu right. I have shown that right wing Hindu nationalism has not in the recent past been inimical to the expressions of women's agency. Nor have the discourses of the Hindu right been shy of fostering and drawing on expressions of women's strength. At the same time, there is always a desire to control and tame that strength and prevent it from excessive manifestation. I find it difficult to concur with any assessment that tries to read feminist empowerment into the K-serials, when that empowerment is delineated only within the arena of domesticity. Even more problematically, the gender discourse of the Hindu right (which I have shown animates the gender discourse on the K-serials) is virulently opposed to Muslim women, who are seen either as weak and powerless or manipulators of Hindu men. Any discourse that sees any group of women this way is not a discourse of female empowerment, however much it may allow strength and agency in a particular context. The visual strategy of the K-serials then provides a counterpoint to the real life social strategy of the Rashtra Sevika Samiti. Historically, women from economically weaker sections have been particularly vulnerable to the appeal of the Samiti; and joining a Samiti *shakha* (or branch) has often been seen as means to women's

empowerment (Das 2008, p.161). Watching the K-serials, then, brings women together in an imagined Hindu community akin to participating in the *shakha* activities.

Not only that, Munshi even argues that these urban centric soap operas had a profoundly positive effect on rural women as well. As she says: “Are heroines like Tulsi and Parvati, bedecked in designer finery with expensive saris and jewelry, changing rural India? The short answer is yes”. Unfortunately, though, the reasoning that Munshi uses here is not exactly watertight. The paper that Munshi refers to here—Jensen & Oster (2007)—uses sample survey data from from villages in 5 states to argue that the advent of cable television has a statistically significant association with an improvement in women’s status. However, Jensen & Oster does not analyze data at the individual program level. Furthermore, two of the 5 states they study are in the south of India where the viewership of Hindi programs is rather limited; and two of the other states (i.e. Bihar & Haryana) have extremely low cable penetration. Finally, the television viewership measurement system in India did not—and the time of writing still does not—measure viewership in rural areas. That is, we have no way of knowing whether or not *Kyunki* and *Kahaani* were indeed the most popular cable television programs in these rural area, like they were in urban areas. Therefore it is simply not possible to state unequivocally that Tulsi and Parvati are changing rural India. If anything, Tulsi and Parvati were more instrumental in not changing India than changing it in a progressive direction.

Munshi (2010) has also argued that the retreat into the family on television was some kind of a “coping mechanism” (p.69) for those who had been affected by the loss of jobs engendered by the bursting of the dotcom bubble in 2001, as well as the economic gloom brought about by the September 2001 terrorist attacks. She argues that because of the pervasive economic gloom people were not out socializing any more and “people needed to have the solace of the family” (Kejriwal, quoted in Munshi, 2010, p.69). This solace was apparently provided both by the families on *Kyunki* and *Kahaani*, and by their own families as they all sat down together to watch these shows. The argument here by Kejriwal is profoundly ideological and perhaps intended to draw a mask over the banal *Hindutva* that she as a key creator must have been more than dimly aware of. First, these shows started and were successes right from their start in the year 2000, and the causal explanation invokes events that commenced in late 2001. Further, in 2001 – 02, only 520,000 people were employed in the software industry (NASSCOM, 2008) out of a total satellite TV viewership base of 181 million (‘C&S Closing Gap’). Even assuming that all of these 520,000 people lost their jobs and all of them then were glued to the K-series, it does not explain the huge viewership numbers delivered by these serials.

The Gendered Commodity of Television

There is another aspect of the K-series to consider and that brings us back to the question of what the commodity in the television system is. I have observed earlier that the viewership of the K-series

was not exclusively female, even though that the standard assumption is that soaps are mostly watched by women. According to TAM data, sometimes as much as 40% of the viewership of the K-serials in its first two years was male. But I would argue that in the Indian context the commodity of the TRPs is itself gendered. This is because of the reliance of the SEC system on the idea of the Chief Wage Earner (CWE). This reliance becomes problematic given the sheer inequality in the number of males and females in the workplace. The Census of India (2001) states that 45% of Indian men fall in the category of 'main workers' (i.e. non marginal) while only 14% of women do. In addition, there is still a huge pay disparity between men and women, with India ranking 111th in the world in pay equality as per the World Economic Forum (Tyson, Zahidi, & Hausman, 2008). These indicate that the CWE is going to be male for all practical purposes, even in the few dual income households that may form part of the TAM sample. So classifying a woman as belonging to a particular SEC becomes a way of classifying her father or husband or maybe son. The SEC system then has an inbuilt tendency to valorize patriarchy with the television viewing of working class women in particular being naturally underprivileged.

This has two implications. First, women who are already at home constitute the bulk of viewership of the K-serials, though by no means was it the case that working women were not watching the serials. Secondly, even though the audience measurement system measures the gender of the person watching, it determines the

economic value of that person watching through that of her father or husband. If it is bad enough, following Smythe (1977) that the work of viewing is being milked for value by capital, it is even worse that the work is going unacknowledged by the very extractors of that value. Since, as we have seen, it is the same SEC system that has long determined the marketers' approach towards hawking their products in India, it is no wonder that the biggest advertiser on the K-series was Unilever and the next nine were all fast moving consumer goods (FMCGs) companies such as Procter & Gamble and Johnson & Johnson. In 2003, for example, the most advertised products on prime time soaps were toilet soaps, shampoos, fairness creams, sanitary napkins, baby massage oil, hair oils, medicated skin treatment, etc. (AdEx India, 2003) - the very products which are often sachetized (to coin a neologism). Only the tenth, Nestle, could be minimally seen as even as a company that produces goods that assists in a woman's domestic labour. In other words, the woman is constantly interpellated by advertising voices that remind her to keep looking beautiful, work in the home and take care of the children. And the shows on which these ads played idealized the woman who would in fact stay within the walls of the home, looking resplendent in saris and jewelry. The viewer's own subjectivity is therefore narrowly circumscribed and limited to her role as wife and mother. Her position in a patriarchal society is reaffirmed in the view of television measurement systems. Thus, when measurement systems are geared

to assist a marketing system that valorizes numbers instead of valuable niches, it ends up reinforcing patriarchy that much more.

‘Modernity,’ ‘Tradition,’ ‘Controlled Emancipation’

The K-serials are, as we have seen, completely invested in *sanskar*. It repeatedly holds up rites and rituals as the way to live that *sanskar*. The serials have an ambivalent attitude towards the issue of the ‘modernity’ of women. On the one hand they suffer from a terrible anxiety about the ‘too modern’ woman. On the other hand, they do actively resist gender discrimination when it comes to education. Yet women’s education is not ever shown to count for anything in the K-serial world, and of certainly no use in the furtherance of a career outside the home. Even as women are asked to sublimate their selves to their families, they are not asked to stay silent in the family. But leaving the family is never presented as a choice.

We have seen how a lot of the discourse of the K-serials is constructed out of the discourse of Hindutva. Like in the case of many other right wing nationalisms, ideologues of Hindutva have tried to box women within specified gender roles, largely to do with the bearing and rearing of the good Hindu male. In general, Sangh ideologues rarely even wrote about women. It was only in 1980 that a chapter on women was added to a revised edition of *Bunch of Thoughts*. So, while Sangh ideology saw women in very constricted terms, Samiti ideology saw them as more direct agents in the establishment of the Hindu nation (Bacchetta, 2005). It represented women widely as “mothers, wives, sisters, daughters, citizens,

pracharikas [celibate volunteers], warriors and rulers” (p.132). Samiti ideology also provided space for the occasional woman to go outside the home, but this was allowed only in the service of the nation. When a significant number of women however were allowed to move out of the domestic into the public sphere in the era of spectacular Hindu nationalism, it created problems for the Samiti. The Samiti, then, as we have seen was at the forefront of the strategy of ‘controlled emancipation.’ On the K-serials, too, we see this kind of controlled emancipation. It seems, though, that on the K-serials there is more of ‘control’ and less of ‘emancipation.’ As we have noted, the women on the K-serials are shown outside the family home only on rare occurrences, and that too almost never without other members of the family. It seems that the K-serials have decided to very restrictively enforce the boundaries of movement of the married woman. The depiction of women on the K-serials is an attempt at placing in the public consciousness the argument that it was better to be ‘traditional,’ (read, having *sanskar*) than to be ‘too modern.’ It is ironical that a movement which is a product of capitalist modernity argues against ‘too much’ of it. But perhaps such ironies are only to be expected in a movement—the Hindu nationalist movement—that is premised on the creation of an imagined antiquity, an imagined history, and an imagined tradition.

Chapter 8

Conclusion

In *Banal Nationalism*, Michael Billig (1995) says, “A battle for nationhood is a battle for hegemony, by which a part claims to speak for the whole nation and to represent the national essence” (p. 28). It is perhaps just a little more obvious in the Indian context than in others, that this battle is an ongoing one. It did not stop when the Indian nation-state was created even though it might have looked like an armistice had been declared. As we have seen the post-independence battle was not as much for nationhood as for defining the contours of that nation—it was of course, in every way, a battle for Hindu nationalists who sought to establish the Hindu nation. This battle became as bloody as any other, involving violence, death, and destruction. By the late 1990s, though, to all appearances, the intensity of this battle seemed to be dying down as the BJP government came to power. The spectacular violence often a corollary to the project of Hindu nationalism seemed to have diminished in frequency and intensity (even though there was a horrific, though localized, outburst of it in the state of Gujarat in 2002). This, I have argued, contributed to the lack of recognition of Hindu nationalism’s increasing success in naturalizing the idea of India as a Hindu nation.

In this dissertation, I examined one of the most significant popular cultural forms of recent times as the site of reproduction of the Hindu nation. I showed how banal Hindu nationalism played out on the K-series in multiple ways. I showed, importantly, that what

was projected on the K-series was not just a Hindu nation, but in fact a Brahminical nation. That is, the K-series played an important role in the ongoing project of remaking of the Indian nation under the ideology of not just a particular religion, but of a specific sect of that religion. This was done by naturalizing the terms *sanskar* and *sanskriti* to connote Indianness. I showed also how the discourse of the K-series was significantly influenced by Hindutva discourse. That is, it wasn't just religiosity that we saw on the K-series, but religiosity in the service of the Hindu nation. I also showed how complete the exclusion of Muslims was on these serials, why that was historically a novel development, and why that was a problematic trend. What made these developments even more worrisome, of course, was the near complete absence of debate around either the religiosity or the banal Hindu nationalism of the serials. I also argued that the periodicity of the soap opera plays a significant role in facilitating the entrenchment of banal Hindu nationalism.

I have shown also that the gender discourses of the K-series are heavily influenced by Hindutva. The apparent complexity of this discourse is a result of the tension between two related, but not identical, discourses of gender—that of the RSS and its women's wing, the Samiti. Reading empowerment into these shows, I argued, was both limited and ahistorical. By reading as textual struggles which are extratextual, these arguments do a disservice to the enormously difficult struggle for equality in an incredibly patriarchal and often misogynistic country. I showed also how the anxieties around the

dissolution of the family and the subsequent cultural emphasis on the joint family was anchored both in an anti-Muslim rhetoric and in anxieties around the emancipation of women. It was influenced by the Samiti's understanding of the Hindu *family* as the basic building blocks of the Indian nation, rather than the Hindu *individual* that the Sangh thought to be so. Equally, the emphasis on the family around the late 1990s was related to the BJP's positioning of the family as not just the sociocultural building block of the nation, but even the economic building block. Alongside, I have also shown how the very commodity of television, TRPs, are actually gendered in the Indian context.

In fact, I have argued that the structural features of the audience measurement system was complicit in the arrival of these discourses on television. This arrival was facilitated by the developments taking place in the three spheres of marketing, television, and politics. In marketing, there was a shift of focus to the bottom of the pyramid consumer; on television, there was an accompanying shift in searching for 'mass' consumers, rather than 'class' consumers; in politics, the BJP was at the peak of its political success in the Hindi heartland. In effect, the search for audiences by all of these forces coalesced in the content of the K-series. The search for consumers by capital and the search for audiences by television were significantly influenced by the structural features of the key consumer targeting system in India—the SEC system. This lubricated the movement in the direction of banal Hindutva, rather than

otherwise. The state's role in this was critical too, in both compelling Star Plus to turn Hindi, as well as to aid its success by removing regulatory barriers that enabled it to invest resources in the kind of programming it did.

Television and the Secularism Debate

As is clear by now, the K-series were critical in the entrenchment of banal Hindu nationalism. Therefore, without a doubt, the K-series were not secular. It wasn't just a question of religious symbolism in the public sphere, which we have noted there has been no dearth of historically. Hansen (1999) has argued that the secular state in India tried to produce public spheres full of reason and science but they remained full of religious signs and practices, "packaged and represented as culture, making up a nationalized cultural realm represented as unpolitical, pure, and sublime" (p.53). According to him, the Indian concept of state secularism did not prevent religious manifestations in the public sphere but were "encouraged and revered as repositories of the cultural legitimacy that the state, routinely depicted as purely technocratic, could not generate" (p.54). One could argue, therefore, that banal Hindu nationalism on the K-series does not pose a significant problem. But I insist that the opposite is the case. As I have argued earlier, the desecularization of the cultural mainstream is by definition exclusionary, especially when that cultural mainstream is driven by the doctrines of the market. But also, banalization ensures that Hindu nationalism works in an insidious manner, therefore making it almost

irrefutable. The more Hindu nationalism enters the cultural mainstream, the more it is able to purvey its concept of the Hindu nation without alarm bells being raised. This means a chipping away of the foundations of secularism so as to render the term almost meaningless. It also accomplishes the task of centralizing Hinduism, and stripping it of the diversity that marks Hindu religious beliefs and practices.

The emergence of the K-series were followed shortly after by a resurgence of Hindu mythological serials (which were almost completely absent during the early satellite era) and after that by the establishment of a host of so-called spiritual channels, featuring Hindu gurus and sermons 24 hours of the day (Chakrabarti, 2012). I would argue that it is not coincidental that Hindu mythologicals made a return or these channels became prominent a couple of years after the emergence of the K-series. Evidence for direct links is hard to find, but it is not too hard to imagine that the profusion of religiosity on the K-series would have convinced producers that there was a market for serials exclusively devoted to Hindu gods and goddesses or persuaded entrepreneurs that there was a strong market for channels exclusively featuring the drones of Hindu gurus throughout the day. In fact, so successful was one of these gurus, Baba Ramdev, that by 2008 he had leapt into politics becoming a fairly significant political figure by 2010 (Chakrabarti, 2012). Unlike in the Doordarshan era, though, when *Ramayan* was followed by *Tales from the Bible* or *Alif-Laila*, this time there were no Christian mythologicals or tales of the

fantastic based on the Arabian nights on private television. However, there was the emergence of Christian and Islamic spiritual channels, which were not dependent on commercial advertising and could thus be set up independent of the Indian market's dictates (Thomas, 2010). But the net effect was a kind of televisual ghettoing, with television channels separated out by the audiences religion. I would argue that this trajectory entails a loss for any cherished aspirations of moving towards a common human understanding and a common humanity.

I would also suggest that this trajectory would have been impossible without the secularism debate taking the shape it did in India. Rather than a relentless defense of secularism, a number of Indian intellectuals and commentators decided to attack secularism itself. In their view, as we have seen, it was the state's attempts at promoting secularism that was as much of a problem as Hindu nationalists attempts to redefine the very idea of India. This liberal intellectual challenge to secularism was no doubt gleefully welcomed by Hindu nationalists who were also busy indicting the same state secularism, terming what had gone before 'pseudo-secularism.'

Because Hindu nationalism was not actively resisted with an even more muscular form of secularism, it was possible for banal Hindutva to infiltrate and dictate the contours of the most widely consumed cultural products in India of the last two decades. Given its eight year run, and five days a week for the most part of the run, the reach of the K-series would have been greater than the reach of even the most successful Bollywood movies of that period. That is, banal

Hindutva was the most widely disseminated ideology of the last two decades.

In her ethnographic study of Hindu nationalism, Mathur (2008) argues:

What is finally crucial to the success of the Hindu Right are not the pronouncements of its leaders on religion, nationhood, identity and religious minorities, but that these ideas are repeated by grandmothers and schoolchildren, by entrepreneurs and wage labourers, by farmers and bank tellers, in the elite drawing-rooms of the urban middle class and in tribal villages, by journalists and academics (p.6).

Private television, in its gloriously free market avatar, and in the shape of the K-series, enables the Hindu right to spread these ideas among grandmothers, schoolchildren, entrepreneurs, wage labourers, farmers, and bank tellers. Yet it does so stealthily, almost without the notice it attracted when it tried to spread these through the politics of spectacle.

It makes one wonder if Amartya Sen's (2005) caution that "the political abandonment of secularism would make India far more wintry than it currently is" was already too late. To take just one example of contemporary research into the efflorescence of things Hindu in the public sphere, Nanda (2010) outlines the emergence in the 2000s of what she calls the 'state-temple-corporate' complex. She shows how the Indian government, Hindu religious bodies, and corporate figures work in a tight nexus that actively promotes Hindu religiosity, filling the public sphere with more and more signs of Hindu-ness. It is all the more disturbing since this seems to be happening with very little protest from any powerful voices. While

Vasudevan (1993) might argue in the context of cinema that there still remains the possibility for mass culture produce from itself a radical practice, with Indian television that looks extremely unlikely to be the case.

The Contribution of this Work

I had suggested earlier that not too much attention has been paid in the study of Indian soaps to the form and structure of soaps. In this dissertation, though, I have argued that the everydayness of soaps became critical in banal nationalism to take root. Similarly, the open nature of the K-series and the siting of the serials in the milieu of the extended joint family had a dialectical relationship with each other. In this study I have made a contribution to the analysis of soaps by suggesting that they can play a critical role in the dissemination of particular ideologies, even when their subject matter ostensibly has nothing to do with those ideologies. That is, even when the soaps or serials might not be engaged directly with questions of nationalism (like in the Brazilian soaps analyzed by Porto, 2005 or the Egyptian dramas discussed by Abu-Lughod, 2005), they are still carriers of nationalist ideologies and do perpetuate nationalism. Of course, in this case, the nationalism is of the banal and not the spectacular nature, but that, as Billig (1995) would argue, is exactly the nationalism of established nation-states. In other words, by using the concept of banal nationalism, we find a bridge between the studies of soaps that look at the micropolitics of gender and those that look at macropolitics of national identity.

This study also extends the understanding of the role played by the closed or open structures of serials. For one, while Allen believes that closed serials are “inherently melodramatic in nature,” in the very sense that closed serials allow viewers to “look back upon the completed text and impose upon it some kind of moral or ideological order” (2004, p.252), we see that the melodrama in the K-serials (which are open) arises from the moral and ideological order inscribed in the texts by their authors. This imposition of a moral and ideological order also ensures that even though K-serials, like all open serials, have a large community of interrelated characters, their setting in an extended family milieu allows this community to be very closely linked by kinship bonds. These bonds become both the object and subject of these serials, and in the repeated discourse around these bonds are sown further the seeds of banal nationalism. In this study, we also see how the periodicity and everydayness of soaps play a key role in the spread of banal nationalism. This is an aspect of soaps and serials that has not been investigated that exhaustively, and though much more work needs to be done, I believe this work is an original start in that direction.

This work, I would suggest, also makes a contribution by showing how focusing on the pleasures that women receive from soaps might at times be limiting. Understanding the roles soaps play does not need to veer between critical opprobrium on one extreme and seeing soaps as sites where women derive pleasures and strongly interrogate patriarchy on the other. Even if they are not passive

uncritical viewers of popular depiction, does not mean that all is well in the interaction between the female viewer and the soap. With banal Hindu nationalism encoded so deeply in the soaps, even an active resistance of the patriarchal elements of the K-serials, does not necessarily imply that the pernicious, exclusionary Hindutva elements are being resisted. Women could engage in textual struggles on the one hand against a particular force of dominance (i.e. patriarchy), but the struggle will be limited indeed if they did nothing to resist the force of Hindu nationalism, or did in fact subscribe wholeheartedly to it.

Specifically in the Indian context, this work shows how a Hindu community is organized around television. Shanti Kumar (2006), as we have seen argued that the community organized around Indian television was 'unimaginable'. As I have demonstrated, that is actively not the case- it is imaginable and has been imagined as a Hindu community. This work has also made an original contribution to the understanding of audience measurement systems. While a large body of work has critiqued the very bases and epistemological assumptions of audience measurement, I have shown how these systems (with their dubious assumptions) can themselves become conduits for the passage of certain ideologies more than others. I have shown also how the interests of capital and television intersect to give birth to particular kinds of television content over others, when mediated through these kinds of audience measurement systems and practices.

Additionally, this work has extended the idea of banal nationalism in two ways. One, it has tracked the process in which ‘hot’ nationalism cools and while it is still focused on an ‘established’ nation, it has examined a situation in which the basic assumptions of nationalism were being questioned even fifty years after the establishment of that nation. Two, it has looked at banal nationalism in *entertainment* media, unlike any other study before it. And importantly, I would submit, it has shown how terms like “ideology,” “naturalization,” and “hegemony,” can be brought into a productive conversation with one of the key contributions to the theory of nationalism, “banal nationalism.”

Future Directions

The work in this dissertation is only a start. It is the first attempt to use the very useful political concept of banal nationalism in an analysis of televisual texts. As might appear from the section above, a number of promising avenues of research have been opened up by this work. First, there is the question of whether banal nationalism is inherent to soaps, or whether a similar study in a different geographic context would suggest it was not the case. We might then profitably extend the investigations of banal nationalism into other media. While I have looked at banal Hindu nationalism on television soaps, I myself would find it extremely interesting to look at it within the content of the other oversized popular cultural form in India: Bollywood. Much further work can remain to be done in investigating the processes by which spectacular nationalism becomes

banal. I have outlined one such process in this dissertation, but there might be others; and there might be different processes in different political systems or nation-states. Also, a lot more work can be done on the structure of soaps, in particular what role their periodicity and internal structure play in the dissemination of particular ideologies over others. But even before that, there is a project which I believe to be of great importance for the understanding of Indian media. As I have stated before, the literature on secularism in the Indian context is rich and intellectually stimulating. However, there has been very little work on extending theories of secularism to the sphere of popular culture, and particularly television. This work has been an initial attempt at understanding how particular kinds of (for want of a better word!) banal content might play a role in the desecularization of the public sphere. This dissertation is truly just the start of a very long journey.

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Appendix : Family Trees

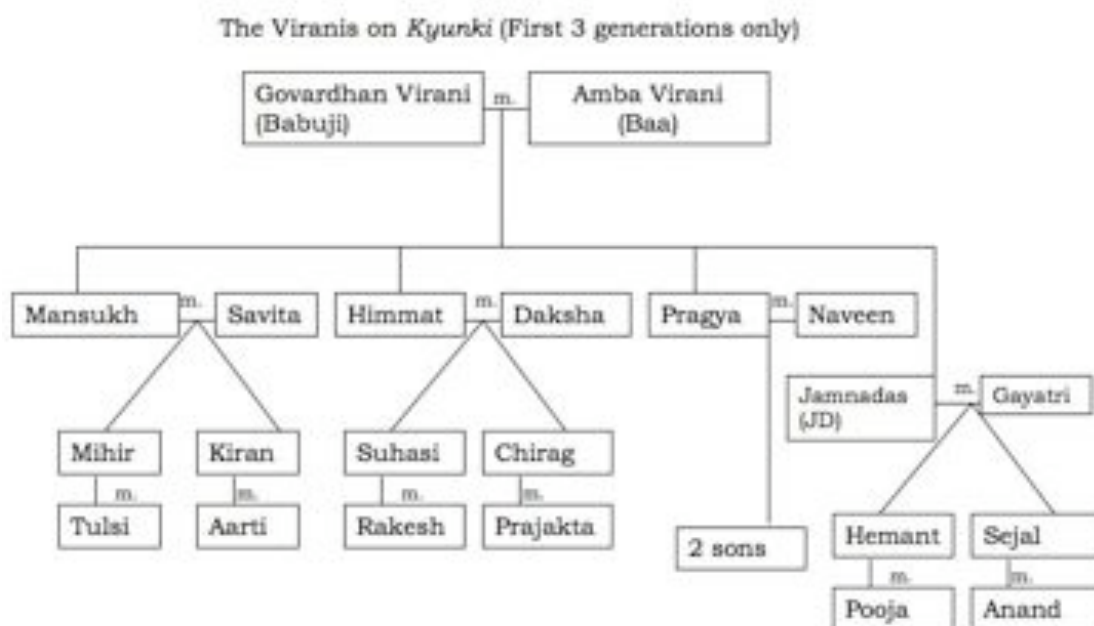


Figure 1: The Virani family tree (*Kyunki*)

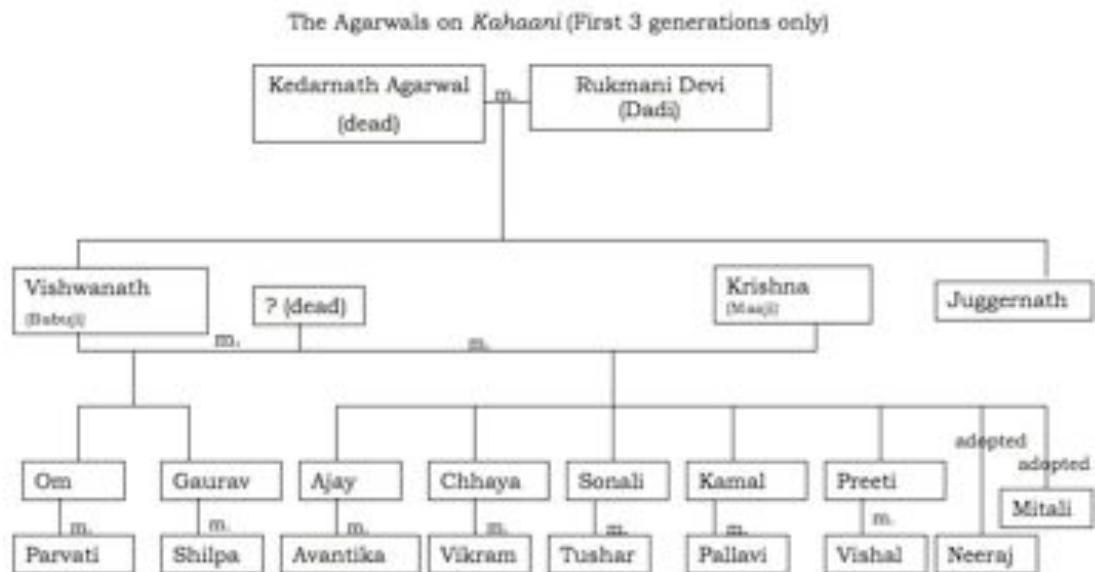


Figure 2: The Agarwal family tree (*Kahaani*)