

# How structure shapes content, or why the 'Hindi turn' of Star Plus became the 'Hindu turn'

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**Santanu Chakrabarti**

## Abstract

Why was there in the year 2000 a significant shift in the representation of families on Indian soap operas, from middle-class nuclear families with independent working women to upper-class joint families with only homemakers; and from milieus in which the religion of the characters was incidental, to milieus in which the Hindu religion and the performance of it was of central importance? I argue that a confluence of three forces enabled these shifts: (1) in marketing, a radical 'bottom-of-the-pyramid' approach; (2) in TV, the industry's attempts to find audiences in large numbers, mediated by the structure of the Indian audience measurement system; and (3) Hindu nationalists' focus on 'middle-class' audiences. In other words, I show how the very structure of the audience marketplace, especially the Indian television audience measurement system and shifts in marketing practices, abets the naturalization of particular political discourses within popular cultural forms, in this case Hindu nationalist discourse within television soap opera. This article makes a significant contribution to audience measurement studies and, by showing the mechanics of the naturalization of Hindu nationalist ideologies in popular culture, contributes to the literature investigating the influence of ideologies of nationalism in everyday life.

## Keywords

audience measurement, Hindu nationalism, Indian soap opera, marketing practice, middle class, political economy

How does the very structure of the audience marketplace<sup>1</sup> abet the naturalization of particular political discourses within popular cultural forms? What roles, for example, did the structure of television audience measurement systems and shifts in marketing practices play in the entrenchment of Hindu nationalist discourse within television soap

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## Corresponding author:

Santanu Chakrabarti, 32 Pond Place, London SW36QP, UK.

Email: [beatless13@gmail.com](mailto:beatless13@gmail.com)

opera? In this article I address these questions by looking at two extremely popular soap operas: *Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi* ('Because the Mother-in-law Was Once a Daughter-in-law Too', Balaji Telefilms, 2000–8, henceforth *Kyunki*) and *Kahaani Ghar Ghar Ki* ('The Tale of Every Home', Balaji Telefilms, 2000–8, henceforth *Kahaani*). Launched in 2000 on Rupert Murdoch's Star Plus, *Kyunki* and *Kahaani* became known in popular parlance as the K-series (because their names started with the letter K) or *saas-bahu* series (because they concerned themselves with family politics, especially between the mother-in-law, or *saas*, and daughter-in-law, or *bahu*), and they marked the most decisive transformation in Hindi TV content since the introduction of private television in 1991. These two serials were largely responsible for turning around Star Plus from an also-ran into a dominant leader in the Hindi television space, a position it has largely held on to even today. Whereas serials in the 1990s had featured as protagonists the 'new bold woman' (Page and Crawley, 2001: 166), hailing from *nuclear* families and 'middle-class' milieus, working in offices, now the serials suddenly started to represent their protagonists almost exclusively as *bahus* (daughters-in-law) of extremely affluent *joint* families. These soaps were constructed in the logic of banal Hindu nationalism,<sup>2</sup> with the *performance* of Hindu identity central to their characters, whereas for the immediate predecessors of these soaps, the Hindu-ness of the characters was at best incidental. In this article I ask, why did these shifts take place? I will rummage deep within the 'black box' of ratings (see Bourdon and Meadel, 2011: 792) to show how the structure of the audience marketplace had a significant role to play in enabling these shifts. I show that a confluence of three forces was instrumental in enabling these shifts: (1) in the sphere of marketing, a paradigm shift in the understanding and redefinition of the potential consumer leading to a refocusing of selling approaches, particularly a transition to a bottom-of-the-pyramid approach; (2) in the sphere of television, Star Plus's attempts to find audiences in large numbers, mediated by the nature and structure of the Indian audience measurement system; and (3) in the sphere of politics, the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) and the Sangh Parivar's<sup>3</sup> focus on 'middle-class' audiences. As we will see, the category of 'middle class' was at the heart of each of these forces, lending credence to Mazzearella's argument that, despite its empirical emptiness, 'the category itself has become an important marker of identification, aspiration and critique in contemporary Indian public culture' (2005: 3).

This paper, then, participates in the scholarship around audience measurement systems and makes an original contribution by examining the rarely investigated audience measurement system in India. But more than that, by showing the mechanics of the naturalization of Hindu nationalist ideologies (or 'Hindutva') in popular culture, this article makes a contribution to the literature investigating the influence of Hindu nationalism in everyday life.

## 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

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. By the mid 1990s it was clear to corporations that 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. The *New York Times* suggested in 1997 that many multinationals rushing into India post-liberalization had ‘wishfully overestimated the size of the middle class’ (Jordan, 1997). 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). Admittedly, the middle class is always difficult to pin down sociologically. As Gupta (2009: 79) says: ‘Nowhere in the world is the middle class actually in the middle.’ But when it came to India, the problem clearly went deeper. Gupta argues that:

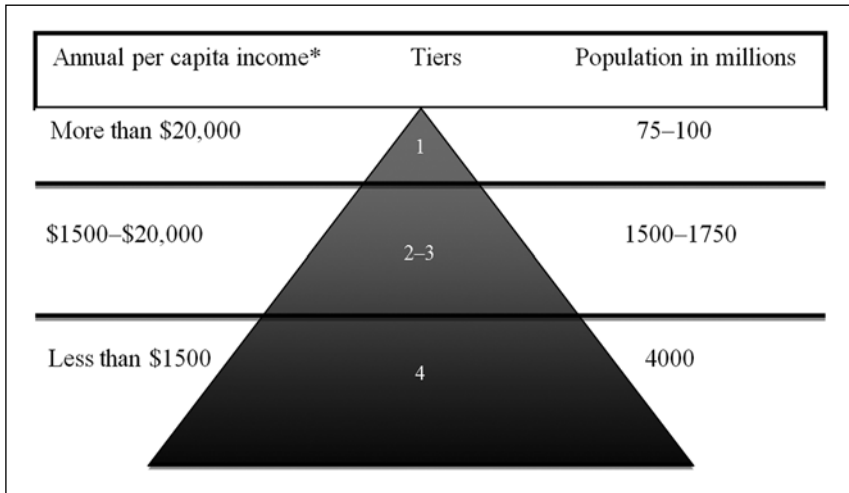
The constituents of the Indian middle-class actually belong to elite sections of the country. Amidst the grinding poverty of millions, they can afford a lifestyle that somewhat resembles those of the European and American middle-class.... When we refer to the Indian middle-class we are unconsciously thinking of those who can approximate the life of the common person in the West. (2009: 80–2)

Or as Mazzarella says, in the Indian context ‘the term is being stretched to cover a staggering diversity of socio-economic and cultural situations’ (2005: 3). But this gap between the empirical and the discursive understanding of the middle class led to an obvious problem for marketers: if what was conventionally understood to be the middle class was 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 a shift into selling *really low* priced goods to a huge number of consumers. This shift meant that marketers across the global South would start 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: 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 and Hart, 2002: 4).

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’



**Figure 1.** The pyramid, and its bottom.

\* Based on purchasing power parity in USD.

Source: Adapted from Prahalad and Hart (2002: 4).

and urging them 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’. By the time it became a best-selling business book, by way of a 2002 paper, 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, four elements were key to locating this fortune: ‘creating buying power, shaping aspirations, improving access, and tailoring local solutions’ (Prahalad and Hart, 2002: 6). Prahalad and Hart recommended that multinationals shift their focus to the bottom of the pyramid, the so-called Tier 4 (see Figure 1) of the world economic pyramid where they would find 4 billion people with annual per capita income of less than \$1500 purchasing power parity.

This micro-selling concept was not introduced into India by multinationals. In fact, one of the key examples that Prahalad and Hart (2002: 5) 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 1990s when multinationals like Unilever and Procter & Gamble adopted the sachet approach wholesale. It is a strategy that worked and continues to work: even in recessionary times, fast-moving consumer goods companies (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) in the 1990s 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% and profits by 25% per year between 1995 and 2000. As Prahalad and Hart say, 'Contrary to popular assumptions, the poor can be a very profitable market' (2002: 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 a mass rather than a niche audience.

### *The SEC system: a blunt instrument*

The introduction of the state's New Economic Program in the 1980s was a crucial step on the path towards the full fledged adoption of neoliberal discourses and practices (Vanaik, 1990). 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. 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' (Bijapurkar, 2007: 130). When it was being constructed researchers decided that the consumption 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).

That is, the SEC of the chief wage earner would be the SEC of everyone in the home. The SEC system thus developed had two sub-parts, the urban SEC system and the rural SEC system, which were used separately to categorize rural and urban consumers. In the urban SEC grid, SEC A (and within that the sub-division SEC A1)<sup>4</sup> purported to represent the 'highest social class' (Bijapurkar, 2007: 132) and SEC E the lowest. The scale was 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' (2007: 131). In other words, the combination of education and occupation stood in as a proxy for income and therefore consumption potential. But because of the lack of actual income figures associated with the system, the application of the SEC for practical purposes was as much art as science. Various additional consumer surveys had to be conducted to map the SEC system to income. For example, a recent report suggested 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: 132). Using other reports, such as those from Shukla (2010) and Datta (2010), we can see that 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. Obviously, the boundaries of this range were clearly even lower in 2000 (given India's much touted GDP growth rate

**Table 1.** The urban SEC grid.

Occupation of chief wage earner	Illiterate	School up to 4th/literate No formal schooling	School 5th–9th	SSC/HSC	Some college but not graduate	Graduate/post-graduate – general	Graduate/postgraduate –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/	D	C	B2	B1	A2	A2	A1
industrialists with	0	B2	B2	B1	A2	A1	A1
	1–9	B1	A2	A2	A1	A1	A1
	10+	D	D	B2	B1	A2	A1
Self-employed	D	D	D	C	B2	B1	B1
Clerical	D	D	D	C	B2	B1	A2
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

Source: Adapted from Bijapurkar (2007).

between 2000 and 2010). Clearly, the size of the consumer base that had tempted many multinationals to India was certainly much smaller than they had anticipated; it was not surprising then that the mantra of the bottom of the pyramid looked appealing to marketers.

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 a very low price, in very small quantities or small volumes (as little as 5 ml, say). This is, obviously, the opposite of the model in developed capitalist economies in which products might be sold at low unit price, but in very large quantities or volumes, thereby extracting a fair amount of money from the consumer per container of product sold. 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. It means that marketers would, broadly speaking, demand from media vehicles large audiences, rather than elite audiences. The transition that Indian media vehicles had to make was therefore from 'quality' to 'quantity'.

## **The shift in television: seeking the mass audience**

### *Ratings and the audience commodity in India*

In its first decade (1991–2000), private television in India had not yet caught up with this shift: it 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 *Saans*. But this targeting of audiences or consumers through media vehicles 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 memorable words: '[T]he commodity form of mass-produced, advertiser supported communications under monopoly capitalism ... is audiences' (1977: 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. According to 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' (2007: 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: 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' (1991: 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 private television because of the absence of any audience measurement agency whatsoever.

It was only in 1994 that INTAM, the first specialized television ratings agency was set up in India (Mitra et al., 2010). But its work (and that of the present dominant ratings agency, TAM) was complicated by the fact that the urban SEC classification lay at the heart of audience measurement in India.

While in theory it was possible that a channel would build its programming around appealing only to a particular slice of the audience rather than the whole viewing population, in practice it did not quite pan out that way in the early years of the satellite era, 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 American ABCD classification, the prototypical example of the 'containment paradigm' whereby audiences were slotted a priori into certain predefined categories and the interest was in unearthing how many people in each category were watching or listening or consuming the show or product (Arvidsson, 2003). By the 1970s, though, class position was no longer being linked in the US to consumption and audience research was transitioning into a new 'mobility paradigm' – pictures were now being drawn, in Deborah Tudor's words, of the 'affluent audience moving through a mediated space' (2009: 836). In other words, the transition was from 'the mass-marketing model to demographic-conscious niche-marketing' leading to ratings becoming even more important 'as advertisers attempt to minimize risk and maximize resources through more exact purchasing and monitoring of the audience commodity' (Carlson, 2006:101). In addition, by the mid 1990s the attempts to find 'quality consumers' had given rise to other approaches of categorization such as psychographic profiling as well as geodemographics (Goss, 1995). These structural shifts in the television industry and the nature of content being produced entailed, in the words of Wilson II and Gutierrez (1995) a transition from 'mass communication to class communication'.

But unlike the US where the shift to the mobility paradigm made the ABCD system redundant, the SEC system in India was being used unchanged at the end of the 1990s almost as developed nearly two decades earlier. It remained till very recently the 'standard industry framework used by all consumer goods and services' (Bijapurkar, 2007: 132). In India, then, the television industry did not see the kind of structural shifts that took place in the US with the move from the 'containment' to the 'mobility' paradigm of understanding audiences.

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 Datta (2010) shows, the number of people in SEC A is a mere fraction of the number of people in SECs C, D and 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 a higher number of total viewers is by targeting the cumulative or aggregate ratings figure, which by definition spanned multiple 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 subgroup of the population. No wonder then that Ashis Ray, the first Asia bureau chief of CNN was



complaining as late as 2007 that in India 'niche, high quality TV is a non-starter'. Wilson II and Gutierrez (1995) have argued that one aspect of globalization was the exploitation of local differences and the use of multi-local niche marketing. But 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 on cable, on Indian television it certainly had not, at least in 2000. Given that unearthing 'quality' viewers was proving difficult, channels necessarily had to pivot to the search for 'quantity'. This pivot was first seen in the 1997 show *Amanat*, the 'first in the line of the traditional family sagas' (Zarina Mehta, quoted in Chougule, 2003) and which entailed a qualitative shift in representation and milieu of television content.

By the end of the 1990s, it was clear that whatever the real viewership, the SEC-based audience measurement systems were not measuring audiences of English-language television, and 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 became heated enough for TAM to start tracking 'elite' audiences, and reporting 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 agonized discussions, TAM's audience measurement system in India in 2000 measured only the viewing of urban audiences, not rural ones. The audience measurement systems in India, then, privileged urban viewing and had an inbuilt bias towards cumulative ratings cutting across audience segments (or SECs) rather than 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 ratings) system and the shift to the bottom-of-the-pyramid approach both had a critical 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 particular notion of Indianness. There were two related factors that contributed to this: Rupert Murdoch's business difficulties and Star Plus's own audience research.

### *Murdoch's business difficulties*

Murdoch, the owner of Star Plus, was 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; Naregal, 2000). There was a need, therefore, to 'Indianize' Star Plus's part western programming, and have some of that Indianness rub off onto 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 audiences, and therefore revenue (Ohm, 2007). 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 at that time showcased a lot of English-language programs, mainly re-telecasts of American shows. And it did have individual Hindi programmes 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 the low number of SEC A audiences and the ratings delivered for the rest of the programmes on the channel were simply not high enough. While 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 of India, 2001), the solution was to turn completely to Hindi programming.

### *Star Plus's audience research*

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 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. These cities were clearly chosen because they fell in the biggest markets for Hindi television, namely Gujarat (1 m+), Bombay, Delhi and UP (1m+). The results – with viewers finding Star Plus characters to be 'ultra-modern', 'westernized' 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: 132). When breaking down the results, surveyed viewers in the higher SECs were found to be much more positive about the existing Hindi-English and Hinglish<sup>5</sup> programming of Star Plus than the lower SECs. Clearly, I would argue, this indicated two possible future routes of travel for the channel: one was to focus with renewed vigor on the higher socio-economic classes, the other was to initiate efforts to expand its appeal among all socio-economic classes. But as we have seen before, the SEC-based audience measurement system was biased in favour of 'quantity' rather than 'quality'. There was little possibility that even if Star Plus redoubled its efforts to target the highest socio-economic 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.

### Tracking the shift and its results

Star Plus's shift was guaranteed to fail without advertiser support – then as now the Indian television business was heavily dependent on advertising rather than viewer subscriptions (KPMG, 2011). It is all 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. As we have seen, this was exactly the condition that had developed by this point in time: it was an environment where advertisers on these shows were also interested in reaching huge numbers of viewers – in other words, in targeting the bottom of the pyramid.

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 Mankekar, in the early years of Doordarshan 'officials, policy makers, serial producers, and advertisers conceptualized the expanding middle classes as their "target audiences"' (1999: 9). Even in the year 2000, 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.<sup>6</sup> 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 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, therefore, that Star Plus now had to get into the game of shaping aspirations and creating consumer subjectivity in order to appease their pyramid-bottom targeting advertisers. As Shailaja Kejriwal, the head of programming (i.e. content creation) for Star Plus from 1998 to 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.... 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 steeped in ordinary middle class values but the projection is visually rich. (quoted in Munshi, 2010: 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* (the Indian incarnation of *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* also launched in July 2000) 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-series 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 its peak, Star Plus was charging three times as much for 30 seconds of advertising on *Kyunki* and *Kahaani* as the going rates for the World Cup of cricket (Bhattacharya and 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: 5) approvingly called a 'pioneer among MNCs [multinational companies] exploring markets at the bottom of the pyramid'. While Unilever dominated television advertising on dramas/soaps (as per an analysis by TAM India), the top 10 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 (AdEx 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 India's first soap, *Hum Log*) or even 'middle class' as on almost every show before the K-series, 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 observe her lower middle-class and working-class respondents failing to identify with the higher class women they see on screen (for example, *Udaan* on Doordarshan and *Hasratein* from the early satellite era). With the K-serials, we now had the most affluent sections of the Indian population being represented on screen. But the characters on the K-serials depict an infinitely greater level of affluence than any of the characters on television in earlier years of television: in SEC terms they would be SEC A1 and above. 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. That is, with the K-serials 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, drawing on Nussbaum (2012), that aspiration can be limiting if there seems to be little possibility for those dreams and aspirations to translate to reality, as has patently been the case in India in the real world outside of television. As Ghosh (2009), for example, has pointed out, the liberalization of the Indian economy in 1991 has had little effect in reducing inequality or fostering social mobility on a mass scale. In addition, the viewership of the K-serials had a significant male component, all of whom were certainly not tuning in to derive the differential pleasures that women supposedly derive from soaps. In this scenario it was what I call 'banal Hindutva' or 'banal Hindu nationalism' that worked to bridge the gulf between the characters on screen and the viewers watching them. This was the 'continual "flagging" or reminding, of nationhood [but which is] so familiar, so continual, that it is not consciously registered as reminding' (Billig, 1995: 8–9). From the mid 1990s, as the Hindu right wing made a concerted effort to gain power at the national level, it had stepped away from the spectacular displays of Hindu nationalism such as marches, exhibitions, mass mobilizations and even destruction of mosques and fomenting of religious riots that had marked its ascendancy in the 1980s and early 1990s (Jaffrelot, 1996). In its place came a steady yet unremarked efflorescence of Hindu religious symbols in every arena of banal life, which was then reflected on the K-serials. One of the few commentators to notice this at the time was A.L. Chougule (2003), who in the Bollywood trade publication *Screen* observed that 'prime time television programming is a grand spectacle of religion, festivities and rituals' going on to wonder why there were so many 'stories and characters overdosed with religion and religious practices.'

Banal Hindutva was multiple and multi-faceted on these shows and was expressed through three key devices: the frequent highlighting of religious *practice*, the plethora of religious symbolism and talk within the spaces of the shows, and the Brahminical nature of the discourse offered. The simultaneous and continual occurrence of these three devices in the ostensibly non-religious spaces of everyday drama was novel and served the purpose of continually flagging the Hindu nation. This generous dose of Brahminical rites, rituals, symbolism and worldview, naturalized and presented as 'Indian tradition', was calling the Hindu nation into being, and forming the bridge between the characters and their audiences. As Straubhaar (2006) argues, soaps do play a role in fostering a national culture; and it was a Hindu nationalist definition of national culture that these shows fostered.

But this could only happen if the audiences for Star Plus were in fact already receptive to such discourses. It is granting the K-serials – and media, generally – too much power to assume otherwise. And if we look at the core target audiences of Hindu nationalism in the last years of the 1990s, we will find this to be exactly the case.

### *The BJP audience: its location in class*

The last few years of the 1990s were a time of transition for Hindu nationalists as they (in the form of the political party BJP, along with assorted allies) tried to gain power at the centre. By analysing their election manifestos, we can get a sense of who the BJP were chiefly targeting.

A central plank of the BJP in the mid 1990s was economic nationalism (or '*swadeshi*'), which the BJP had adopted to target the 'unincorporated sector'. This included (in its 1998 election manifesto at least) everything from manufacturing, construction, transport and trade to doctors, lawyers, accountants, goldsmiths, plumbers, porters and tailors. In a significant transition in language, though, the BJP 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' (BJP, 1998: para. 28, emphasis added). For the BJP, all ills of the nation can virtually be addressed by focusing on this middle class:

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. (1998: para. 31)

This overt focus on the middle class marks the BJP out from most of its rivals, including its key rival the Congress Party, which historically portrayed itself as the party of the poor. Of course, as Sarkar suggests, the principal base of the Hindu nationalist movement has always been the 'urban or small-town, predominantly high caste, lower middle class of professionals, clerks, and traders' (2005: 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.

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. Using the BJP's own explicit definition, we can approximately map the BJP's 'middle class' to the SEC grid. Looking at the grid (Table 1), we see that the BJP's 'Unincorporated 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 fewer 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, which in the Prahalad (2005) terminology was the bottom-of-the-pyramid audience. But the geographical areas in which the Hindu nationalists had the greatest electoral success (as we can see from Election Commission of India, 1999) included Bombay, Delhi,



Ahmedabad and Kanpur, the very cities from where respondents were chosen for Star's viewership survey.

In the 1999 election manifesto of the BJP and its allies (NDA, 1999) the emphasis on Hindutva and Hinduism was significantly diluted. This absence was not an indication of the party's change of heart but of the compulsions of coalition politics (Mitra, 2005). 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. This explains why, when Star Plus wanted to 'Indianize' and took the 'Hindi turn', its definition of 'Indianness' rested upon the overtly Hindu upper-caste, urban joint family which was perpetually engaged in performative displays of an efflorescent Hinduness, whose milieu was saturated with religious symbolism, whose discourse was borrowed from the discourses of Hindutva, and in which the women were almost always safely ensconced in the private sphere of the home.

## Conclusions

A very different notion of Indianness might have taken root on television if the SEC system and the audience measurement system had been constructed differently, and if it did not privilege 'quantity' over 'quality', or indeed if there had not been a turn to targeting the bottom-of-the-pyramid audience. Star Plus's 'Hindi turn' perhaps would not have become in effect a 'Hindu turn' or, even more accurately, a 'Hindutva turn'. And it was not limited to just Star Plus, or even soap operas. In fact, as Chougule (2003) shows, by 2003 all Hindi channels were giving explicit instructions to television producers to depict characters as extremely religious and ritualistic. Yet, it is hard to argue that the same developments panned out in the southern states of India, for example, where Hindu nationalist parties have had comparatively less success, and the different economic contexts in those states compared to most of the northern Hindi-speaking ones meant that the ratings system affected programming there differently. In fact, as McMillin (2003: 345) has argued, a show such as *Adarsha Damapathigalu* in the state of Karnataka 'challenges the restrictive myths of marriage [which] strikes at the patriarchal heart of Hindu India and contests the very construction of national identity'. And on Tamil TV, rather than just being *bahus*, economically independent women were the norm with the 'mega-serials' ... filled with women occupying the public space' (Ranganathan, 2010: 215).

That is, we see how the political economy of television (and consumer marketing and advertising) has a critical role to play in determining which political ideologies become hegemonic in popular culture. While ideologies (in this case of Hindutva) might become dominant in particular spheres through the active mediation of political actors, as they did in the spheres of Indian politics and education for example (see Ludden, 2005), they

cannot become hegemonic in the sphere of mass mediated popular culture without the confluence of a set of conditions favourable to profit making. To use an analogy, the nature and structure of the plumbing has a very significant role to play indeed in the taste of the water that comes out of the tap. That is, the structure of the audience marketplace shapes, to a significant degree, the content of television operating in that marketplace.

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## Notes

1. A term borrowed from Napoli (2003) to refer to four primary participants – the media organizations, the audience measurement organizations, the advertisers and consumers of advertised products and services.
2. I adapt the term ‘banal Hindu nationalism’ from Michael Billig’s (1995) insightful study of nationalism, *Banal Nationalism*, via Meera Nanda’s *The God Market* (2009).
3. An agglomeration of related Hindu nationalist organizations – the word ‘*Parivar*’ means ‘family’.
4. A new SEC system has been introduced in 2011 which combines the urban and the rural SEC systems into one grid, and replaces ‘occupation’ with ‘number of consumer durables’. See <http://bit.ly/P90sHi>.
5. 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’.
6. The ratings agency at that time, INTAM, worked on a ‘minuscule’ sample and as an audience disclosure scandal that led to its demise suggested, its data was possibly compromised all along (Mitra et al., 2010). 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.

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