

Sanjukta Dasgupta  
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MEDIA, GENDER *and*  
POPULAR CULTURE  
*in* INDIA

*Tracking change and continuity*



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in India**



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Sudeshna Chakravarti



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To Chitrarup, Saswati, and Ratan—their sensitive support  
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# 1

## Introduction: Media and Mediations— Representing Change and Continuity in Indian Popular Culture and Gender

...the outside world's opinion about India is a chaos—baroque art and gigantic monstrous images, rajas, elephants, tigers, Brahmins, untouchables. And when India is filmed it is “Clive of India” or “Lives of a Bengal Lancer”...

—Edward Thompson in a letter to Rabindranath Tagore, 1935  
(Dasgupta 187)

Imagology has gained a historic victory over ideology.

—Kundera 127

The specular sociocultural redefinition of India commenced from the beginning of the 1990s and now, almost two decades later, it is more than obvious that the subcontinent has traversed a difficult terrain in order to assert its position on the global map, as an emerging global presence and identity. India is no longer only about an ancient civilization with its holy cows, mysticism, *kamasutra*, yoga, and tandoori chicken or as Edward Thompson's epigraph to this chapter regretfully states as he brings together essentialist signifiers of ethnic exotica. The India

that Thompson wrote about in his letter to Tagore in 1935 was British-governed colonial India, when the role of the print media was a deeply political one. The Indian English print media with nationalist underpinnings was careful though critical as the fear of censor if not sedition loomed large; simultaneously, the vernacular media was a powerful vocal tool in the national struggle for freedom. Also, it must be remembered that the camera and the documentary as well as feature films were not as sophisticated as at present and technology was relatively much simpler as the computer revolution had not yet happened. In comparison to colonial India and India's first assertive decades of political independence since 1947, around 60 years hence, in 21st century, the present India is a vibrant democracy that is home to over a billion people who maintain with passionate fidelity their regional culture, recognize multiple religious affiliations, and support the need to negotiate the home and the world and the world in the home. It is the media that has emerged as the facilitator between the home and the world, enabling connectivity and networks of communication that are promoting improved understanding between people. Rantanen's definition supports this emerging norm of media constructed connectivity: "Media is about connecting strangers to one another, whether or not they have expressed their willingness. In this sense, when the 'neighbourhood' is the world, refusing to hear or see the neighbour is not an option" (Rantanen 125). The Indian media is the in-between agent that has the dual potential of ruthlessly perpetrating homogenization of regional cultures as well as securing the longevity of heterogeneity of cultures from the urban to the tribal sectors.

The perceivable tensions between the two media approaches could neither problematize India's cultural diversity that age could not wither nor could custom stifle its infinite variety. In his recent book *The Idea of Justice* Amartya Sen has specifically identified the role of "an unrestrained and healthy media" that can generate "direct contribution" of free speech as well as an "informational role," "protective function," and "formation of values" all of which can facilitate and enhance the quality of life of the people, both the advantaged and disadvantaged classes (Sen 335–36). Sen emphasizes that freedom of the media can stimulate public reasoning and response and though he mentions the print media alone, the same can be related to the role of the visual media as well. It is a role that is also about responsibility, for a partisan, biased, or controlled media may lead to more harm than good. A restricted media administered by a regulatory body can shrug off responsibility but the free media has greater responsibility, in terms of ethics. It is often noticed that the media can stake ethics and national interests for the sake of the consumable story. Also, it is noticed that media agencies can be easily accessed

by terror outfits to threaten state and central governments, as has been happening lately in West Bengal. Media ideology is intrinsically about global and local connectivity, which may stretch national integrity. As a vigilant media is crucial to national progress and a totalitarian media control is undesirable, the media's responsibility lies in structuring an agenda that goes beyond corporate profits and balance sheets. The clamoring for war with Pakistan or China by a section of the media makes an interesting study about media ideology. How free is the media? We have accepted the homily that human beings are born free but are enchained throughout life. If freedom is about the right to choose one's chains, then the selective freedom of the media also underscores the fact that the media is not immune from the compulsions of patriarchy and capitalism.

In this context the relevance of Peter Golding and Graham Murdoch's four historical processes that are part of the central discourse to a critical political economy of India's changing culture is obvious. These are the "growth of the media, the extension of corporate reach, commodification, and the changing role of state and government intervention" (Curran and Gurevitch 16). These four historical processes are integral to the changes that have swept over Indian popular culture, as it is mediated by the media and vice versa. This *new* India is an India of call centers, shopping malls, software professionals, venture capitalists, industrialists, scientists, public intellectuals, and celebrity cult figures. It is also about the 20 million Indians living in the world, and the perception is that all the nonresident Indians (NRIs) negotiate the local and global in a seamless mode. Or do they? After all, one needs to admit that cultures cannot choose to survive in exclusivity. Global, national, and local cultures have to engage in dialogues of understanding due to the constant mediation that is perceived on every level. Irving Fang observes:

We live in a world of mediated communication. That will not change except to increase the world's sum of mediated communication. The genie will not go back into the bottle. As the new millennium unfolds, mediated communication is regarded as a weapon that opposing cultures both feel threatened by and wield to spread their own messages. (Fang 350)

It is to explore these questions, problems, and roadmaps that we have ventured to put together in this book some of the interrelated crucial features that contribute to the changing profile of India, which shines, whines, is incredible, and is simultaneously realistic and representative Indian media assemblage; the significant blend of the carnivalesque and the consumerist culture in the media complicates the theoretical parameters of Deleuze, Guattari, and Bakhtin as these are used for reading Indian/Asian concerns, desires, sexualities, and the politics of representation (Dudrah; Rai). It is in this context that we will critique the role

of the media and its representation of popular culture and the position of Indian men and women in urban, suburban, and rural India. Our point of view will be from the standpoint of cultural commentators as we bridge the outsider/insider divide through our affiliations and corresponding distance from the media industry. We have carefully made very limited use of extending western film theory for reading Indian films. We have, however, tried to refer to some of the leading-edge research on Indian cinema that has been conducted remarkably in recent times. We have been different in our approach in some ways, as we have read into the film content as representative texts of change and continuity in technologically enabled India. Our cross-disciplinary team-authoring has been an enabling experience as two of us are cultural commentators and critics working amicably with a social scientist, conscious about our mutual gendered perspectives as two women teaching in the English literature department along with a male social scientist, teaching in the Department of Political Science of the same university. These identifiable categorical differences in our professional affiliations, however, have helped us to explore the seams and nuances with insight and assess our deliberations in their perspectives, due to the cross-disciplinary nature of our engagements. Though in the critically informed language of our discourse we have used key terms and theoretical approaches, we have also made concerted efforts to maintain uniform readability and accessibility of our arguments so that not just researchers in the field of media, film, and mass communication studies can use our book but we wish to provoke interested readers who watch films and television and read newspapers and magazines to read and agree or argue with our points of view.

## India Now

...it is time to recognize that the opening up of India, and granting people economic opportunity and freedom, has been a vital turning point in our history.

—(Nilekani 482)

India in the 21st century, or India Now is an India that is in incessant conversation, the dialogue continues via the mobile phone networks that link cities, villages, and even deep forests, even enabling the media to be in close contact with faceless challengers to the nation-state. "What an Idea," ejaculates a euphoric telecommunications advertisement, when people "Walk and Talk." The slow and steady transition in human

history from oral culture to writing culture to the electronic culture of the present has transformed human connectivity and understanding. The interactive media such as the telephone and telegraph have been supplemented by the revolutionary inclusiveness of the mass media. The media as a public watchdog, as an interpreter of macro and micro issues from the local to the global has now emerged as a powerful alternative to state-controlled broadcasting corporations such as the radio, *Akashvani*, and television *Doordarshan*. As Curran observes:

Classical liberal thought argues that the primary democratic role of the media is to act as a public watchdog overseeing the state. This is usually defined as revealing abuses in the exercise of state authority, although it is sometimes extended to include facilitating a general debate about the functioning of government. (Curran and Gurevitch 83)

Globalization and corporate investments by multinational corporations have undoubtedly played a role in the changing culture of India that becomes apparent in the audiovisual narratives, news, and advertisements. In India, from the 1990s private TV channels have proliferated that compete with each other for breaking news and even making news. NDTV is a dominant presence followed by CNN-IBN, Times Now, Star News, and Zee TV along with regional language channels that engage local cultures and customs with energetic reportage. Star TV and Zee TV were embattled in their bid to attract viewer attention and Zee TV emerged as the topmost player in reaching NRIs. The question often asked is that do such evidences of corporate transnational connectivity affect indigenous culture? As Mankekar comments, "The centrality of NRI capital to the marketing of 'India' via transnational television crucially mediated the production and reterritorialization of Indian culture" (Mankekar 349). One noticeable factor is bilingualism in the audiovisual entertainment industry. In films definitely, in advertisement of high-end products, and remarkably minimal in TV soaps, the use of Hinglish, a blend of Hindi and English, seems to be the glocal trend; in terms of linguistic percentage, there seems to be a propensity to use English words and surely key signifiers along with certain descriptive markers in the national language, Hindi. This trend in language indicates also the ready adaptation of western clothes by not just men but younger women. This propensity is remarkable as Indian women's clothing retained their ethnic signature through the colonial period and even till the 1980s, while for Indian men power dressing had been about wearing western clothes since the colonial times.

In his book *India 2020: A Vision for the New Millennium*, the former President of India, A.P.J. Abdul Kalam had stated without ambiguity that

the media is guided by concerns of business and the market, so the content in both print and electronic media focused more on the negative and sensational than the positive and matter of fact. So Kalam comments:

...the media plays an important role in any modern society in moulding public opinion. It has its own constraints. Like any enterprise, it has to make a profit. The media presents news, views and analyses tailored to suit what the readers would like. It also has to create headlines, look for something shocking, exciting, thrilling. (Kalam 292)

The role of the media as a public watchdog that is independent from state control, however, may lead to certain ambiguities about the extent to which democracy and media can operate without clash and chaos. Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model that takes into account both the source and the receiver of the transmitted code is ultimately about cultural contact zones and cultural negotiations. The role and responsibility of media cannot be overstated in this context for it is a proven fact that it does contribute to social change as stated by Devereux:

At the macro level the mass media are an important agent of transformation and social change, they are inextricably bound up with the capitalist project and they play a center-stage role in the reproduction and continuation of various kinds of social inequalities at local, national and global levels. (Devereux 9)

However, in macro-issues women's roles are generally those of passive supporters or victims as the recent terror and turbulence perpetrated by Maoist outfits in some parts of India have proved yet again. But gender disparity continues here too, as we see in the visual images of passive and sometimes veiled women carrying traditional weapons or young women in military fatigues. These images carry the overall impression of women being used by male leaders rather than women being the leaders and motivators of such movements. Media reports about women in conflict terrain are about abuse, molestation, rape, and murder or as mourners, bewailing the loss of family members and property.

Recently it has been noticed that media as ombudsman has yielded results that have been unprecedented in India's history. The vigilant media has contributed toward the exposure of scams, corruption, and financial irregularities leading to resignation of members of parliament such as Shashi Tharoor, Ashok Chavan, Telecom Minister Raja, corporate CEO of Satyam, the exposure of Lalit Modi, the IPL chief, and Suresh Kalmadi, Organizing Committee Chief of the Commonwealth Games 2010. Simultaneously societal inequities and abuse by distinguished persons such as the exposure of DIG Rathore in the Ruchika case, Manu Sharma's

jail term in the Jessica Lal murder case, honor killings in Haryana and other states and obsessive attention to zodiac signs, *rashi*, and *gotra*, even endorsed by young Congress MP Navin Jindal who asks “Will you marry within gotra?” (Jindal 1). Such factual data obviously suggest the change in the value system and also the growing confidence and power of the media to ventilate an independent voice not always controlled by capital investors and political power centers.

However, in this context along with race, sexuality, nation, and religion the understanding of traditional gender status in a patriarchal and capitalist system and the relation of gender to power is crucial for the understanding of the gender inequality and gender injustice internalized in media flows and media effects. Sonia Bathla unambiguously states that the Indian press has systematically elided and ignored the need to raise issues of gender injustice and gender inequality in contemporary Indian society. However progressive and inclusive the media may seem, gender discrimination and bias lingers as a carcinogenic core nestling in the heart of the problem. From the epics to the epicenter of contemporary popular culture, Indian women remain the second sex, trapped in the triple bind of religion, patriarchy, and capitalism. Referring specifically to the silence of the Indian press, Bathla states:

The silence of the media on women’s issues and the movement also hints at the insignificance attached to women as citizens and to their participation in the public sphere. In other words, media has rendered insignificance to women’s voices and conveyed that their concerns are irrelevant to democratic polity thus also indicating that a free press in itself cannot guarantee representation of opinions and values of marginalized sections. (Bathla 109)

In all cultures, it seems, overall constructions of images of women in feature films, television, and advertisements are routinely about prioritizing elegance, glamour, sensual bodies, and charm. This is linked along with traditional notions of the self-effacing homemaker, caregiver, women as domestic Alsatians, the event manager, security guard, cook, and nurturer of adults, senior citizens, and children. The ideal image is that of the woman who expresses an obsessive fidelity to the family members, irrespective of sensitive reciprocity or callous exploitation. In terms of theoretical readings of media processes and its methodological approaches, John Corner recognizes the impact of feminism but at the same time expresses his reservations about any internal transformation that feminism may have effected in media processes that would include media flows and media effects. This uncertain position interestingly

leads one to configure that feminism's impact on the media has been not just superficial but has even helped in consolidating the stereotypes. Corner states:

Feminism has contributed important new ideas to the study of media processes, particularly to an understanding of the relationships between textuality and subjectivity. It has also produced an impressive range of new knowledge about the media and has considerably raised awareness of gender inequalities at all levels of the mediation process. (Corner 175)

So, men in the family are generally represented as messy, funny, intrusive, farcical homemakers, who spill, spoil, or stain which the woman with her high-skilled expertise in domestic free radicals is seen to put things right when they fall apart, from laundry, administering pain balms and health potions along with crushing pests with an aerosol can like a fundamentalist fanatic or an annihilating Durga, sporting a bandana on the forehead while wearing a sari. As a point of reference the television serial *Cagney and Lacey* (1981) originally planned as a feature film, a story about two female New York cops, made the producers uncomfortable as the content of the serial suggested that the two female cops were very subversive, that is, they were too unfeminine, too feminist, and too lesbian. Thus the original angle of the series, focusing on women working in nontraditional job and fighting sexism, was modified by removing overt references to feminism and by representing Cagney and Lacey as women who "combine competency with an element of sensuality" (Zoonen 45).

As cultural commentators we will identify the traditional structures that have been invaded by unprecedented storms of change. But simultaneously we will also try to track the traditional, conservative continuities that remain sacred, unruffled, and unmediated, impervious to ideas of transition and transformation. This is most relevant in critiquing the representations of women in the media that perpetuate the stereotypes and stabilize the status quo. So women victims are still at fault and the male perpetrators are regarded as trapped and seduced and are presented as victims too (Mcquail et al. 116). This is common in commercial Bollywood films and commercial regional films as opposed to high culture art films and television serials which project a studied solidarity with the rigidly patriarchal popular responses to gender issues.

## Popular culture

Popular culture represents society; it tracks society's consolidation of traditional norms and its subversions as well. The intellectual debates that

ensue about high culture; low culture; and cultural confusion, chaos, and decadence merely validate the existence and enduring power of popular culture. One can recall Matthew Arnold and John Dover Wilson's classic text titled *Culture and Anarchy* that raised significant questions about issues of high culture and plebeian culture. Technological advancement and the mass media have proved that popular culture has greater penetration in the 21st century, reaching remote locations, thereby leading to a perception of homogenizing of consumer desires and tastes, ranging from fizzy drinks, fast food to detergents and toothpaste. Popular culture, thus, is the sensitive litmus test that represents both tradition and transformation. As Durham observed:

Culture is produced and consumed within social life. Hence, particular cultural artifacts and practices must be situated within the social relations of production and reception in which culture is produced, distributed and consumed in order to be properly understood and interpreted. Contextualizing cultural forms and audiences in historically specific situations helps illuminate how cultural artifacts reflect or reproduce concrete social relations and conditions—or oppose and attempt to transform them. (Durham xxi)

The media critic John Fiske in his observations problematizes the dichotomous tug of war between pleasure principles in the public space of popular culture and the subversion by popular culture of the mainstream high culture that can be canonical, classical, and identifiable as the hegemonic grand narratives. Fiske argues, “that the very fact that pleasure is derived from popular culture makes popular culture threatening to the status quo of cultural mainstream. Fiske assumes that pleasure is always disruptive of social structures and cannot be controlled or regulated by them. Therefore, it is quite understandable why popular culture would always be the object of serious attack. And those attacks further prove that taking pleasure in popular culture is itself an act of resistance.” (Grossberg et al. 254)

Also, in his essay “Postmodernism and Television” John Fiske defines popular culture and its deeply nuanced significance by defining its purpose and its distinction from theoretical problematization of classical definitions of high culture.

Popular culture is less a culture of art objects and images, and more a set of cultural practices by which art is imbricated into the routines and conditions of everyday life. This intersection between the images produced and circulated by the media industries and everyday life is absent from representational, mimetic and postmodern theories of the image. All of these focus their theoretical lens upon macro-structural relationships whether between the image and ideology, the image and reality, or the image and

other images. None of them look at the concrete, contextualised practices at the intersection between socially produced images and socially positioned people. (Curran and Gurevitch 60)

The implosion of popular culture and the media impact from soaps to reality TV have rocked the traditional bases of Indian culture according to Kamlesh Mohan who argues, “Obviously, this narcissist ethos of consumerist culture militates against the communitarian orientation of Indian culture which values fulfillment of individuality within familial and kinship network” (Sethi 228).

Identifying the enabling factors that are integral to Indian popular culture studies, as interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary approaches, “dialogical and intertextual resonances between different genres and cultural formations,” the common “vernacularism” as opposed to high culture and the tensions between dominant culture and resistant voices, sociologist Patricia Uberoi observes:

The conspicuously globalized popular culture of the upper-middle-classes, though a minority one, is neither more nor less authentic than the more conservative culture of the lower middle classes, or the mass culture manufactured for the urban working classes, the rural consumer, and the socially dispossessed. (Uberoi 6–7)

However, popular culture also bears out that economic class differences become more discriminatory and conservative in their attitudes toward women leading to not just class inequality in terms of consumption but gender inequality that is inherent when the focus is on women as target consumers. Globally and locally popular culture has been identified for its propensity to consolidate stereotypes and resist innovations, creative initiatives, and nonconformism as reprehensible acts of social and moral transgression. In “Media and Popular Culture” Ruth Holliday makes an interesting reference to a washing powder advertisement where a son washes his mother’s cardigan before she goes out on a date with her boyfriend. This may overtly indicate a postmodern single parent family, where the son is a willing co-sharer of domestic chores. But the intention of the son is to prevail on his mother to wear the cardigan so that she can cover her cleavage exposed through her revealing dress. This desire for control of his mother’s sexuality links the medieval and modern in terms of patriarchy and capitalism and their representation by the media (Richardson and Robinson 188).

In India, women in television advertisements still perform traditional roles of washing clothes, almost invariably serving food to adults and children, and are often shown as craving jewelry, using cosmetics, and displaying clothes. Even professional women seem to be obsessed with

the power of the fair and hence lovely skin, glossy long hair, and a slim body. A daughter therefore reprimands her mother and urges her to give up her job in office if she is unable to nurture her daughter's hair due to her job. Mothers wash, stitch, and iron clothes for professional daughters such as flight attendants. However, in the last few years cosmetics for men has infiltrated into this female-dominated target consumer arena. Men's clothes on TV soaps are either ethnic or ceremonial, worn at home as casuals or in ethnic festivals. In the corporate sector, western clothes for men have remained the norm through the postcolonial times. Women continued wearing ethnic clothes, during both colonial and postcolonial times—both at home and at the workplace. However, globalization and its hegemonic interventions have led to homogenization of clothes, with blue jeans, T-shirts, and executive suits emerging as preferred choices. Sociologist J.K. Tina Basi attributes this change in sartorial preference to call center jobs that recruit women workers from both urban and suburban sections of Indian society. Western culture, the English language, and exposure to western lifestyle norms play a transformative role in this makeover. As a matter of fact, the transnational, transcultural networks create “institutionalized cosmopolitanism” (Basi 107) that extend the de-territorialized space of the media. But this is not a simple sweeping categorization of choices; choices are complicit with the factors of class, gender, and location.

But the most significant part of this process of transition is that the deep penetration of traditional role-playing is sustained in what appears to be contemporary situations and futuristic concerns. In a TV advertisement again, a five-year-old is seen asking his father while the family is having dinner, “Dad, do you have a plan for my future?” The parents exchange glances of guilt at this precocious wake-up call and an investment agent offers to secure the child's future with a “Child Plan” proposal. However, what needs to be doubly noted here is that the male child asks this question to his father, the provider, not his mother, the homemaker. The visual suggests an affluent home and the mother is in western casuals, but there is no indication of role reversal or equal power relations.

## **Not a Borderless Media Empire: Divide and Rule**

It is becoming an increasingly apparent fact that Indian popular culture indicates the growing schism between the advantaged and disadvantaged classes. The digital divide becomes obvious from the target audience of

television advertisements. It excludes almost 70 percent of the Indian population while the rest succumb to seduction generated by processed food, techno gizmos, tourist spots, and international cosmetics. The linguistic divide that is simultaneously created shows again advertisements in the English language for high-end products like plasma television and cars while advertisements of toothpowder, washing powder, and cement are in Hindi. English therefore emerges as the signature language of economic power and social fame, while Hindi is used as a close second, but regional languages such as Bengali seem to advertise textbooks for competitive examinations and region specific commodities such as mustard oil and mustard powder. Therefore, instead of a participatory culture of inclusiveness, exclusivity becomes internalized within the material world of endless choice in the consumer-oriented market economy and the limited monetary resources of the average masses or *aam admi*. However, if masses are about the male-oriented *aam admi* or male masses, this may mean that the *aam admi* implies women as well, similar to the Anglo signifier "mankind," which implies inclusion of women. But in case the *aam aurat* desires a space of her own, does popular culture or the media act as facilitator, or do these platforms elide, romanticize, and mythify the roles and responsibilities of women? In other words, can popular culture and the liberated Indian media accept *aam aurat* to imply men and women as a general inclusive category? In the present social and cultural environment *aam admi* in India is about the accepted idea of mass representation, while *aam aurat* is about gendered power inequalities.

In *Globalization on the Ground: Media and Transformation of Culture, Class*, Steve Derne (2008) argued that media consolidated economic class divide in India. Derne distinguished between the elite middle-class Indians and the nonelite Indian middle classes stating that the latter resisted structural changes to the institutions of marriage and family and gender roles. The media-generated lifestyle approaches have been selectively adapted as a superficial veneer to the existing traditional institutions and structures. So it is blue jeans and religious superstitions, laptops and talismans, pasta and payasam that distinguish media effects in Indian middle-class culture. This is similar to Arnold Schwarzenegger, James Bond, and western pornography, all of which merely validate masculine muscle power and male dominance. Also the totalitarian constructed landscape of patriarchal value systems created by the media accentuates the processes that divide, mediate, and dominate as media effects and affect on the consumerist culture underscore (Couldry 155–77).

It is indeed a significant fact that Indian popular culture has resisted cultural globalization through overt and covert strategies despite

superficial levels of metamorphosis mostly in the sartorial and gastro-nomic preferences of the urban Indian youth. But blue jeans, skimpy tops, size zero, pizza, and pasta may suggest a homogenized culture but a deeper probe reveals that from garments to matters of gastronomic appropriation, all this has happened with great creative dynamism and irreverence. Fusion clothes and fusion food are an integral part of popular culture as are Bollywood films that recognize the Indian diaspora with enthusiasm and a liberated spirit of inclusiveness. It is no longer a world or an India that is about either/or, it is about an India that is rapidly transforming through the networks of cultural bridges, flyovers, and underpasses, as the situation demands and negotiating with the world, whether it is the global south or the global north, with confidence and creative zest. Ashis Nandy's essay on Indian popular cinema outlines clearly why instead of a social revolution in terms of globalization, mediated popular culture in India in an accommodative spirit has robustly included changes but has simultaneously continued with traditional value systems. Nandy observed:

Popular cinema creates a space for the global, the unitary and the homogenizing, but does so in terms of a principle of plurality grounded in traditions. As a result, the homogenization such cinema promotes is not a unilinear movement from diversity to uniformity, but a multi-layered affair with the global mass culture which takes weird new forms as a result. (Nandy 12)

Interestingly, the media transmits popular culture selectively, retaining deep-rooted patriarchal and capitalist norms of the market economy, and their embedded presence in contemporary society and culture. In our book we shall endeavor to analyse media flows and effects through semiotic readings and content analysis. Semiotics largely involves intensive readings of single texts through qualitative assessment attuned to the humanities discipline in textual analyses. Content analyses will involve reading of a large body of sample texts in order to identify quantitative data attuned to the social science discipline. This dual approach can be more holistic as it will inevitably address both signification and occurrence. In terms of gender inequalities as transmitted by the media Zoonen observes:

Looking at the differences within feminist media research, it seems that content analysis emphasizes the manifest working and non-working roles, women are portrayed in and their visual function as a decorative element while semiotics draws our attention to the power of "woman" as signifier of almost anything between virtue and vice, desire and fear. (Zoonen 85–86)

## Mediations

It is the media that has totally mediated Indian middle-class culture by causing a social and technological revolution on multiple levels from the casual to the deeply transformative, in terms of cultural interventions along with the resistance to the change in the world around. This agenda to de-recognize the changing cultural profile of a transforming India going through a makeover mode of image reconstruction becomes apparent for media images seem to reiterate and consolidate stereotypes that are no longer an integral part of the ground realities in the urban scenario. The glorification, mystification, and romanticizing of value systems of the past from child brides to self-effacement of women amply prove that the media can be biased or can be used as a consolidating tool for empowering patriarchal norms. As Dasgupta and Lal observe:

Advertisements on Indian television as well as prime-time serials produce these visual and verbal markers that register the fact that though in terms of material culture, technology has revolutionized the domestic, such as gas, microwave, washing machine, fridge, phone, television, personal computer, DVD player, and so on, the necessary lifestyle changes and ideological shifts are at a subcutaneous level. Conservative customs, practices and beliefs ranging from zodiac signs and wearing of precious stones to even religious superstitions, still play a dominant role within the middle-class domestic space. (Dasgupta and Lal 28)

Television, print journalism, films, and advertisements all carry the four-pronged imprint of a changing 21st century, and urban, suburban, and rural India have not remained unaffected by the *four* identifiable categories that have generated change in cultural structures (Brants et al. 175). According to Brants, these are *globalization* that also incorporates migration of labor from homeland to the lands of opportunities; *individualization* that celebrates self-image constructions, leading to the reflection that the 21st century is the age of imagology as opposed to ideology or stretching the idea of reinvention of identity. Further one can even venture to state that the present times pursue the ideology of image constructions; and *fragmentation*. This obviously leads to flows of images, flux, change, and skepticism about static universal noninvasive value systems. The fourth category, *depoliticization* once again underscores the lack of trust on the state apparatus and a self-seeking desire to identify with a civil society as its vigilante, ombudsman, and watchdog, in a participatory democracy that distances itself from the macro and meso and valorizes the micropolitics of everyday experiences.

Grossberg et al. make an interesting comment about the far-reaching influence of the mass media that can totally motivate human thinking and

action to a degree that the media consumers run the risk of becoming media marionettes manipulated and brainwashed by the media. They state that “Despite differences in taste and access, there are significant commonalities in our shared experience of the most ‘mass’ of the mass media, television, popular music, and block-buster movies” (Grossberg et al. 206).

Grossberg further argues that the media has penetrated identity formations based on traditional understandings of location, profession, and religion among others:

At the same time, the sense of unity among people, created by such powerful identities as were defined by religion, nationality, and work, have themselves been increasingly undermined by the powerful representations of difference that have come to define the media’s cultural content, even as the media has come to shape social life. Ultimately, the media’s ability to produce people’s social identities, in terms of both a sense of unity and difference, may be their most powerful and important effect. (Grossberg et al. 206)

This indeed attributes to the media an omnipotence and omniscience that can very well run the risk of being authoritarian and counter-hegemonic unless regulatory norms guide media interventions, for human life is after all not such a consumable story for electronic transmission. However, the success stories that the watchdog media have pursued, investigated, and relentlessly reiterated include the Jessica Lal murder and the jail term of the killer Manu Sharma, the punishment meted out to Amar Mani, the BMW murder case, the Nithari case, and most recently Ruchika’s suicide abetment by DIG S.P. Rathore. The participatory role of the media in meting out justice, have been commendable in the cases cited as examples, so we are aware that we have not mentioned many others.

Also, another remarkable feature of the Indian entertainment industry is the symbiotic relationship between the film and television industries. Padma P. Govindan and Bisakha Dutta state:

Satellite channels offer the film industry an exponentially increased ability to promote and market their films through television previews, programming that features song and dance sequences, and the purchase of telecast rights to popular films. Television shows (as well as print media) in turn depend on the film world—its music, award ceremonies, and celebrity gossip—for programming and articles. (Kavoori and Punathambekar 185)

Govindan and Dutta also support the view stated in this book, that despite such unprecedented use of images and information, stereotypes

are consolidated and any progressive transformations, if at all, occupy a peripheral position. This is the routine agenda in filming women celebrities or even the common woman and the continuing binary of the vamp/virgin that now becomes a central discourse, no longer limited to just the femme fatale who is projected and punished for living dangerously and for moral transgression. So Priyanka Chopra in Bhandarkar's *Fashion* is a sexually attractive model and also a heroine. The complex negotiations, however, bring back the binary of the good/bad woman in Hindi films. However, *Fashion* emerged as an outstanding heroine-centric film, a rarity in the Bollywood industry, where the accolades for the successful women's hockey team in *Chak De! India* was overwhelmingly intended for the male coach Shahrukh Khan. Perhaps as *Fashion* was after all about the lives of ramp models and hence outside the boundaries of the traditional familial definitions unlike the divorced mother and her daughter in *Aaja Nachle*, Priyanka Chopra's role playing was received positively by the viewing public but Madhuri Dikshit's role in *Aaja Nachle* seemed to have been de-recognized.

## Gender politics

Interestingly, therefore, popular culture continues the traditional paradigm of the ideal Indian woman, self-effacing caregiver and the maternal grace that is her essential mystique. As she refers to Mankekar's observations about Indian television, Margaret Gallagher in her essay "Feminist Media Perspectives" points out that

Indian television of the early 1990s addressed upwardly mobile women as the prime market for consumer goods, while simultaneously trying to engage them in the project of constructing a national culture through television serializations of the great Indian mythological epics—The Ramayana and the Mahabharata—in which women's role in the family, community and nation was depicted as cardinal.

So the "liberties" of consumerism were in constant conflict with the duties of nation and family—building as presented in the televised epics (Valdivia 30). The television serials and the gendered advertisement bear this observation out through the use of images and words, lifestyle representations, garments worn by men and women, and also garments worn by children. As a regular practice in visual representations married women are most often seen wearing the national dress, the sari, while unmarried women are seen in western clothes. Other than ethnic festive occasions such as Diwali, Rakhi, and Bhai Duj, urban men are in western clothes, which are sometimes advertised as "power" dressing signifying the "complete" man. Blue jeans are a marker of liberated,

cosmopolitan urban lifestyle in the Indian context, but till date Indian garments could not become the preferred daily wear of the western world and that includes the South Asian diaspora. Sujata Moorti comments on this issue of global infiltration on local fashion and the fusion that becomes a part of fashion apparel that brings the capitalist market economy and the desirable image of cultural cosmopolitanism on the same platform. Moorti writes, "Dressing negotiates between the intensely personal and the prescribed and constructed layers of the social; it also concerns ideology, seduction, and North-South relations. Thus through bodily adornment one can acquire symbolic and economic capital" (Valdivia 300). However, the changelessness of Indian popular culture becomes apparent if one visits religious sites such as temples where young and middle-aged women and men are seen to be sporting their foreign brands from cell phones, watches, and sun glasses to jeans and tops who, however, quite seamlessly crack coconuts on stones, light incense sticks, carry plates of holy offerings for gods, dangle talismans from arms, wrists, and necks, and wear numerous rings to stave off the evil eye.

But the body images that the media celebrate, however, stimulates dissatisfaction with one's own physique and a desire to acquire the media-hyped proportions of ramp models, movie stars, and waif-thin celebrities. Women are of course imaged and imagined as thinner than men but to be size zero for women courtesy Kareena Kapoor and to acquire the six or eight pack abs courtesy Shahrukh Khan or Aamir Khan has seen the mushrooming of gyms and body-sculpting centers, cosmetic surgery, beauty parlors, and spas. Middle class—high, middle, low—is the main target as the members are more in number. But the elite too are not exempt. Media through television images and images in advertisements make it a realizable dream, which may result in desiring body images that may lead to self-destruction. Anorexia, bulimia, fasting, dieting, and inadequate nourishment, all are potential killers and women willingly validate the idea that looks can kill, such is the obsessive compulsion to look like a media generated body image. As Wykes and Gunter argue, "At best, media images of the body are politically oppressive and commercially exploitative. At worst they may justify a young woman's efforts at self-annihilation" (Wykes and Gunter 219). Few questions are ever asked about the fact that such exertions to acquire the "thin is beautiful" look runs the risk of weakening the physique of women, whereas, the emphasis on men's muscle-packed body correspondingly makes them stronger and in all probability, makes them more resistant to lifestyle-generated illnesses.

In its context, we may cite the case of supermodel Gitanjali Nagpal who turned into a drug addict; her career graph can be tracked from

catwalk to sidewalk as reported in the *The Times of India* on September 7, 2007. She was spotted roaming the streets of New Delhi and was rehabilitated by an NGO agency. This is not an atypical case but the tip of an iceberg. Madhur Bhandarkar's film *Fashion* also makes case studies of such fractured identities of glamorous showstoppers and their sizzling body images. As Shoma Munshi observes, "But come the 1990s, and Indian cinema and advertising reflect the arrival of the perfectly sculpted body to meet exacting international standards" (Munshi 85). The media has contributed largely in creating images of young women who bridge the global and the local, through a cosmopolitan body imagining and sartorial choices and yet retain traditional Indian norms and religious rituals. So it is a routine sight to see young women in tight tops and blue jeans walking to the neighborhood temples with metallic plates filled with flowers, sweets, and fruits as *puja* offerings to the gods and goddesses. As Shoma Munshi comments, "[V]isual media in India now echoes post-liberalization India with the youthful, westernized-yet-India-at-heart persona for whom London and New York are nearby but whose heart is in the right place, being unflinchingly Indian. The middle class urban Indian now comfortably straddles two worlds..." (Munshi 88–89). Though their clothes are western, but their global, say, English language communication skills are surprisingly limited and sometimes nonexistent. Appearances are truly deceptive, literally, in this context.

But body imaging in the 21st century has percolated to working-class settlements in urban and suburban areas, so young women in slums set up beauty parlors there to cater to slum clientele who find it easier on the purse to use these unregistered parlors in the homes of their neighbors, where hair coloring, eye brow tweezing, waxing, formal makeup, and hair cutting are common facilities. As no training certificates are required, this boom of women clients and women beauticians in the unorganized sector is truly remarkable. Often again, domestic workers and their daughters provide in-house massage and beauty therapy to their female employers, such as manicure, pedicure, and hair coloring, all of which is mutually cost-effective. Indian women's consciousness, if not obsession about possessing a perfect well-sculpted body from hair to toes, has been a media construction boosting both local and multi-national cosmetic industries along with the mushrooming of fitness parlors, spas, and beauty parlors.

However, the most noticeable evidence of sexist imaging of patriarchal stereotypes in recent times has been the Kolkata-based newspaper *The Telegraph's* page 1 story of a vacillating government with Chief Minister and other government officials draped in saris. This is doubly significant as the media projects an image that is without a conservative gender bias and strives toward gender inequality in both private and

public domains (see Photo 1.1). The caption to the images of men in the government and bureaucracy draped in saris is indicative of such sexist notions about traditional binaries that define gender—“We apologize to women who may feel the elegant sari has been wasted on our administrators” (*The Telegraph* 1). Eminent intellectuals and culture activists recorded their protest in Letters to the Editor and also organized protest forums. Among the many letters the one written by Nabaneeta Dev Sen and 72 others recorded their outrage and demanded an apology from the newspaper, which in turn appealed to the sense of humor of the Bengali readers, as if a nation of Indian women were not included in the deliberate demeaning of women as procrastinators, she-Hamlets, dithering between performance and nonperformance, to act or not to do so being the challenging question leveled toward those who have traditionally internalized “silent” multitasking without sound and fury, knowing that calling attention to unpaid labor would signify nothing but lack of feminine grace. It is therefore further ironical that the same Kolkata-based newspaper joyously reported in connection with President Obama’s visit that India can now create jobs in the USA, instead of asking for alms and aid. The banner heading on the first page was “Dance to India Tune: How the World Has Changed: We Create Jobs for US” and the image on the title page was that of the First Lady, Michelle Obama, dancing with disadvantaged children to a Bollywood tune. In fact,

**Photo 1.1 Image of Chief Minister and Others in Saris**



Source: *The Telegraph* 1.

President Obama had danced too in that school but for the newspaper a dancing US President who was visiting India to firm up strategic partnerships would have seemed quite outrageous and needless to add, effeminate (see Photo 1.2). Though, of course, one must not forget that men never stop dancing in Bollywood films and almost never dance in Bengali “art” films.

**Photo 1.2 Image of Michelle Obama**



Source: *The Telegraph Sunday* 1.

## The hyperreal text and imagology

Baudrillard identifies the ubiquitous television that has invaded the domestic space of the industrial and technologically advanced locations, as the media flow that has zoomed beyond the traditional perspectival and panoptic spaces and become a genetic and generic mode that is simultaneously active and passive, a complex positionality. So Baudrillard suggests, “One must think instead of the media as if they were, in outer orbit, a kind of genetic code that directs the mutation of the real as hyperreal...” (Durham 473). As a result, this three-dimensional (3-D) effect gains the fourth dimension of the hyperreal, a metastate as it goes even beyond the perspectival notions such as, “TV is watching us, TV alienates us, TV manipulates us, TV informs us...” (Durham 473). And of course now with 3-D technology—facilitated television sets, television images submerge, overpower, and invade viewers as never before. Such invasive power of moving images therefore involves unprecedented viewer participation, though how far images evolve into symbols of change or

replicate the normative practices remains a matter of debate and ideological perspective.

In this context, the role and responsibility of the media becomes very serious as it is situated in that slippery intermediate space between the free market and ethics. Summing up the performance of the year 2009 locally and globally, Johann Hari's article in the UK newspaper *Independent* was reprinted in India in *The Statesman* on December 31, 2009, made some incisive observations about media content and control. Referring to the slow change that the much hyped "King of Change" Obama was able to deliver Hari interpreted the slowness in the change motion to the US media. Hari stated:

A large part of the problem is the atrocious US broadcast media. The TV news is one lengthy blow-job for the powerful, seeing everything from the perspective of the rich, and ridiculing arguments for progress. It serves its owners and advertisers by poisoning every political debate with death-panel distractions and silence for the things that matter. (Hari 5)

In the following paragraph of the same article Hari celebrates the hour-long unbiased, fact-based news report hosted by Amy Goodman broadcast from an independent New York-based media studio *Democracy Now* as he states categorically, "It is the best single source for making sense of the world that I know—and it is a model of what American media could be if it treated its viewers with respect" (Hari 5).

This argument about the media's motivational agenda being mediated by vested interests, thereby denying it freedom and choice mooted by Hari, has been referred to in more analytical and abstract terms in Ishan Joshi's article "Media Matters" in the *Statesman* (December 27, 2009). Referring to the media theorist Habermas's contention that the media should ideally operate without state-control and the controlling economic agencies, Ishan Joshi refers to the imminent tabling of the Broadcast Bill in the Indian Parliament and writes about the vast potential of the Indian media, "The largest group of considerable vintage diversifying out of print into TV, radio, Internet, advertising, event management and a variety of other media ventures with little resistance from any regulatory policy or body." Elaborating his argument further, Ishan Joshi concludes:

We have something to learn from the Western European model rather than the American on cross-media ownership regulations to ensure free market principles are not compromised by monopolistic patterns in that most vital of areas—the right to varied and even conflicting information and/or points of view. Only once these are in place, does it become, as it should, a matter of choice. (*The Statesman* 6)

However, the responsibility of the media and media ethics emerge as contentious issues as experienced in the reporting of the inefficient and corrupt organization of the recently held Commonwealth Games in Delhi (October 4–14, 2010) and the western media's exploitation of the same issues blown out of proportion to provide stories about the slovenly, unhygienic East. Even when the Games were in progress, BBC reports harped on contaminated water in swimming pools, and water in wash rooms and toilets in the Games village. Fidelity to national prestige, fidelity to factual evidences, fidelity to vested interests interested in the required slant in the story, all three categories can often challenge the agenda of reliable reporting and the journalist's own subjective commitment. Media bias, media lobby, agenda, and market ideology of media houses often overwhelm facts through mediations that are centered on self-interest that largely prioritizes profit and market sustainability. Pavan K. Varma comments that the impact of globalization on India's culture and identity must be monitored with vigilance so that exclusion of the local does not become the major part of the global makeover. Referring to the news coverage of the international media Varma writes:

The essential fact is that technology is not neutral; and, in a globalizing world, those who have the means to disseminate their own cultural priorities have an unassailable advantage. Since such powerful communication technologies *appear* to be neutral, their messages are often internalized as universal, without scrutiny for bias or selectivity. The rest of the world is then expected to passively accept a particular point of view, to the exclusion of all others. (Varma 246)

From the non-virtual world of the media in the free market and the freedom of the media, we move into the further problematized zone of the hyperreal that Baudrillard brings to our notice. If Baudrillard asserts that images are about the hyperreal, the world of simulation that has been widely discussed, from the simulations of the Disneyland to the filmic medium, a world of fantastic telescoping, it is an implosion that happens as polarities collapse. However, it is Milan Kundera who has perhaps given a new semantic dimension and interpretation of the simulacra through the use of concrete samples and descriptive details. In the characteristic gusto of a fictionist, Kundera poses the rhetorical question:

Imagology! Who first thought up this remarkable neologism?... What matters is that this word finally lets us put under one roof something that goes by so many names: advertising agencies; political campaign managers, designers who devise the shape of everything from cars to gym equipment; fashion stylists; barbers; show-business stars dictating the norms of physical beauty that all branches of imagology obey. (Kundera 127)

Kundera makes a categorical assertion of a new paradigm that is media-constructed and this new paradigm of the imagologue who has replaced the role of the ideologue. So Kundera states, “[I]magology has gained a historic victory over ideology” (Kundera 127).

In this connection, the role of the patrolling paparazzi becomes significant as their pursuit of winning stories brings down the private–public divide in terms of personal information being disseminated to the public about the lives of celebrities ranging from film stars to politicians and media and corporate barons. The tragedy of Princess Diana is a case in point. However, that is just the poisoned tip of the iceberg which is on its relentless drift through all locations. Referring to the British tabloid culture that is being replicated with energy and enthusiasm in India, Nona Walia states, “British tabloid culture does not give its celebrities any space. Reporters strategically trail the star, follow his movements, track his friends and break silence of family for a ‘prize.’ So, what’s the future of the Indian celebrity’s private space? ‘Indian celebs aren’t going to be able to breathe easy. In the future things will only get tougher as there’ll be no privacy for celebs,’ says Meera Khera, London-based publicist for Jude Law and Sadie Frost. She however adds:

The new generation of celebs know that certain key events in their life are now a commodity—marriages, births and I hate to say even death a la Jade Goody. Every part of yourself can be sold to the highest bidder. That’s a trend soon going to be seen in India. (Khera 3)

Images, stories, print visibility, publicity, self-promotion, and commodification of self-talent have fractured and reduced to insignificance erstwhile notions of moral reticence, modesty, and shyness. No film star would ever repeat the 19th century American poet Emily Dickinson’s rejection of self-promotion. Dickinson’s poetic talent was discovered only after she had died. Most of her poems were posthumously published. Here are a few lines from one of her short poems which may bear out clearly the difference that has happened in the psyche of the creative artist with technological advancement:

I’m nobody! Who are you?  
 Are you nobody, too?  
 Then there’s a pair of us—don’t tell!  
 They’d advertise—you know!  
 How dreary to be somebody!  
 How public like a frog  
 To tell one’s name the livelong day  
 To an admiring bog!  
 (Emily Dickinson, Poem 288 in Johnson 133)

In this invasive world of image constructions the role of the Indian film industry and specifically the emergence of Bollywood as a global player in the entertainment industry is undoubtedly remarkable. In her essay "The Global and the Local in International Communications" Annabelle Sreberny-Mohammadi refers to the emergence of a reverse cultural imperialism as it counters the cultural imperialism of the previous centuries. Referring to the impressive quantitative annual production of Indian films she comments on the Indian film industry's ability to fuse the local and the global in a felicitous tension, suggesting cultural confluence rather than a clash of cultures (Curran 180). The third chapter of our book will address the performative role of films and whether films can suggest alternatives to the existent stereotypes. Deshpande raises this important question about intellectual engagement and cultural evolution as he asks that if Bollywood is cast in the "Narcissus-Echo mould" can it be progressive, "If the cinema lacks courage to challenge the phallic narcissistic character of the average Hindi film, how can it foster alternative historical sensibilities? This is a legitimate question to ask in our journey into the world of Indian cinema and television" (Deshpande 30).

India has also managed to keep a somewhat dualistic yet productive tension between high art film and popular cinema, creating movies that reflect and reinforce different elements of India's rich cultural past as well as indigenizing invasive foreign elements into a distinctive Indian style. Similarly, Indian television has also enthusiastically incorporated the traditional and the trendy, leading to astonishing TRP ratings that serials of epics have generated. Sreberny-Mohammadi observes, "Television, too, has been successful at translating ancient Indian culture into popular contemporary televisual fare, The Hindu epic, the Ramayana, clearing urban streets and creating a huge demand for additional episodes over the fifty originally planned" (Curran 180–81). As international exporters of global cultural products the Indian film market has caused a revolution on economic, social, and cultural levels by localizing the global and globalizing the local and have been described therefore as "global cultural pluralists" (Prasad 46) through market penetration ranging from media forms to firms and media flows to effects. In fact it is also necessary to notice not only media flows, inputs, and outputs, but it is necessary to focus on the story makers, the media force, and the gender bias and glass ceiling that still exist in the Indian mass media from the press to televisions and films. As Kiran Prasad observes, "The increase in numbers of women who work in the mass media has not necessarily translated into increased power and decision-making in media organizations, women are not able to influence media policies" (Prasad 46).

In the traditional domain of the Indian print media, visibility, identity, and decision-making power of women journalists is still peripheral despite the staggering statistics in terms of quantitative output. Despite the 46,000 newspapers and journals that comprise the Indian print media of recent times, with largest number of publications in Hindi (nearly 19,000), followed by English (nearly 7,000) and Urdu (nearly 3,000). Ammu Joseph conducts an interesting reality check in terms of gender representation as she observes:

But many female journalists still experience slow and limited progress, if not stagnation, in their careers. And the existence of a glass ceiling, which currently keeps women from occupying the very top spots in the editorial hierarchy (of newspapers in particular), is widely acknowledged, even by women, who have reached relatively high positions within their news organizations. (Ross and Carolyn<sup>135</sup>)

However, in a recent film that has been entered for the Oscar award, the emergence of women media persons as personalities and not marionettes have been prioritized. If the film *Peepli Live* receives the recognition it deserves it will be an intelligent use of the film media exposing the plight of the wretched of the land exploited by the relentless camera lens, while in fact the film itself subtly participates in the same exploitation through the guise of exposures.

## Cyberscape and the Media

Also, the relatively new entrant in the media arena is of course the Internet and the cyber world that it creates. With the shrinking of the non-virtual reality, the sense perceptions of individuals of the world around them is being somewhat blurred, elided, refracted, and even distorted through repetitive images of the non-virtual reality, a systematic misrepresentation that often has a butterfly effect, dissidence on the Net, a riot, and bloodbath in the country, as the recent 2009 cases in Iran and China signify, while one was about the Presidential election, the other was about Chinese minority rights. Its advantage over the traditional television viewing is that it can involve active participation of family members or groups, unlike passive TV viewing. For:

The web is positioned as the television was once positioned, as a window to a wide world of discovery, possibly educational and certainly mind expanding. By showing the family gathered round the television, which is now WEBTV, family values (as in family television, too) are appropriated,

promoting family togetherness and countering the isolation obliquely referenced and suggested in the act of spending time on the Net. (Slayden and Willock 285)

The evolution from parrot couriers to electronic mail, from the era of modern technology to the meta-technology of postmodernity has opened up avenues of social networking that is beyond all borders. Indian parliamentarians, film celebrities to students, and even homemakers access Orkut, Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter, the last mentioned recently embarrassed a Member of Parliament whose casual tweets about “holy cows” led to cultural tensions forcing him to apologize. Digital diasporas, that is, diasporas organized on the borderless world of the Internet now play an active participatory role in involving themselves in national and international issues. Brinkerhoff defines the role of digital diasporas and their transnational identities and engagement which may seem idealized and yet not without positive potential, “Digital diasporas use the Internet to negotiate their identity and promote solidarity; learn, explore, and enact democratic values; and mobilize to peacefully pursue policy influence, service objectives and economic participation in the homeland” (Brinkerhoff 2). The emergence of the social media, release of the WikiLeaks files, the manipulation of corporate lobbyists as in the Radia case in India (*The Times of India* November 27–30) contribute toward blurring, spinning and fixing news, data and views, or even exposing data with an ulterior motive, at the behest of vested interests. All such technology enabled and problematized issues unequivocally underscore the fact that the watchdog media needs to be watched in turn, thereby raising serious issues about media ethics. The need for a two-way gaze, if not a pan-optic gaze, may perhaps be the way to go in a rapidly transforming scenario of highly competitive corporate players. Often however, the destructive impact of information explosion, the machinations of media manipulated by self-interest groups, the absence of defining media ethics and code of conduct, all contribute to a volatile environment that spins out of control and reduces an enabling media to a debilitating one generating negative results.

Also, news on television, news on the Internet, advertisements in both TV and the Net have infiltrated into the domain of print journalism, thereby leading to the collapse of sales of newspapers and magazines in the developed societies. Joe Cappo identifies newspapers and magazines as “a Medium in Trouble” (Cappo 64) as print journalism and the print industry failed to anticipate the reach of the cyber revolution and its participatory democratic mode. A corresponding ripple effect will steadily be felt in third world print industries as well with the advancement

and penetration of the telecommunication industries. Also e-commerce, e-marketing, electronic auctioneering such as eBay and online marketing such as the champion Amazon.com (Cappo 200) along with advertisements on television have contributed to the erosion and gradual marginalization of the print media.

However, the oppressive and exploitative factor of women's bodies, the embodiment and encoding of women's sexuality emerge as concerns among cyborg affiliates and theories and practices of cyberfeminism. Even the liberating technological domains remain male-centered instead of gender neutral. In the post-human, post-gendered, meat, and metal cybernetic conceptions too the defining roles of women remain ambiguous and ambivalent. In the essay "Cyberspace, Feminism and Technology" Stacy Gillis (Richardson and Robinson 205–20) points out that despite technological advancement and the liberating environment that the Internet provides, it is in visual pornography that women's bodies are "most prevalent," thereby suggesting the persistence of the notion of cyclical progression, which is regulatory and exploitative in its representation of young women's bodies as the perennial and ultimate seduction. This poses queries about the decision makers and investors in Internet components and literature that uses inputs on race, sexuality, class, religion, and gender categories attuned to market demands which are determined by patriarchy and capitalism. The *Sunday Times of India* (November 8) reported that pirated Japanese video game Rapelay was available in India and could not be banned by a cyber vigilance facility. In this sexually graphic video game the player is expected to rape a woman and her two teenaged daughters. The report further states, "...the internet is today littered with games that allow players not just to undress and grope women characters, but to tie them up, torture and rape them" (Ram 11). Another significant cyber event in 2009 was the astounding popularity of the *Savita Bhabhi* pornographic comic strip and its hasty banning by the Information and Broadcasting Ministry. Sociologist Patricia Uberoi commented, "To me, Savita Bhabhi was as if India, in spite of its coyness had come of age—a woman initiates all the action here, the porn is not crude but on the verge of sophistication. India got its desi Debonnaire in Savita" (Divya A. 17). Despite the *Savita Bhabhi* fan club and the attention of the foreign press tracking the phenomenal success of the website, *Savita Bhabhi* was laid to rest at the behest of a government directive as it challenged the traditional notions of the ideal Indian married woman as a silent sufferer who lacked agency.

Our concluding chapter will address these issues in detail as the road ahead is about technological advancement, cultural transformations, continuity of tradition, media control, media ideology, manipulative media,

and the crucial issues and signifiers of gender representation configured, conflated, and confabulated, by the media and popular culture. We are conscious about cyclical progression which is especially significant in the Indian context but globally too is an accepted standard as David Thorburn and Henry Jenkins observes:

Old media rarely die; their original functions are adapted and absorbed by newer media, and they themselves may mutate into new cultural niches and new purposes. The process of media transition is always a mix of tradition and innovation, always declaring for evolution, not revolution. (Thorburn and Jenkins 12)

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Nov 28 15-member Group to Ready Norms on Phone Tapping

Nov 28 2G Scam: ED to Summon Officials, Raja Aides PTI

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Nov 30 WikiLeaks spares India, for now Indrani Bagchi

Nov 30 India downplays WikiLeaks, defends ties with US PTI

Nov 30 Radia links leave CPM red-faced

# 2

## Indian Media in Transition: Recent Past and Present

### Introduction

With all her specificities and varieties, India from time immemorial has been anything but a static entity. Multifarious sources and waves of change have always been there amidst the apparent placidity not only in the space but in the very idea of India itself. Insofar as the recent history of India is concerned it is marked by not one but two transitions—first, the transition from the colonial to the postcolonial era in the late 1940s and second, the transition from the state dominance to the market ascendance in the early 1990s. In both cases there has been a remarkable and far-reaching churning of society, economy, and polity in structural and cultural terms. While we would be mostly engaged here in exploring the second transition, it cannot be done without at least briefly referring to the first. In the first transition, temporally marked by the year 1947, when India became independent after a protracted freedom struggle, the major contours of change were sought to be determined overwhelmingly by the then emerging postcolonial state, the dominance of which was “unquestionable.” In the process the state presented itself as omnipotent. The statist mode of development managed to have a deep impression not only in the sanctified policy circle and hallowed institutional arena but also in the mind of the Indians in their day-to-day affairs. Let us at the very outset refer to some key points here. First, one does not have to be an avowed feminist to realize that the Indian state has a “deep heritage” of patriarchy, which time and again has surfaced,

in some cases crudely and in some rather subtle. Second, the Indian state has for a considerably long time considered itself as the prime medium of communication, notwithstanding the fact that successive rulers have proclaimed their admiration for the role of the media in sustaining and strengthening Indian democracy. Third, even if the Indian state did not (and still does not) have an official “culture policy” as such it nevertheless is confident enough to set the terms of culture for its citizens, especially in the days of its hegemony. No doubt then the complex issues relating to media, gender, and popular culture were bound to be affected by the state-centric ambience. Not the least, the focus on such ambience with the transition thesis at the center stage also contributes to the understanding of the inevitable but complex point that analysis of media is inescapable in the “simulacral realm” popular culture in the contemporary era. Shohat and Stam lucidly explain the point:

The contemporary media shape identity; indeed, many argue that they now exist close to the very core of identity production. In a transnational world...media spectatorship impacts complexly on national identity and communal belonging. And while the media can destroy community...solitude by turning spectators into atomized consumers or self-entertaining monads, (it) can also fashion community and alternative 4 affiliations. (Shohat and Stam 7)

We shall subsequently argue, in the context of the second transition which constitutes our major concern, that while induced by the change brought forth by the twin force of globalization and liberalization the traces of continuity tend to make their presence felt. Before we embark on an analysis of the same let us conceptualize the interface of popular culture, gender, and media. Popular culture in terms of conceptual development has a remarkably varied career with contradictory thrusts, both direct and indirect—from the skepticism of the Frankfurt School (Adorno) which would be particularly concerned with the manipulative potential of the “culture industry” and the technological rationale of standardization and standardized content to the celebration of the “popular” by the proponents of cultural studies, who would associate it with opposition and resistance to domination. In the words of Ian Chambers:

Popular culture. Through its social exercise of forms, tastes and activities flexibly turned to the present, rejects the narrow access to the cerebral world of official culture. It offers instead a more democratic prospect for appropriating and transforming everyday life. For whatever its actual limits, people live through culture, not alongside it. If we wish to appreciate this potential, we must learn to stare hard at the realities of the contemporary world we all inhabit... (Chambers 12)

There has of course been no linearity in this journey marked by contradictory perceptions. After all, popular culture is to be “produced” and this process of production inevitably involves a heavy dose of political economy. Popular culture, it is thus rightly said, is “too tricky an idea to be pinned down by... a neat gesture” (Payne 417). The concept, despite its notable usage in contemporary academic and journalistic discourse, is not only a slippery concept, it is complex as well. The affix “popular” not only concerns the claims relating to the reflections and representations of the (ordinary) people, which by itself opens up to an array of orientations, attitudes, beliefs, values, skills, habits, preferences, and tastes, but it also simultaneously connotes to those who are not much convinced about such claim-making, something “low,” “unrefined,” “inferior,” “trivial,” and even “distasteful.” As the following explanation goes:

The association of culture with tradition and heritage effaces the potentialities of the present and denudes it of cultural invention. There is little space for the “popular” in such a conceptualization.... Yet popular culture engulfs people. Excluded from the ambit of (high) culture the masses are perceived as wallowing in the banal. (Ghosh 13)

Perhaps we spend more time in critiquing popular culture than in trying to understand its dynamics. The complexity and ambiguity in the production and reception of popular culture are compounded by the cohabitation of resistance and dominance in popular culture. In analysing the simultaneity of change and continuity we shall see that the “principal challenge with popular culture is that it has two contradictory thrusts. It may claim to speak from the people or it may claim to speak on behalf of the people” (Conboy 11). To minimize the complexity and ambiguity that are associated with the analysis of popular culture, it has been suggested that one should explore *what, when, where, why, and how* of it (Zelizer 310–13). Gender by virtue of being a social construction remains a key component of popular culture and with lot of *gray areas* and contradictory possibilities of enforcing both bias and equity it adds to the ferment.

To situate and contextualize the media vis-à-vis popular culture, let us make a general observation that media assumes the role of prime encoder-cum-disseminator of popular culture through its act of mediation and by producing a *notion of space* between the individual subject and reality—a space of experience, interrogation, and most important, meaning—beyond the formal relationship between the producer and consumer of its cultural forms and representations composed of texts and images (Silverstone 1–12). These cultural forms and representations, though constructed and encoded with hegemonic motives

and often rested on the arbitrary claims of defining the “reality,” are disseminated in a manner as if they are sourced from the audiences. As the maverick thinker Jean Baudrillard (1983) would remind us time and again through his notion of *simulacra*, in which the image is a complex reference point of the interplay of reflection/masking/perversion/absence of “basic reality” and one step ahead, in terms of *simulacrum*, detached from any relationship to reality whatsoever. Yet, media representations, including Baudrillard’s “flood of images,” are subject to multiple and varying decoding, often in competing and conflicting terms, by the media audience—the readers, the viewers, and the listeners—in the form of self and collectivity. This also explains why despite the unprecedented power of the media and its extraordinary reach it falls short of monopolizing the definitions of the world around us. Thus, having noted that the media is part of the general texture of our experience Roger Silverstone (6) goes on to add that it is in the “mundane world” that the media operates most significantly by filtering and framing everyday realities through “singular and multicultural representations, providing touchstones, references, for the conduct of everyday life, for the production and maintenance of common sense.” Denis McQuail (9), from a different vantage point, identifies the route of transformation of the media cultural issues in the “decomposition of the notion of the ‘popular’ and its reassembly in terms of everyday life and closeness to cultural and social experience.” The subsequent discussion of the two different eras in India would substantiate the aforementioned contentions.

## Era of State Domination

The history of the Indian media, from the colonial to the postcolonial era, is fairly long and is marked by various episodes. To cut a long story short, in the newly independent India the dominant mainstream media scenario was broadly divided into the print media segment and the segment of radio and television. No less important, the print media was largely owned and controlled by the private entrepreneurs and the radio and television was under the strict control of the state (Chatterji 13–38; Page and Crawley 35–71; Lynn Farmer, *Television*). This was a follow-up of the British tradition of free commercial press and government-owned broadcasting. The Indian print media has not been an “upstart;” it had played a noteworthy role in the late colonial era despite periodic attempts by the British rulers to gag its voice, especially since the mid-19th century, through acts like the Vernacular Press Act (1878) and the Newspapers (Incitement to Offences) Act of 1908.<sup>1</sup> But this tradition of

the print media was mostly preoccupied with the issues pertaining to the colonial era and India's subjection. Gender in the contemporary sense was not a major issue though women's conditions were part of the then prevalent discourse. Nor was the notion of popular culture, in its contemporary sense, in the limelight. In the postcolonial era both the deeply patriarchal Indian society and the utterly patriarchal Indian state would continue to privilege men at the cost of the "second sex." Notwithstanding the constitutional guarantee of "equality between sexes" the Indian society and the Indian state revealed a great convergence as far as the gender bias is concerned. When it came to the question of popular culture it was a largely marginal question as the age-old binary opposition between elite/high culture and mass/low culture held the center stage, with the state at best being indifferent and at worst being contemptuous to the latter.

The media in the official precincts in the state-dominant era was viewed as a powerful instrument which is to be used for defining and propagating the functions of the nation-state. There was the official recognition of the media as the Fourth Estate and the Freedom of Speech and Expression, enshrined in Article 19 (1)(a) of the Constitution of India as a Fundamental Right. But when it came to the question of autonomy of the media the Indian state was very cautious and careful (Masani 152–61). There is much truth in the observation that a psychology of conformity prevailed in All India Radio (AIR) to "ensure unquestioning compliance" which can be traced back to the colonial baggage (Kumar 2173–82). Thus, in 1952 the then Minister for Information and Broadcasting, B.V. Keskar, an ardent admirer of Indian classical music, would describe film music as "cheap and vulgar" and would instruct the radio stations to broadcast only music with "good taste." But Keskar was only one of the successive ministers—starting with Vallabhbhai Patel—holding the same portfolio, who would be up in arms against what they perceived as "distractions and temptations...capable of diverting people from the national quest for freedom and reformation" (Jeffrey 19). In AIR's case, popular culture seeped in through the commercial service called Vividh Bharati only in 1957 after the rising popularity of Radio Ceylon which would broadcast light songs, including Hindi film songs (Chatterji 49–50). In yet an interesting instance of the surveillance motive, Jawaharlal Nehru on March 15, 1948, and Rajiv Gandhi on July 7, 1985, in their respective tenures as the prime minister, would assert that time was not ripe for India to provide her citizens with autonomy of broadcasting (Chatterji 182). In other words, insofar as having free radio and television is concerned the Indian citizens were as much "immature" in the 1980s as they were in the late 1940s of the

preceding century. Though they did not say so in so many words the main factor behind such reticent attitude was the fear that autonomous AIR and Doordarshan would indulge in frivolous programs, catering to the lower end of the popular taste, and would thus deviate from the path of educating people in the rules and norms of citizenship. The zeal to educate the “people” and turn them into “proper citizens” reached a high point following the proclamation of Emergency in the mid-1970s when the print media was brought under strict censorship and the radio and television were used as instruments of propaganda which included the most atrocious diktat of the Indian state till date—“work more talk less.” This piece of diktat has to be related to the hostile attitude of the state to public communication (Sinha, “Public Communication” 2326–29).

The Emergency days might have been the most dramatic high point of aggression of the state-domination and state-dominated media but even in “normal” times the official media remained the mouthpiece of the Indian state. One can take up the case for Doordarshan to substantiate the observation. In order to understand why gender and popular culture would remain a blind spot in Doordarshan’s scheme of things it is imperative that we explore, albeit briefly, both Doordarshan’s parentage and upbringing. A number of studies (Ohm 69–96; Gupta, *Switching Channels*) show that Doordarshan’s emergence and its parenting are to be attributed to the state which was entwined with the be-all and end-all objective of “national integration.” The state thus needed to disseminate information about its development activities, and Doordarshan being the electronic medium with the widest possible reach was supposed to be a major “agent” of information dissemination. As Ohm writes:

The state’s definition of Doordarshan has consisted of its central vision: that the future should bring forth an educated, civilized and united citizenship. Long after the proliferation of the private satellite channels Doordarshan’s main aim remained ‘national integration, inculcating a sense of unity and making people proud that they are Indians. (Ohm 82)

The state was not only responsible for inculcating such spirit to Doordarshan since the latter’s birth, it was also responsible for constant parental surveillance of Doordarshan even in its “adulthood” (Sinha, “Development [Without] Communication” 140–53). The point continues to be true even in the days of Prasar Bharati (Broadcasting Corporation of India) which came into being after spending fair amount of time in “cold storage” (Ghose 217) to provide so-called functional autonomy to Doordarshan and AIR on November 23, 1997. One can verify the contention by the news content of both.<sup>2</sup> Thus, in a way it seems that Doordarshan was fated to be governed by a complex mix of patrimony, ambivalence, and paradoxes, which never allowed the gender issue to be addressed. Nor could popular culture have much status in its cognitive map.

## And Then There Was Liberalization

The year 1991 has marked the official beginning of the transition from the state control to the market domination, with the Government of India formally adopting the neoliberal market reforms as the driving force of governance. Yet, such transition could not be exclusively “Indian” in character. While the political economy dimension of such transition involves the negotiations by the Indian state with the neoliberal conditionalities of economic development prescribed by the developed states and the transnational institutions like the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Trade Organization, there is another side to it which is of prime relevance in tracing the roots of the changes we are engaged with in this discussion—the vital role of the cultural economy. It is important to point out that be it media or gender or popular culture, in a specific locale like India all are enmeshed in the logic of cultural economy with strong transnational roots. The advent of the satellite era and the rise of the electronic media, which are inextricably linked, have intensified this process in a major way but there are other factors vis-à-vis the broader process of globalization too.

At this juncture we can refer to Arjun Appadurai’s repertoire (296–310) of five “scapes” of global cultural economy: (i) Ethnoscape: landscape of persons vis-à-vis human motion, with the realities of having to move, or the fantasies of wanting to move; (ii) Technoscape: global configuration of the ever-fluid technology, both mechanical and informational, cutting across previously impervious boundaries; (iii) Financescape: movement of global capital through national turnstiles at a blinding speed with vast absolute implications for small differences in percentage points and time units; (iv) Mediascape: the image-centred, narrative-based accounts of strips of reality—offering a series of elements, such as, characters, plots, and textual forms out of which scripts can be formed of imagined lives, their own as well as those of others living in other places; and (v) Ideoscape: concatenations of ideas, terms, and images, which are often directly political and frequently have to do with the ideologies of state power or counter-ideologies of movements explicitly oriented to capturing state power or a piece in it. What is implicit in Appadurai’s formulations and which needs to be underlined in our context is that all such “—scapes” have a commonality in having communication as their inherent driving force. In the contemporary cultural economy nothing happens without communication. The incessant flow of people, images, and ideas, technology and capital are all to be framed and perceived as “flow” of numerous beliefs, attitudes, values, and images, involving the

senders and the receivers. With this backdrop in mind let us now take up a concrete instance in the Indian televisual scenario as the catalyst for change.

Significantly, it was 1991—the same year in which India opted for liberalization—when STAR TV made its entry into India. The era characterized a new beginning in policy reorienting (Shields and Muppidi 1–24) and in redefining the cultural space and the notion of Indianness with both disjunction and continuity (Butcher, *Transnational Television*). Doordarshan as a major media organization could not remain immune. In fact, the impact of liberalization proved to be quite costly for it. A major blow to Doordarshan's monopoly-power was dealt by the Supreme Court which in a judgment with far-reaching impact in a case<sup>3</sup> ruled that the Indian government's monopoly over broadcasting was "unconstitutional." While the judgment in declaring that airwaves constitute public property and must be utilized for advancing public good was not particularly in favor of broadcasting being left free and without any control, it did prepare the ground for the deregulated broadcasting, setting free the televisual environment for open competition.

If such legal-institutional changes were not enough, the 1990s also brought profound changes in the broadcasting arena with the entry and quick-paced penetration of the satellite and the cable channels. The broadcasting scenario in India could not have a greater transformation in almost all conceivable aspects (the only exception being the foreign equity participation in private broadcasting companies) and Doordarshan had no other alternative but to face the game in a highly dynamic, extremely competitive environment. This is notwithstanding Doordarshan's complaints that satellite channels were resorting to unfair competition to "reduce Doordarshan's revenue" by "manipulating popular ratings" of television programs (*The Statesman* 7).

Doordarshan's decline in power and status, precipitated among other factors by the rise of a number of proactive private competitors, led to its uneasy negotiation with the new reality. Such uneasiness primarily relates to devising means to strike a balance between revenue generation, which is essential to survive in the newly competitive environment, and the imperatives of public service broadcasting in public interest. It is noteworthy that the Prasar Bharati Review Committee, in its report in the year 2000, emphasizes the need for the public service broadcaster to strike such a balance in the face of the new reality.<sup>4</sup> More specifically, concerning entertainment, which shares lot of overlapping with popular culture, the Doordarshan was in great dilemma. Should it prioritize entertainment, the last of its prime ethos? In a significant observation the report on *A Vision for Indian Television* (1986) draws our attention to this:

(T)elevision, caught in the cleft-stick of raising resources and filling expanded broadcast time, had abandoned all its social objectives and placed itself at the mercy of advertisers....It is for the television to modulate and moderate programme content. The norms *and methodology*...*have to be carefully worked out*... (NAMEDIA 34; brackets and italics mine)

Entertainment laced with popular culture had to be taken into consideration by Doordarshan not only because of the pressure from the competitors but also because it had the potential to contribute, especially in the face of the rising number of middle-class consumers, much to the revenue generation. But the question was entertainment at what cost? While the promotion of programs with popular culture content would contribute to Doordarshan's reorientation in the face of the new reality, it would on the other hand, result in Doordarshan losing its distinctive character. Till today Doordarshan has not been able to come to terms with the pulls of post-liberalization scenarios of change, and its hankering for continuity. Nor did Doordarshan manage to get a glorious report card in the realm of gender representations. Thus, the aforementioned report made the following comment:

The government must at the earliest formulate clear-cut guidelines regarding positive portrayal of women on television. The portrayal must take note of women in all facets of their lives: as workers, and significant contributors to family survival and the national economy. Women must not be portrayed in stereotypical images that emphasize passive, submissive qualities encourage them to play a subordinate secondary role in the family and society.

The waves of change were, however, too strong for Doordarshan to reorient itself, especially, as we shall see subsequently, in the new ambience of the high tide of popular culture.<sup>5</sup>

## Cricket as Mediated Popular Culture

The meteoric ascendance of cricket would be a good illustration of the change-orientation and the traces of continuity vis-à-vis the media, gender, and popular culture that we are seeking to highlight. Originally an introverted game played in Britain and few of her colonies, cricket has been commodified and marketed to the maximum possible extent—aided among other factors by the state-of-the-art technology, and epitomized by its latest incarnation Twenty20. It is today not just a game but a spectacle constructed by an aggressive visual regime. In India, cricket is a commodified “item” of popular culture by virtue of being produced

for the people who are basically perceived as audience-cum-consumers. It attracts, sells, and is watched in large number. This marketplace approach is to be simultaneously understood with cricket being a symbolic object and practice which in some specific ways relates to popular beliefs, values, and even traditions. In an interesting spin, the media representations of cricket in its new avatar not only concerns “for whom it is produced” it also stresses on “how it is being interpreted.” At one stroke it almost perfectly fits in the frame of popular culture when it expresses the aesthetic, hedonistic, spiritual, and symbolic values of a reasonably large segment of people. One would perhaps remember the television commercial of a popular edible product during the last Cricket World Cup, which would implore the viewers to live, dream, and eat cricket. Going far beyond “doing” cricket and “talking” cricket it sought to deepen our involvement with cricket in everyday life, body- and soul-wise.

The mainstream media<sup>6</sup> obviously is a key factor in this process, be it cricket or any other commodified items—from soaps and shampoos to televisions, air-conditioners, health drinks, designer watches, cell phones, and so forth. As long as the item has market potential and brand value the media would act as the main agent of dissemination. Then again, such a role of the mainstream media comes with a catch which in many cases may reinstate rather than change the gender bias. Thus, in catapulting cricket into popular imagination the media plays a subtle game. On the one hand, when it comes to panning the television camera to the spectators in a fair number of cases it follows “gender equity” showing a fair number of women. One can notice that in the post-liberalization era the framing relates to vibrant and energetic young girls who are supposedly engrossed in the game. This is in marked contrast to the television bytes, much less in number, of older, bored women who would be often seen knitting while supposedly watching cricket. Apparently, change underlies such distinction, but does it really? A careful look might reveal that the young girls are more of cheerleaders and less of intense followers of the game. But the media does not stop at the gallery. It seeks to replicate the same in the studio itself. Thus emerged the “Mandira Bedi syndrome” in a program called *Extraa Innings*, based on deft and calculated incorporation of a smart, talkative, and provocatively dressed (attire ranging from the Indian tri-color to noodle-strapped shoulder-revealing tops) sitting with *less exuberant* male commentators and discussing the nitty-gritty of the game with a lot of indulgence in trivialities. One cryptic observation on the construction of “fun filler” Mandira Bedi as the leitmotif of the supposed women’s constituency in cricket finds in the process finds in it an effort to silence Indian women’s “own subjectivity and agency” (Banerjee 143).

## Spin Effect beyond Cricket

What happened with cricket was only a manifestation of a causal factor with decisive spread effect. Thus, in the liberalization-friendly India the change-effect pervades the ₹ 50,000 crore-strong media and entertainment arena and the realm of popular culture, with the gender issue being a major, though not the sole, determinant. It is necessary to reiterate here that it is the complex interplay of gender and class that determines the contours of popular culture. In the post-liberalization India, a market with vast growth potential, there is little doubt that insofar as the media is concerned the “merchants” (the private entrepreneurs) have greater control than the “princes” (the representatives of the state). On its part the media is playing a decisive role in promoting a trend in the Indian public space—opening up vistas and public discourse on/of gender and popular culture with subtle strategy of promoting “post-ideological lifestyle” characterized by eclectic and fluid processes. In the days of globalization and satellite culture, as one observation reminds us (Page and Crawley 139–83), it goes beyond the borders of India, in other parts of South Asia, to ensure a new lingua franca and new spectator positions. In different categories of media—print, electronic, audiovisual, and virtual—the imprint of transition, though differing in degree, is too evident to be underestimated. The following chapters of the volume would analyse such imprint in greater detail but in this chapter we can provide a brief overview.

In a classic case of “print capitalism” bowing to the pressure of “electronic capitalism” the post-ideological lifestyle is becoming more evident in popular press, which many supposed would show strongest resistance to the same. Most Indian newspapers have discarded their broadsheet character to resort to tabloidization. The Page 3 culture that is now an integral part of the newspapers in India was never so in the earlier era because at that time information and entertainment could not be fused so easily and regularly. Today in the days of infotainment and stiff competition such an idea borders on absurdity. As a journalist writes on the fast changing track of the news media, “With increasing competition, the rush for quick and easy bottomline enhancers has become particularly graceless. Even in the late eighties, I remember, we used this ‘babe’ trick, but in a limited way” (Dev Sen 278). She also notes that being enamored by the fantasy woman the Indian media is “steadily turfing out the harassed Indian woman” whom “we see in single-column, single-inch news reports, who hardly ever makes an appearance in magazines or supplements” (Dev Sen 277). Almost all newspapers in India, with rare exceptions like *The Hindu*, have deliberately blurred the

essential attributes of news on the basis of the oft-cited “market demands it” logic. Again, it is because the market demands it one finds glossy magazines surpassing the newspapers in disseminating bolder representations. Thus, one finds, almost coinciding with the Supreme Court verdict in 2009, on decriminalizing homosexuality and lesbianism in Indian laws, the provocative images of scantily clad Neetu Chandra and model Krishika Gupta in a tight embrace in a men’s magazine.

Films are also reinventing themselves with the changing times. If one, for instance, thinks of the changing course of the mainstream Hindi filmdom—arguably the most influential carrier of popular culture in India—it is not just the astonishing gloss in terms of high-tech venture or the twisted storylines in place of the linear ones of the earlier era. Gone are the days of Mehboob Khan’s *Mother India* which would induce the main protagonist to sacrifice her maternal instincts to the imperatives of nation-building or Manoj Kumar’s *Purab Aur Paschim* in which the protagonist would take up the plough in his quest for nationalism-led development. Today the nation-building process in Bollywood films, as *Lagaan* would show, goes even temporally backwards to the colonial times to take advantage of the popular frenzy over cricket. The change in the mindset of the filmmakers and presumably of the audience also reveals the change in the dominant representation of Indian women in such films—from the quintessential mother (as Nargis in *Mother India* or Nirupa Roy in *Deewar*) to “equal” partner (as Kajol in *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai*). There has also been a simultaneous change from the pristine pure *Sati Savitri* image of the leading lady (as personified by Nutan or Nanda) with female lead would not mind being vampish and bold. Such trends are not confined to Mallika Sherawat and Kangana Ranaut as it spills over to once-coquettish Vidya Balan who would sleep with both uncle and the nephew in *Ishqiya*. But in most cases the filmmakers seem to be harboring a “thus far and no farther” attitude. Thus, be it Mallika Sherawat or Kangana Ranaut trying to seduce the hero or Bipasha Basu or Konkona Sen Sharma or Priyanka Chopra fighting it out in the bad world of corporate firms, print media, and the fashion industry in respective films of Madhur Bhandarkar, at the end of the day one finds them all being “victims” of the male-dominated conspiracy. The victimhood syndrome, it seems, is still a safe bet for the Hindi mainstream filmmakers in their perception of popular culture and construction of gender. This has not escaped the attention of the analysts of popular culture. As Ashis Nandy (235) explains, the commercial Hindi films “if by default” continue to be “protective” toward non-modern categories and viewing practices. On the part of the defenders of the so-called Indian tradition any bold attempt to cross the *Laxmanrekha* would be

dealt with violently. The instance of the series of attacks on the screening of *Fire*, a film made by the Indian-born Canadian filmmaker, Deepa Mehta, which portrayed lesbian sexuality, came under fire literally from the self-proclaimed champions of “female chastity.” We shall refer to *Fire* in the chapter on “Filming Change, Securing Tradition.”

The change in the advertising arena was initiated by a more aggressive hybrid language—*Yeh Dil Mange More*. Consumerism was always the backbone of advertising but with the advent of television commercials in post-liberalization India—in which, as a commercial of a global soft drink multinational would show, the nation Hindustan would be substituted by *Youngistan*—a nation would be subordinate to brands. “One More Please,” in a woman’s seductive and indulgent voice, transcends immediacy and becomes the metaphor for depicting and promoting the insatiable urge for higher and greater levels of consumption, often surpassing the attributes of the specific brand being advertised. A commercial of a two-wheeler takes this urge for brand value to the maximum in showing two sisters, being provoked by the urge to get a single piece of the vehicle, indulging in sibling rivalry to the extreme—snatching the best dress, clashing with each other to get out of the room and rushing in to be on the prized possession. Is it a representation of the fierce women power of the new era or is it that of an animated object which has little reasoning and sanity? The “fuzzy logic” seems to come to the fore. In a number of advertisements and commercials women are shown to be highly competent, “employable,” and “empowered,” snatching jobs from their male counterparts and conducting corporate meetings and making decisions. In some, as in the case of a commercial, the female character would even gatecrash inside a flight to advise a toothache-prone man to use a specific brand of toothpaste mixed with salt. Yet here again the pulls of continuity remain. Let us refer to some instances in which the professional success of women comes with a rider. Thus, the commercials of fairness cream would carry the message that only fair girls perform well in interviews and grab jobs. Even the commercials highlighting the so-called empowered and employed women would incessantly carry the message that notwithstanding their success in the professional world the subject at the end of the day must not forget to buy a specific brand of oil and cook for the rest of the family. The image of a smiling woman cooking and the rest of the family enjoying her selection of oil is quite a familiar view for the audience. A popular brand of hair oil would show a woman police officer in full uniform procrastinating before the deity in a temple, presumably before taking up a risky assignment or for post-performance thanksgiving—an interplay of image and message of a Brahminical India which would never have a man as a subject.

But it was left to television to be the most visible and powerful media-agent of change during India's tryst with liberalization. Since the 1990s, coinciding with the onset of the liberalization, India has witnessed the growth of an extremely powerful television, a 24x7 power pack, which has definitely usurped and surpassed the power of print media. One can in this context refer to a study titled *Politics after Television* (Rajagopal) in which the author links and analyses the telecast of *Ramayana* and the Hindu public amidst the ongoing market reforms and heralds it as the beginning of a qualitatively different and unprecedented televisual regime. As hinted earlier, television's impact on the print media has compelled the latter to change its hitherto existing form and content drastically. Television through its mega serials has given a hard competition to films in terms of audience attention, apart from being a convenient medium of viewing films. It has revolutionized advertising by its unleashing commercials which combine voice with moving images to present more convincing messages. The mega serials like *Rajni* and *Udaan* had ushered in the representations of the "new era" Indian women on the television screen. The screen character *Rajni* would make all sorts of tirades against abuse of power, corruption, and wrongdoing faced in everyday life by the ordinary citizens. In *Udaan* the depiction of the struggle of a woman from the underprivileged class to become an Indian Police Service officer would definitely be offbeat. But one need not overstretch the point. The televisual scenario in India also seeks to "balance" these instances of reversal of gender bias with K-serials of Ekta Kapoor, which leaves no stones unturned insofar as the perpetuation of the stereotypical and patriarchal images and values are concerned. In reality television programs based on "investigating" real-life crimes, woman's body as a locale of violence and abuse seems to have good market potential. In serials, such as *FIR*, in which Haryana police inspector Chandramukhi Chautala would lord over not only male criminals but also male colleagues, the screen-role has to have a mix of "manliness," for instance, in frequent acts of slapping, and lot of "womanly traits" in the skin-tight uniform. A number of mega serials like *Balika Vadhu*, *Sajan Ke Ghar Jana Hai*, and *Aagle Janam Mohe Bitiya Hi Keejo* constitute the gray area marked by the supposed promotion of cause of the girl child and/or woman's power and the stereotypical representations, including child marriage in the first mentioned case, in the name of such promotion (Singh, "Glorifying Child Marriage").

Notwithstanding the hype that is associated with the Internet as the most revolutionary media in "new India" the fact remains that it is at most used by only 4 percent of Indians.<sup>7</sup> Internet definitely is extremely

powerful but as long as its access remains limited in a society largely inhabited by the underprivileged people it would continue to have an “elitist” character and would in no way be a competitor to mass media, like television or films. Nor would it be a vehicle of virtual democracy in any deeper political sense. But Internet has its fair share of negotiations with popular culture. Social networking—promoted by Orkut, Facebook, Twitter, and the likes—has ushered in the chat era. Relying on computer screens and keyboards instead of paper and pen, and resting as it does in many cases on anonymity, confidentiality, and often false identities, the Internet, apart from being a source of information, has become both a generator and medium of popular culture. As a cryptic comment goes, it is as if chat has brought in a “new excuse” in the realm of message production (Bandopadhyay 12). It is difficult to judge the exact nature of gender relations in the Internet usage in India, apart from guessing from the dominant global trend that is male dominated, both in terms of usage and representations. However, the Internet all over the world has earned an interesting and somewhat dubious distinction as a channel for dissemination of pornography. India is no exception. In this context one can cite the instance of the porno cartoon strip *Savita Bhabhi* in which the title role was that of a voluptuous homemaker who being bored with her workaholic (and probably impotent) husband would be as flirtatious and inviting to a salesman as she would be to the visiting relative. Created by an Indian-born British entrepreneur the site drew huge audiences—according to an estimate (Blakely, “Savita Bhabhi”) 60,000 per month with the Indians constituting 70 percent of the total—but it was ultimately blocked by the Indian government, which invoked Section 67 of the Information Technology Act, which eventually led to its termination by the creator. The blocking of the site which was hailed dramatically in foreign media as the 21st century version of *Kama Sutra* (Buncombe, “Cyber Sutra”)—drew sharp criticism from veteran media personalities and analysts like Pritish Nandy, Sevanti Ninan, and Patricia Oberoi. The aforementioned section of the act sanctions such governmental action on the grounds of maintaining friendly relations with foreign countries and for maintaining and defending sovereignty and integrity of the country—none of which could have been threatened by *Savita Bhabhi*. It was a clear case of government mandarins being over-sensitive and over-zealous about defending the image of the country and safeguarding the so-called moral fabric of the Indian society. It was at the end of the day a government-sponsored act of resisting a new genre of *online* popular culture, and for that matter, sexual liberation. Pritish Nandy (Nandy, “The assassination”) puts it straight:

By banning her site, the I(nformation) & B(roadcasting) Ministry has demonstrated (yet again) how men want to control women all the time. What is Savita Bhabhi's greatest appeal? That she is a typical *Bharatiya nari* who is brave enough to demonstrate that when it comes to sex she's no pushover. (Brackets mine)

The simultaneity of change and continuity remains in every society even if the two processes may not be operative in the same degree at one point of time. In contemporary India the change factor, as already noted, may at this point of time be more evident but some segments of the Indian society also put up stiff resistance in the name of continuity. We shall now refer to three classic instances of such resistance, which still have lot of symbolic significance beyond their immediate attributes.

## Continuity Strikes Back: *What Ifs and Buts*

Veteran journalist M.V. Kamath ("The Indian Media Today") makes us aware of the *painful* transition when he writes:

What is evident is that *Indian media is going through a difficult phase and the more tradition-minded citizen is finding it painful to adjust* to changing circumstances ... An immediate transformation is not expected, but then, as in all such matters, times alone tell. The media in India is certainly in transition.

Notwithstanding the multidimensional nature of change the continuity factor remains, and on occasions it stings hard. In delving into the recent past of India one can note that the maverick painter M.F. Hussain and megastar Amitabh Bachchan, and to a lesser extent the king of pop Michael Jackson, were at the receiving end of it just when many thought that the change had become too invincible to generate resistance. The year 1996 in this context became very important, with lot of substantive and symbolic dimensions. In late 1996 Husain had been subject to hostile reaction from the self-proclaimed champions of India's "tradition" and "culture" by painting *Bharatmata* and the Hindu goddesses, including Saraswati—the custodian of art, culture, and education—in the nude. Incidentally, Husain's act has also led to the creation of blogs<sup>8</sup> in which Indians of all varieties are exhorted to protest vehemently. Bachchan, the uncrowned king of the Hindi filmworld, came under heavy fire for hosting, on behalf of Amitabh Bachchan Corporation Limited (ABCL), the Miss World pageant in India, "the land where women are worshipped as mother." Hussain and Bachchan, both of whom have exceptional charisma, were being censured and defended at the same time

by friends and foes, thereby personifying the spirit of the times in which one finds a blend of change and continuity.

It was evident that the violent threats against Hussain mainly came from those who were bent on defending the sanctity of the “Hindu tradition” and “Bharatiya Sanskriti,” however ambiguous such concepts might be. But what became more important is the politics of vilification, targeting an artist for “illicit expression of a noble art.” Effectively, this politics had its source in Hussain’s daring attempt to bring down a “noble art” to the level of the “popular.” To move the spotlight on the ABCL-sponsored Miss World pageant held in Bangalore, the height of aggressive protest was marked by “Professor” Nanjundaswamy—known for organizing violent attacks on the Kentucky Fried Chicken outlets—who had threatened to set alight the whole show and burn to death the “uncultured” participants and the audience. In an interesting convergence of diametrically opposite forces—ranging from feminists, women’s rights activists, on the one hand, and the self-proclaimed custodians of the Indian culture, on the other hand, ABCL was in a tight corner. The fact is many of Hussain’s sympathizers did not go with Bachchan because painting supposedly has higher status than the catwalk of beauties. However, like Hussain, Bachchan also had his share of sympathetic coverage in both print and electronic media. But media itself in this whole process received both clap and flak. While the media’s role in Hussain’s case received wide appreciation in the case of the beauty pageant the feminist critiques lashed out at it for celebrating the event and thereby failing to situate the pageant politics in proper perspective, which is infringement of women’s rights by growing (multinational) corporatization (Bageshree 2856–57). More subtler interpretations would argue that the popular print media’s public profiling of beauty queens at a global level, laden with representations of feminine agency “authorize the ideological interests of India’s consuming classes” (Parameswaran 346–70). In Michael Jackson’s case there were shrill protests, again by the self-proclaimed custodians of *Bharatiya Sanskriti* which was supposedly under threat. Jackson was also condemned as an “agent of globalization” and “representative of the decadent capitalist culture.” However, in the ensuing tug-of-war between the forces of change and continuity the former had their day and Jackson performed in front of a rousing audience in Mumbai. In a twist of events Shiv Sena also became instrumental in organizing Jackson’s show.

Both Hussain and Bachchan, however, had backtracked. The former, who is now in a sort of self-imposed exile, had to apologize for his “misdeeds,” and the latter was compelled to shift the beachwear segment of the pageant to far away Seychelles. Hussain’s adversaries were as

euphoric as those of Bachchan. But two fundamental and related points were lost in the cacophony: first, liberalization is not just an exclusively political economic package; it is a cultural economic package as well, with lot of indulgence to the marriage of the market and popular culture. Second, because it is such a package one cannot be selective about its segments and prefer to choose one at the cost of the other. The same holds true for the Valentine's Day controversy which took a particularly ugly turn in the year 2009 in a "cosmopolitan" city like Bengaluru and more so in Mangalore engulfing a number of issues from girls wearing low-waist trousers to the youth frequenting pubs and discotheques. The resistance from the society was equally aggressive this time with the formation of the provocatively named Consortium of Pub-Going, Loose and Forward Women the members of which would devise a novel campaign by sending pink *chaddis* (panties) to Pramod Muthalik on Valentine's Day as a mark of protest. Apart from the fact that the media in general came out strongly against cultural policing, the new media played its role in a constructive manner because the campaign was first launched on the social networking site Facebook. However, the possibility of a media "spin" even in this case cannot be underestimated. An observer makes a relevant point in seeking to understand whether the English media was overjoyed and became overactive about the campaign waged by youthful, irreverent young, urban, apparently empowered and independent women against the seemingly boorish men, and got what it looked for, the ideal news matter to feed this particular segment of readership (Gupta, "Moral Panic in the Media").

Whatever may be the motive of the English media in publicizing this specific mode of protest the fact is that this mode itself, however limited it may be in terms of being associated with a particular social echelon, is a symptom of India changing. There are instances to prove that such changes are occurring at different levels and layers with the media acting as a facilitator. Thus, *Sach Ka Samna*, a reality show to the extreme, which induces the participants to divulge and admit intimate details of their private life in public for a huge sum of money, has been attracting a lot of audience. Incidentally, the show reveals participants with various social and economic backgrounds, generations, age-groups, and no less important, men and women showing equal vigor in reliving the past, "facing the truth," and in making "confessions" for monetary gain. The program has been criticized by the likes of Swami Ramdev and it has even been "debated" in the parliament for "threatening the Indian culture." The channel broadcasting the program had been issued a notice by the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, in July, 2009, to "show restraint." The same ministry has issued a stern

warning to the concerned channel in late November 2009, when it came to know that the program is going to have a second phase. The Ministry has supposedly found the program vulgar, indecent, against good taste and decency, and above all, not in tune with the Indian ethos and culture. But while it is stretching the “Indian culture” to its limits the fact remains that in doing so it is also redefining the parameters of popular culture in India.

## Concluding Remarks

India is as much a land of paradox, as it is a land of variety. Thus, India has a burgeoning middle class with high purchasing power. This class, for better or worse, is eager to be an integral part of the globalizing liberalizing world. On the other hand, the media does not exist, nor does it survive, in a vacuum; it invariably rests on a context. This context makes the Indian media both the facilitator and recipient of the contemporary transition, with give and take relations vis-à-vis popular culture. However, while the cutting edge “India” seeks to move at a breakneck speed she also, not infrequently, has her brakes applied by the contending forces. Such forces of resistance are not homogenous in composition. In some cases, as we have seen in the preceding discussion, such forces act on the ground of defending the ill-defined and amorphous idea of “Indian culture.” In some cases the resistance also comes from those at the opposite politico-ideological spectrum, who being led by social concern seek to draw attention to the dangers emerging from any unilateral submission to the market imperatives and sacrificing public interest, especially of the vast majority of the poor and the marginalized. The mainstream Indian media, despite being market-friendly, seek to indulge in a balancing act while devising strategies—on what to disseminate, how and to what extent—because the forces of continuity, like the forces of change, also constitute a fairly large segment of its market. In the land of paradox the media cannot but face this paradox too.

## Notes

1. One can justifiably mention the constructive role of *Calcutta Journal*, *Friend of India*, *India Gazette*, *Bengal Gazette*, *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, *The Hindu*, and *The Free Press Journal* in this context. One can even think of an impressive trajectory of eminent political leaders contributing to media’s role in generating social and political awareness among colonial subjects. In this trajectory

- at the initial point would be Raja Rammohan's *Sambad Kaumodi* and Gandhi's *Harijan*.
2. If it hints at some kind of incongruent and contradictory trend one can go further to point out that contradictions and ambiguities were Doordarshan's birthmarks. Thus, for instance, the very emergence and existence of Doordarshan in independent India (unlike that of radio broadcasting in the colonial India) continue to be ruled, till the Supreme Court judgment of 1995, by the utterly archaic The Indian Telegraph Act of 1885 formulated by the British rulers.
  3. The Union of India and Others versus the Cricket Association of Bengal, Judgment given on February 9, 1995.
  4. The observations of the Committee can be treated as very significant in the process of Doordarshan's coming to terms with its changed status. In the section on *The Need for Public Service Broadcasting* the Report takes up the issue of identity of Prasar Bharati organizations, namely, Doordarshan and AIR. Acknowledging (Clause 2.1.3) the "historical reality" that Doordarshan happens to be "one of the largest broadcasting networks in the world" the Report calls for a reoriented Doordarshan, ready to provide as a public service broadcasting "to strengthen the democratic process by providing information, promoting debate and discussion on all vital issues, and providing a platform for interaction between the common man and the policy maker" (Clause 2.1.7).
  5. Then again, one has to look beyond the confines of Doordarshan. One cannot but keep in mind that the Government of India still bans news broadcast by the FM radio, still maintaining a line between "serious" business and entertainment.
  6. Here we are making a distinction between the mainstream and the nonmainstream "alternative" variety of media—such as little magazines, group/street theatre—in which gender bias on a comparative scale is much less evident.
  7. 2007 figure of Internet World Statistics is just 3.7 percent of the total number of users 40,000,000. Source: [www.internetworldstats.com/stats3.htm](http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats3.htm) from 0.1 percent in 1998.
  8. Such as, [www.protestnudebharatmatha.blogspot.com](http://www.protestnudebharatmatha.blogspot.com) (retrieved January 3, 2008).

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# 3

## Filming Change, Securing Tradition: A Hobson's Choice or a Dynamic Duality

As there are many Indias in India, so Indian commercial cinema is a heterogeneous mass of speaking positions and lifestyle representations which have been produced and directed with spectacular success. These commercial feature films originate from many regions of India, enshrining region specific cultures, customs, and languages. Almost all media critics and commentators agree that two categories qualify Indian cinema, that is, the cinema produced by all major states such as Andhra Pradesh, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, West Bengal, and Orissa among sundry others. The first is the *constant* category that characterizes the continuation of traditional practices despite the march of time. The other category is the *variable* category that scripts the changes that affect the social environment. M.K. Raghavendra observes:

If the recurring codes and conventions of Indian cinema are traceable to the "constant" element, the manner in which motifs actually undergo transformation may be a function of the changing social landscape. The fundamental codes are stable over longer periods but individual narratives and their constituent motifs apparently address the historical moment. (Raghavendra 2)

In 1998, Ashis Nandy had commented on Indian popular cinema and had titled his essay "Indian Popular Cinema as a Slum's Eye view of Politics." Almost 11 years later in 2009 a British filmmaker makes his Oscar winning British film based in India's slum and titles it

*Slumdog Millionaire*. The title may even be read as a symbol and metaphor for an abject India progressing toward global economic power. In 1998, Ashis Nandy may not have anticipated Danny Boyle's Oscar triumph. But Boyle or his screenplay writer may have been familiar with Nandy's significant essay which is remarkably in context. Nandy had observed, "The urban slum consists of people who are uprooted and partially deculturated, people who have moved out of traditions and have been forced to loosen their caste and community ties" (Nandy 6). But apart from its success in the Oscars, *Slumdog Millionaire* has generated market interest in crossover films and foreign productions of ethnic resources, which postcolonial critics may identify as cultural neocolonialism. As Smitha Verma observes, "The Bollywood-Hollywood exchange was given a great boost after Danny Boyle's *Slumdog Millionaire* swept the Oscars earlier this year. *Slumdog* has acted as a great promotional for brand Bollywood" (Verma).

In a more general understanding of the evolution of Indian cinema and its historical as well as socioeconomic evolution Anirudh Deshpande asserts:

The history of Indian cinema tells us how the bourgeois nation has been historicized, narrativized and devised differently in varying contexts. From anti-colonialism, followed by nation-building and planned development, to the contemporary years of a collaborationist globalization, the Indian bourgeoisie has experienced an interesting journey. (Deshpande xi)

This journey has become more international and transcultural in the last five years, and the last year (2009) has seen enthusiastic tie-ups between Hollywood and Bollywood, which may be regarded as unprecedented. Proposals for joint venture production projects, in which well-known actors acting in Bollywood and Hollywood films could be cast has initiated further speculations that Indian celebrity actors may be cast opposite Hollywood counterparts in the near future, such as for example a Priyanka Chopra and Brad Pitt starrer. Media critic Smitha Verma observes:

Part of the reason why the West is increasingly enamoured with Indian films is simply because its size matters. According to a Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry KPMG media and entertainment report 2009, the Indian film industry, with releases of around 1000 movies a year, produces twice the number of Hollywood movies. "We have the biggest film industry which can give work to many Westerners," says Afsar Zaidi, Director of Carving Dreams. (Verma)

The producer of *Kambakkht Ishq* Sajid Nadiadwala had remarked, “This is an exciting Hollywood Bollywood marriage.” Filmmaker Anurag Basu acknowledges that in contemporary times such collaboration is not desirable but inevitable, “The audiences have changed and so has the movie making business. Now everybody wants to make movies for a global audience.” Basu’s movie *Kites* featured the Mexican model Barbara Mori who played Hrithik Roshan’s love interest (Nandy 14).

Elsewhere again Nandy refers to the popular film and its position as manifest in popular culture. Nandy states unambiguously, “The popular film is low-brow, modernizing India in all its complexity, sophistry, naiveté and vulgarity. Studying popular film is studying Indian modernity at its rawest, its crudities laid bare by the fate of traditions in contemporary life and letters” (Nandy 7). Slayden and Whillock stated:

[A]s an art form, film has played an essential role in shaping our concepts of reality. From its inception, cinema has changed the way we perceived our existence. It is said that when Louis Lumiere first projected a film of a train coming into a Paris station, the patrons of this cinema ran screaming out of the building, afraid of being run over. Truth or legend, the point of the story is compelling. The impact of media as feedback loop and as an attractor has, for the most part, been very successful and remains a vital part of how we invent and interpret the world in which we live. (Slayden and Whillock 232)

Recently produced biographical films such as *JFK* or *Gandhi*, *Sardar* or *Bhagat Singh*, and *Mangal Pandey* may run the risk of being criticized for ideological interventions in their image constructions that can be overtly mainstream with a Left or Right wing bias that leads to deconstruction and reconstruction of received histories. Slayden comments on the strange attractors that chaos theory identifies which constructs and complicates fractal images and is entirely nonlinear, thereby quite contrary to the Hegelian mode of representation of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis till the thesis is challenged by successive antithesis and so on.

Because of its style and recent method of discourse—film and its visual presence—new histories are understood and developed as truth. This concept of attractors and their impact on a nonlinear dynamic, such as history, is a major component of chaos theory and is essential in the understanding of how film revises and redefines history. (Slayden and Whillock 231)

I

## Gender and Popular Cinema

In the *Ideology of the Hindi Film*, M. Madhava Prasad states that popular films represent a utopian ideal that combines commodity culture and the problematics of the nuclear family in a patriarchal system that moves beyond the feudal social systems toward capitalism (Prasad 109.) Despite overt and covert ripples and waves of change, it is not possible to state as an overall assessment that the status and dignity of women has changed remarkably in the 21st century. The vigilant media incessantly informs us about female feticide, female infanticide, dowry harassment and deaths, sexual harassment in work places and public places, domestic violence that ranges from verbal violence to murder. As we know, Bollywood films too are mostly androcentric, and if they venture to be different they often fare poorly at the box office. Take the recent case of the Madhuri Dikshit comeback film *Aaja Nachle*. It was a film about a strong woman who takes her own decisions. If Shahrukh Khan's *Swades* is considered an intelligent film addressing the diaspora and repatriation, celebrating individual will, regard and commitment to one's cultural roots one wonders what could have gone so wrong with *Aaja Nachle*. After all, if the objection is that in real life Madhuri is married with children, so is Shahrukh. But that's another political issue and no less problematic.

The Hollywood shift is apparent when we recall the agenda of the Melanie Griffith starrer *Working Girl* (1988) with more recent films like *Stepmom* (1998), *Monster-in-Law* (2005), and *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006). *Stepmom* is more about the terminally ill ex-wife slowly learning how to accommodate her husband's second marriage within her family and explain the invasion of the outsider to her children. It heralds the era of the blended family bringing together the suffering Susan Sarandon and the smart professional photographer Julia Roberts, who is capable of smooth multitasking and the husband's divided loyalties. The core narrative has an Asian flavor, readers may recall many narratives about sick wives and straying husbands, and even Tagore has a few, as Tagore aficionados are aware.

The clichéd conflict between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law is revived in *Monster-in-Law* that satirizes the gutsy journalist mother-in-law and romanticizes the charm of the would-be daughter-in-law, whose passion is to become the traditional homemaker. Such an overt agenda parodies the hard work of the women's liberation movement activists. The verbal violence and the physical assault in the film between two

women, the conniving, disapproving would-be mother-in-law Jane Fonda and the charming but very determined Jennifer Lopez, once again throws us back to the issues of female rivalry and quarrelsome disposition leading to the sneaking perception that women are the worst misogynists.

Then follows *The Devil Wears Prada* where Meryl Streep is the sophisticated, arrogant, de-feminized, diabolic exploiter. This role again parodies female professionalism that implies broken homes, broken hearts, and an office ogre reputation. Again the young woman aspirant pro gives it all up for love and a presumably stress-free life. This is strikingly unlike the male aspirant Will Smith in *The Pursuit of Happyness* (2006) who will run those extra 10 miles to realize his dreams, a compelling study in contrasting attitudes and gender priorities. It is important to reemphasize the fact that both *The Pursuit of Happyness* and *The Devil Wears Prada* were released in the same year, 2006. *Working Girl* (1988) is about the determined woman achiever who is ready to chase her dreams by hook or by crook, if she feels she is deliberately being sidetracked and exploited. This positive image is deconstructed, if not entirely rejected in *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006). Something has definitely changed between 1988 and 2006, as the strong woman of 1988, transforms into a she-devil in 2006.

In narrative cinema, whether it is Hollywood or its inspirational semantic surrogates in the imaginary geographical space in India, Bollywood, Kollywood, and Tollywood, despite their overt architectural differences all, however, share similar responses to gender representations and the female body. Women are still the focus of the gaze, the luscious apple of the male gaze, as Mulvey defines the propensity that enjoys perpetuation in all times:

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*. Woman displayed as sexual object is the leitmotif of erotic spectacle from pin-ups to striptease. (Durham 346)

Joanne Hollows supports Claire Johnston, Pam Cook, and Laura Mulvey who set a new agenda for thinking about women and films. Referring to the three theorists and their feminist perspectives Hollows summed up:

Their ideas are underpinned by the notion that the very form and language of film works not only reproduce patriarchal ideology, but also to reproduce its spectators as subjects of patriarchal ideology. From such a

point of view, changing the “content” of films, as feminist documentary practice sought to do, could offer no challenge to patriarchy because it utilized the same “realist” codes and conventions as mainstream cinema. A feminist film practice which sought to challenge the taken-for-granted codes upon which mainstream cinema depended was needed. (Hollows 44)

The advancement of technology, however, is not about cultural progress and gender justice. Technology facilitates transmission of popular culture. The result of media representation of gender relations, however, may reveal a reverse effect, instead of cultural and social advancement, economic facilitation in the era of globalization actually revitalizes gender stereotypes. This brings us to Laura Mulvey’s gaze theory that determines priorities and patriarchal ideology and its priorities in filmic representations. So in “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” Mulvey points out that feature films or narrative cinema situates the male gaze as the determining and defining gaze that looks at women as objects of pleasure and erotic fantasy. Mulvey argues:

The image of woman as (passive) raw material for the (active) gaze of man takes the argument a step further into the structure of representation, adding a further layer demanded by the ideology of the patriarchal order as it is worked out in its favourite cinematic form—illusionistic narrative film. (Durham 351)

In a further elaboration of Mulvey’s gaze theory and male voyeurism Hollows emphasizes the patriarchal unconscious that constructs docile bodies that are nonthreatening and that flatter the notions of male power. Hollows states:

[T]he image of woman in cinema always has the potential to be threatening to the male spectator. Therefore, dominant cinema uses mechanisms which alleviate this threat through particular forms of fetishism and voyeurism. Fetishism turns woman into an image that is safe, enjoyable and unthreatening by turning some part of the body into a fetish—that is, by focusing on some aspect of her that can be made pleasurable in itself—for example, the legs or the hair... The alternative mechanism, voyeurism, overcomes the threat that the woman represents by seeking to investigate her, understand her mystery and thus render her knowable, controllable and subject to male mastery. (Hollows 47)

On the other hand female spectatorship seems to consolidate the abjectness that the male gaze desires and constructs. As Hollows states, “female spectatorship is characterized by ‘narcissism’: an over-identification with the idealized feminine image of the female star. However, because this identification is with woman as the object of male gaze, it is a ‘masochistic’ identification with a position of victimization” (Hollows 53).

Furthermore, in this connection one may argue that though female spectatorship is controlled by the cultural invasion and colonization effected by the patriarchal unconscious, female filmmakers pose a different paradigm or continue to be influenced in their filmmaking by the male gaze. Some important Asian women filmmakers can be referred to in this context, such as, Aparna Sen, Meera Nair, and Deepa Mehta among others. This leads to a distancing from women's empowerment agenda and the target consumers of such visual texts is more often the affluent NRIs and migrants from South Asia, for whom retention of traditional value systems work like security chains that one clings to often with helplessness and desperation. The stories in these typical feature films are more often about rich Indians in search of marriage partners. As filmmaker Meghna Gulzar states, "As the rich Indian family becomes unbelievably super-rich, they become more traditional instead of progressive and liberal" (Dasgupta and Lal 290).

Certain evidences of this sense of regressive continuity can be figured out from the following section that samples films produced in the eastern region of India, in the first half of the 1980s. The title of our chapter described the change and continuity of contemporary Indian films as being a Hobson's choice; in many respects this is indeed so and not an exaggeration as the attitude of the Censor Board and the subject matter of a random survey of Bengali films of the 1980s bear out. The second section of this chapter based on Bengali films as case studies and their content analyses once again validates our argument that change and continuity is a simultaneous process in the cultural mainstream of India, as also represented in the entertainment industry. Bengali films have always commanded critical attention and acclaim but even here there has been the obvious divide between the commercial Bengali cinema intended for suburban viewers and the more sophisticated Bengali films directed by internationally recognized filmmakers. The target viewers of this latter category are the urban, educated, and cultured classes.

## II

### **Social and Cultural Trends in Eastern Indian films in the 1980s**

The functioning of the Film Censor Board between 1981 and 1986 can be an interesting study from a member's viewpoint. The first point of significance that must be noted is that the Board was not made up of

people connected with the film world, though the Chairman, Hrishikesh Mukherjee, was a leading film director. The Board was meant to include a representative cross-section of society, including academicians, civil servants, professional people, such as lawyers, doctors and accountants, school teachers, social workers, and so on. Even housewives were included. The idea was to get a feedback about the possible reaction of the audience. In ancient Greek drama, the chorus (which was a part of the play) was supposed to reflect the reaction of the ideal spectator. The Censor Board was supposed to fulfill a similar role, perhaps! Every member must be 30 plus and graduation was the minimum qualification needed. Members of the minority communities were included and such people were specially invited to watch films that might hurt the feelings of these communities.

The films were shown about twice a week and every time four members of the Board were present. Calcutta was the center of the Eastern Zone and all films of this region, including Bihar, Orissa, Assam, and Manipur were brought here to be presented before the Board and obtain the certificate necessary for release. Thus, while the majority of the films shown were Bengali, a few also were in other languages, such as Hindi, Bhojpuri (a dialect of Hindi), Assamese, Oriya, and Manipuri. The most striking Hindi film was *Sadgati* by Satyajit Ray, which will be discussed later.

A number of points about the films in this period will be discussed: (i) The social and political background and the way they are reflected in certain films; (ii) religion and gender-related issues; (iii) the joint family and its changes and complex nature; (iv) romance and adventure, including films of crime and detection; (v) the comparison with contemporary films made in other parts of India; and (vi) comparison with certain foreign films. Though very few, these provided a certain international background against which Bengali or East Indian films might be evaluated.

## Social and political aspects

The period, 1981–86, was a time of change and turmoil as far as several regions in Eastern India were concerned. In 1977, the Left front government had come to power implementing land reform and *Operation Barga* programs. The countryside had undergone a considerable and for the most part positive change. The flip side was the electricity crisis and a degree of “de-industrialization.” Many existing factories were closed down, without being replaced by others. In neighboring Assam, the early 1980s witnessed a strong subregional movement and the formation of the Assam Gana Parishad (AGP) which eventually formed the

State Government. While most of the films of this period were not overtly political a few did reflect contemporary trends directly or indirectly.

The most notable of such films was *Sadgati* (A Good End) by Satyajit Ray. It was a relatively short telefilm, made particularly for “Doordarshan.” The story line of *Sadgati* is as follows. The setting is a North Indian village of the 1920s or 1930s. An untouchable comes to the home of a Brahmin pandit, in order to ask for an auspicious astrological date. The pandit keeps him waiting all day while making him work in his (the pandit’s) garden. Neither the pandit nor his wife thinks of offering the untouchable any food. Worn out with fatigue and hunger, the man, who was apparently not in the best of health, dies. According to social rules, it is for the men of his own caste in the village to carry away the corpse and perform the funeral rites. However, the untouchables, angered by the treatment meted out to one of their caste brothers, stage a protest, albeit a passive one. They refuse to touch the body. The other Brahmins in the village berate the pandit, holding him responsible for what amounts to spiritual pollution of the whole neighborhood—not to mention the concerns about hygiene! Finally, in the dead of night, the Brahmin ties a string to the foot of the dead man and drags him all the way to a “bhagar” a place on the outskirts of the village where traditionally, the carcasses of animals were dumped. This is the “good end” of the untouchable, who comes to a Brahmin, seeking spiritual help and guidance. Meenakshi Mukherjee has commented on the film:

In many ways thus ‘Shatranj’ was a story that would naturally attract him, but I have not been able to find out exactly how he came to decide on ‘Sadgati’ as the narrative base for his only other Hindi language film. It is the starkest of his works with the kind of brutality never seen in a Ray film so far, and deals with the question of caste—something he did not touch upon before or after, it is a bare, grimy and low-key film that follows much more closely Premchand’s own non-committal brevity than any of his other adaptations of literary texts. Unlike in ‘Shatranj’ where Premchand interrupts the story with his authorial comments, in ‘Sadgati’ as in ‘Kafan’ (both written during the final years of Premchand’s life) the author was practically invisible it seems to me in keeping with the author’s deliberate erasure of himself, the director also abstains from putting his individual stamp on the film ‘Sadgati’ which he filmed with the maximum economy of detail. (Mukherjee 20)

Why, however, does Ray, or most other Bengali filmmakers for that matter, not deal too much with the theme of caste? Why is *Sadgati*, set in North India, an exception in this respect? While middle class, Hindu Bengalis are far from indifferent to caste—witness the matrimonial columns in the newspapers—the caste system does play a smaller role here

than in many other parts of South Asia. Politics is not in the main, caste based and caste-atrocities are rarer than elsewhere.

Another film with political, at least, social implications was *Atanka* (Terror), made by the film director Tapan Sinha. A school teacher (played by Soumitra Chatterjee, the noted director and actor, on both stage and screen) has witnessed a murder. The murderer warns him to remain silent, with threats concerning his (the teacher's) daughter. The teacher maintains silence but is tormented by his conscience (in Bengali fiction and the silver screen, a school teacher is usually portrayed as an honest, simple man, an idealist). Finally the murderer is arrested. The political leader who supported him turns against him when things go wrong. However, the daughter of the teacher is not saved. The last shot shows half her face, eaten away by acid. This is the worst evil that can happen to a woman, worse than death.

The film portrays, among other things the politician–mafia nexus, which is so common today in almost all parts of South Asia. Deceit, as well as violence, is used as a trope as it were in such films. An honest man, who is against the evil circle, is discredited, by inducing his domestic woman to bring false charges against him. There is a mention of deindustrialization of the state by one of the characters and the trade unions and workers' movement are blamed for this—the classical conservative approach. In another film of this period a character (played by the comic character artist Rabi Ghosh) tells a young man, who is looking for a job in a factory, “Do you know how to sell ‘phuchka’ and ‘jhal muri?’” When the surprised hero asks the reasons for this strange question, the other replies: “The factory will soon be closed by a lock-out and the workers will have to earn their living by selling snacks outside the factory gate.” This bitter irony reflects the shifting of a large portion of industrial workers to unemployment and/or an uncertain and meager livelihood in the lowest rung of the service sector.

The rural class conflict between a “jotedar” and the “bargadar,” that is, the landlord and sharecropping peasants had received prominence in the era of the previous United Front rule and the Naxalite movement of armed struggle. In the early 1980s, the class orientation in the countryside had taken a new turn through “Operation Barga” and the strengthened Panchayat system, initiated, as we have seen by the Left Front government. A film of this period reflected this condition, not giving a very bright picture of the landlord in question. One of the four members of the Board who was present on this occasion protested against this story line. The member who happened to be a well-known writer declared that it was wrong to portray the rural landlord as a villain, since in the

language of economics, the terms of trade were against agriculture. The other three on the Board overruled his protest and the film was duly certified.

Another film, which raised some controversy for political reasons, was an Assamese film, *Juge Juge Hangram* (Struggles in Every Age). As mentioned earlier, the early 1980s was a time for a strong movement of Assamese nationalism; *Juge Juge Hangram* was an example of this trend. It juxtaposed two eras and two movements; the “Quit India” movement of 1942 and the current sub-nationalist movement, to use such a term, which was agitating Assam. Freedom from British rule was equated implicitly with freedom from the rule of greater India. The Board demanded the omission of certain passages, which might seem injurious to the minorities. Ironically, the social background or picture that emerges from Assamese films was not very different from what appears in contemporary Bengali films; unemployment, frustration of young job seekers, and family problems. In one Assamese film presented to the Board at this period, for example, we see a long line of men who have come to attend interviews for a single job. One of the candidates is asked whether he has any experience. He replies, “Yes, I have a lot of experience in appearing for interviews;” we are reminded of the well-known Bengali film *Interview* made by Mrinal Sen a few years earlier.

It is noteworthy that the social and cultural background of the films of various regions and languages of Eastern India show a marked similarity even if the political angle might differ.

## Religion, culture, and gender

Popular plays, “jattras,” or opera as a rough translation of this vibrant genre; cinema based on religious themes on stories from the great epics or the “Puranas;” and other legends with a religious bent have been common in almost all parts of India from time immemorial. Such films were extremely popular in the early 1980s and often presented to the Censor Board of Eastern India. None of the members of course had anything against religious films as such. There were problems, however, when in the name of religion such films spread harmful superstitions or provided a backward and male chauvinist background on the gender question. The directors and producers replied that they were simply following age-old and familiar Indian classics. Was it necessary to obliterate the great treasures of ancient Indian literature and mythology in the name of modern rationalism and feminism? The members of the Board replied that while no one wanted to wipe out the epics and so on, modern attitudes and sensibilities should be taken into account. This was in fact

laid down by the rules of the Central Board of Film Censor, though the members engaged certain flexibility while interpreting these.

We may mention a few examples of films with mythical or religious subjects, which proved to be socially objectionable. The cult of Santoshi Ma (Santoshi Mother) was gaining ground in West Bengal at this time. A film entitled *Jai Santoshi Ma* had been presented before the Board and was later to become extremely popular. The film contained an episode as follows. A woman had neglected the worship of Santoshi Ma. As punishment her children died of snake bite. She then carried out the "puja" and poured the sacred water of the ritual on the dead children. They immediately became came back to life once more. This type of story is not uncommon in "brata katha," that is, tales of rituals usually performed by women. However, the Board argued, the representation of such supernatural events on the screen would produce quite different results from their oral narration. In remote villages, where modern medicine is not very accessible people are anyhow inclined to quackery and magical remedies. Suppose a person was bitten by a snake in real life, or even simply fell seriously ill, someone who has watched this film would prefer to pour "sacred water" over the sick person, rather than send for a doctor or take the patient to a hospital.

Another film of a religious and mythological nature which caused controversy was *Sati Anasua* (The Chaste Anasua), an Oriya film dubbed in Bengali. The main story had been taken from the *Ramayana*. During their exile in the forest (*Banabas*) Ram, Laxman, and Sita visited the "asram" of a great hermit (*Rishi*) Atri. Anasua, the noble wife of Atri, counseled Sita on the duties of a wife. The cinema adapts and embroiders the story in this fashion. Anasua is persecuted by her jealous neighbors and put to the test by the gods themselves. Her devotion to her husband enables her to overcome all problems and gain a position superior to that of the goddesses. The film had another interlinked plot; this too based on a popular tale. A woman (named Nirmala in the film) carries her invalid husband to the house of a prostitute. A great hermit curses her husband but the power of the wife's chastity overcomes even the spiritual power of the hermit. Finally, her husband is transformed into a healthy and handsome young man.

This particular story had always infuriated progressive thinkers and social reformers of India. Rabindranath in his feminist story "Streer Patra" (The Wife's Letter) calls it the greatest example of cowardice which the people in this country have exalted. *Sati Anusua* contained a counter or negative example; a husband who serves his wife, who does all the domestic work. This is considered unmanly and contrary to religious values. Altogether, *Sati Anasua* was considered antiwoman and thus

contradictory of the directives of the Film Censor Board. The makers of the film gave the old excuse: they were merely putting on a film version of traditional stories. In the end the film was certified with some minor cuts and changes. However, the main spirit of the story could not be altered.

While religious and mythological films were hardly new in the 1980s, with the countrywide advent of the television they assumed a new significance. The serials based on the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, shown on the small screen were immensely popular and even influenced politics to a not so inconsiderable extent. A film based on the *Ramayana* was also presented to the Censor Board in the early 1980s. There was a contradiction here; such films were extremely popular yet the philosophy they put forward was often at variance with modern ideas of rationalism and feminism.

Curiously enough at one point, the religions and mythological films coincided with those set in modern life. During this period cabaret dances were often included in Bengali films: something of an innovation. Mythological or “pauranic” films had no problem in staging heavenly cabaret dances by “apsaras” or minor goddesses. *Sati Anusua*, for example, contained a charming and somewhat suggestive dance by Madan the goddess of love and his wife Rati.

## The joint family, gender, and the female body

These are by no means uncommon in Bengali films and indeed follow a tradition from the earliest days of the cinema industry. Films based on or adapted from novels by Saratchandra Chattopadhyay appeared in the 1980s as they had done earlier. Yet the significance of the joint family and its changing structure obviously reflected the values and concepts of different eras. The joint family in Bengal and indeed almost the whole of South Asia, is a shifting one. The original joint family was based on commonly shared agricultural property, in which all male members had ownership rights. Women were subordinate, though some senior women sometimes played an important role in the family on the condition of enforcing patriarchal values. The modern type of joint family, if it still existed, had to face the following challenges: (i) In most cases, the property except perhaps the dwelling house is not owned jointly by the family. The rest of the family income was provided by the individual earnings of the members whose disparate incomes would often lead to tension. Those who earned less would feel neglected while those who earned and contributed more would believe that they were being exploited; and (ii) The age of submissive child brides is over, at least in the urban middle-class areas.

Women who are highly educated, are often economically independent, and do not wish to submit to the discipline of a joint family. They prefer to make their own arrangements, especially since the joint family is the husband's joint family and the wife comes into it as an outsider. It is rarely that a husband moves into the natal family of his wife. Such a man is regarded as a "ghar-jamai" (one who lives with his in-laws) and generally looked down upon.

There is the other side of the coin. Working mothers with young children in a country where the public child care system is not very extensive or reliable, often welcome the help of a senior female relative, a mother, mother-in-law, or the like.

The East Indian films of the 1980s reflected these social trends and contradictions. A noted director cum actor of this period was Sukhen Das. Though not very profound or thought-provoking, his films were fairly well-made, enjoyable, and expressed the combination of change and conservatism, desired by a section of the middle classes. They were perhaps the updated versions of the sort of films that used to be advertised in the 1950s and 1940s: "Fit to be seen by the whole family, from the grandchild to the grandmother." Certain films from other parts of Eastern India seemed to be made on a similar pattern.

A few examples might be as follows "Kenaram Becheram" (their names have a double meaning, one who is bought and one who is sold or one who sells and one who buys) was made by Arabinda Mukherjee: a celebrated dramatist, actor, and director, active on the stage and the screen alike. Becharam Chatterjee, an aged widower is forced to leave his house because of his uncaring sons and daughter-in-law. His children now discover that their father has taken away the key to the locker, which supposedly contains money and jewels. They search for him desperately. A certain Nagen, whose job it is to find lost people or their substitutes, brings in a certain Kenaram of roughly the same age and appearance. Meanwhile, the real Becharam finds refuge and affection with a young, newly married couple, who prevent him from committing suicide. The story moves to its bitter-comic climax.

Another film depicting the joint family and its breakup was *Joge Biyoge* (Addition and Subtraction) based on a novel by Ashapura Devi. She was one of the premier fiction writers in Bengali and a large part of her novels and short stories deal with the theme of the middle-class family, particularly from the point of view of the woman. The story of the film falls into this pattern. The large joint family of Raibahadur Jaminimohan runs smoothly, as long as there is unlimited money supply. But things start falling apart when the head of the family retires from his highly paid job (or fails in business in the film version). Only the little

educated factory worker Gobinda, the nephew of Jaminimohan, remains loyal to those who had befriended him.

The female image, body, dress, and profession, were also subjects of controversy. While it was accepted that a woman could be educated and have a job, the favored model in this type of film was the good housewife. In one film, a married woman, the mother of a small child, starts as a saleswoman and builds up a vast business empire. But this is because she has been abandoned by her husband and has no option. When her husband returns many years later, she leaves the business to her son and retires. Interestingly enough, this film was made by an author/doctor who also happened to be a member of the Film Censor Board. Again while middle-class girls were often taught music and sometimes dancing, these professions were not considered quite respectable by sections of Tollywood. In a film called *Kalankini* (A Woman With a Ruined Reputation) the scion of a wealthy and aristocratic family marries the daughter of a celebrated women singer and this leads to problems. In another film, the hero is discarded by his family for marriage to a singer.

In the early 1980s, the sari was still almost the exclusive attire of Bengali woman from the late teens onward. But other dress forms, the salwar kameez, jeans, tops, and so on were making their appearance. In Tollywood the mode of dressing was often used to distinguish “good” and “bad” woman. Alcohol and cigarettes provided another mark of distinction. In the film *Rajbadhu* (The Bride of the King) the son and heir of a wealthy businessman intends to marry a girl whose dress and manners would not please his ailing father. He decides to present a “respectable” and at the same time attractive and intelligent young woman as his fiancée waiting for his father’s imminent death, before marrying the woman he really loves. Expectedly, the pretence becomes reality. The hero transfers his affection to the “good” girl and eventually marries her. The point is that the dress and behavior of the “bad” girl troubled some of the members of the Censor Board. They maintained that even when condemned and presented in a negative fashion, vulgarity cannot be condoned on the screen. In another film, problems arise when a “modern” husband forces his reluctant wife to put on a nondescript “Western” dress.

The most profound and sensitive film on the gender theme in the early 1980s is *Adalat o Ekti Meye* (The Court and a Girl) by Tapan Sinha. This film takes up a subject that is generally avoided in our society outside police court reports; rape and even more important what happens to the woman post-rape. In a film by Tapan Sinha, a young woman, a school teacher spending a holiday in a sea resort with her friends, is gang raped by a group of ruffians. To increase the horror of the affair, she is

raped in the sea water. The young woman barely survives. It is now that the real drama starts. The rapists are wealthy and well connected and will do anything to save their skin. The girl is raped, so to speak, all over again by the defense lawyer, the media (the media, fortunately or otherwise, was not as powerful then as it is today. Still its influence for good or evil could not be ignored), and the general public. She is threatened with the loss of her job. The only one on her side is the police officer in charge of the case, Gobinda known as “Thangare Gobinda” or “Thug Gobinda,” because of his merciless attitude toward criminals. The friends of the rapists deliberately set a trap for Gobinda and have him dismissed from the police force. However, the harrowing story ends on a positive note, as the heroine manages to retain her job. The bitter experience of the female body, subjected to multiple rapes, figurative and symbolic, is brought out with stark realism. The court which tries the rape case and indeed a large section of the society are seen as collective violators.

We have already mentioned the popularity of cabaret dances in the Bengali cinema of the early 1980s, including the “heavenly cabaret dances” of the religious and mythological films. In these cases too, the female body was an object and the excess sometimes drew protests. However, since in terms of cinematic representations their bodies were those of “bad woman” or at least professional women of doubtful reputation it was more or less accepted.

In terms of the female body, female dress, the role of women in society and in the context of the nuclear or joint family the Bengali and Eastern India cinema in the first half of the 1980s was a time both of change and backlash against the change.

## Comparisons with other states

The two other Film Censor Boards at this time were located in Bombay (now Mumbai) and Madras (now Chennai). It goes without saying that the number of Hindu films, which were Bombay centered, far exceeded the total number of films made in Eastern India including Nepal (a few Nepalese films, such as, *Adavihu Nair*, were certified by the Board in this period). But by the 1980s, the number of South Indian cinemas undoubtedly topped the list. Moreover, they nearly scored the highest marks as far as sex and violence is concerned. We, the members of the Eastern Board of Film Censor, were often told by complaining filmmakers. “In Bombay, and even more the South, they are letting a camel pass, and you are straining at a gnat! How can we stand in the all India competition, if you refuse to give us (universal) certificates for the slightest reason?” The certificates were very much in demand because, at this time, only films so certified could be sold to the Doordarshan—a safe and

sure niche. The existence of a hundred varied TV channels and showing of late night adult films were still some distance away.

In fact, we were shown one or two South Indian films, in order to give us an idea of the national standard. This convinced us that Eastern Indian films were indeed mild as milk in comparison.

### *Foreign films*

We also had to certify a few foreign, that is, non-Indian films (excluding those from Nepal). Their number was small indeed. Two US films, for example, included a comedy for children, *The Fish that Saved Pittsburgh* and a film about the Vietnam War, *Boys of the Company*. The Vietnam War was at that time less than a decade old. Numerous cinemas on this theme have been made, before and since, with different points of view, *Boys of the Company* took a definitely anti-war stand. An East German film portrayed Germany under Nazi rule, seeking refuge from bitter reality into fantasy. A Chinese film, set in the countryside, in the early 1980s, reflected the beginning of the era, known as “reforms and opening to the world.” It was not, however, overtly political, while portraying problems of a joint family, in a way that might seem familiar to South Asians.

In conclusion, one may state that the early 1980s, then, was a time of both change and complex development and by no less complex response, in things as different as female dress to changing patterns of land ownership and a technological media revolution. In all these matters, the films of Eastern India offered a faithful, but not mechanical, reflection.

This very significant appraisal of the role of the Eastern Region Censor Board of the 1980s points out the differences between the leading filmmakers and the commercial film makers of Tollywood who thrived around the same time. It is in this context that the films of the dominant filmmakers of Bengal, who have become iconic figures in national and international art cinema, stalwarts such as Ritwik Ghatak, Satyajit Ray, and Tapan Sinha stand apart, as all three filmmakers made a concerted effort to break free from the stereotypes that catered to mass appeal and popular culture and opened up possibilities of visualizing the “real” India and its extremely nuanced complexities. The three filmmakers were the pioneers in envisioning an India that was changing very subtly and slowly since the late 1960s. However, it must be remembered that there is a marked distinction between Indian popular cinema and cinema intended for a more sophisticated niche audience. This is true about films produced in all the regions of India, not only Bengal. However, as our location is Bengal and the city of Kolkata, we have tried to address some of the problematics of the commercial visual texts that Bengal has produced in the last two or three decades. We tend to agree with Raghavendra,

as he alerts us about the heterogeneity of location and speaking positions of regional cinema,

Indian popular cinema is not a homogeneous body and the regional cinemas exhibit characteristics that often depart from the 'pan-Indian' model represented by the Hindi film. The notion of the 'regional' is itself not determined by language and each kind of regional cinema exhibits distinct characteristics. (Raghavendra 24)

### III

## The Female Lens: The Films of Aparna Sen

Though there have been several women filmmakers from other parts of India, such as Sai Paranjape, Meghna Gulzar, Revathi among others, it is perhaps Aparna Sen who has exhibited a sustained development in terms of filmmaking as well as acting in films. First noticed as a young teenage actress in Satyajit Ray's *Teen Kanya*, as filmmaker Aparna Sen created a classic in her Indian English debut film *36 Chowringhee Lane* (1981), a film that was well in advance of the crossover films that have become a norm in the last 10 years. The film addressed many issues hitherto ignored by Bengali filmmakers. In her film Aparna Sen questioned the marginalization of the Anglo-Indian community, the cruelty of youth, exploitation of the sincere by smart and cunning younger people, and premarital sex. In her second film *Paroma* (1985) Aparna Sen brought forward the searing loneliness of the middle-class homemaker, despite her total involvement in domestic chores. The title of the film is also the name of the central female character, who has a brief affair with the photo journalist Rahul. If Satyajit Ray's *Charulata* (The Lonely Wife) which won him the Golden Bear at the Berlin Film Festival, ended in a compromise, the female filmmaker's lonely wife, though making a failed suicide bid, however finds her singular identity which gives her confidence and this is further accentuated as she informs her outraged husband that she has decided to earn her living by working as a sales assistant. In 1989, Aparna Sen's film *Sati* once again traversed a new route, this time too going beyond Satyajit Ray's *Devi*. Uma, the dumb protagonist of the film is married to a tree, following a superstitious belief that an elder sister who has remained a spinster could be married to a tree, so that her younger sisters could be married. Second, the affair of Uma with a schoolteacher and her death, struck by lightning, along with the fall of the lightning-struck tree-husband, is used as a statement and symbol of superstition, religious conservatism, and the consequent human tragedy.

This indeed is a complex film where again Aparna Sen breaks fresh ground. The next two films *Yugant* (1996) and *Paromitar Ekdeen* (1999) continued to explore women's search for identity, her roles has homemaker, wife, daughter, daughter-in-law, and mother as well as a professional expose—the multitasking that she has to negotiate, balancing each role in a fine balance like a skilled juggler. Her last two films released so far *Mr. and Mrs. Iyer* and *15 Park Avenue* reiterate the same agenda of this filmmaker who regards each of her films as advancement in creative dynamism, by opening up new windows through which one can watch the world and its human inmates. Film critic Shoma A. Chatterji's observations about Aparna Sen's films support the view that Aparna's films break free from the stereotypical images of Indian women that are common in Indian commercial cinema. Chatterji states, "Instead of bringing across superficial cosmetic changes in her screen women in keeping with the changing demands of the changing times, Ms Sen scratches the surface, probes into their struggles, to discover new patterns of oppression and resistance each time" (Chatterji 18).

The contemporary Bengali filmmaker who has tried to represent, deconstruct, and reconstruct images of Bengali women on screen is Rituparna Ghosh. Though his senior contemporaries Mrinal Sen, Tapan Sinha, Buddhadev Dasgupta, and Gautam Ghosh have also tried to interrogate women's exploitation and marginalization in Bengali/Indian society through their films *Ekdeen Pratideen*, *Adalat O Ekti Meye*, *Akranta*, and *Yatra*, respectively, Rituparna Ghosh has addressed contemporary women and their complex lives with remarkable sensitivity. Rituparna's first film that attracted the attention of viewers was *Unishe April*. The film has a complex psychological narrative; it foregrounds the tug-of-war of emotions between a daughter and her talented mother who is a well-known award-winning dancer. The narrative raises questions of a married woman being professionally more distinguished than her husband, leading to jealousy and an inferiority complex on the part of the husband. Also the film underscores the possibility of friendship between an adult man and a woman which does not have to necessarily be about marriage and sexuality. Other films by Rituparna Ghosh that have reiterated the woman question on varied levels have been *Dahan*, *Bariwali*, *Antarmahal*, *Dosor*, *Shob Charitra Kalpanik*. This brief summary of the alternative narratives that distinguish Bengali cinema from the Hindi films produced in Bollywood indicate that popular culture, gender images, and the mediating media can be region-specific as well as culture-specific in their representations. Also, mention must be made that Rituparna Ghosh has been able to cast Bollywood celebrities and brand ambassadors of various products from watches to perfumes in advertisements, in his atypical

films with significant success. Aishwarya Rai Bachchan and Bipasha Basu have been able to deconstruct their popular media constructed images in Rituparna Ghosh's films, which raises the question about the longevity of media images and the kaleidoscopic lens of media images that create and recreate. Rituparna Ghosh's *Chokher Bali*, adapted from a narrative by Rabindranath Tagore recreates the colonial period and the loneliness of a young widow with remarkable sensitivity, emphasizing the woman's sexual desires that earlier filmmakers of Tagore films including Satyajit Ray would not have ventured into so directly.

## IV

### Images in the Imaginary: Bollywood

If we mail a letter to Bollywood, no post office will know where to deliver it. It is not featured in the Indian Postal Directory. Such a letter would require an address in Mumbai, the erstwhile Bombay. Yet now internationally India and Bollywood have become synonymous. Commercial Hindi cinema produced in Mumbai has made a global impact to such a degree that international curiosity about India has been aroused as never before. Since Sumita S. Chakravarty had written about the cinema produced in Bombay in *National Identity in Indian Popular Cinema* (1996) referring to the effective use of *impersonation* and *masquerade* in Hindi commercial films, waves of change have swept the Bombay-based film industry in terms of scripts, music, actors, and capital investment. The far-reaching impact of the Indian popular film industry was anticipated as a positive road map as Chakravarty had observed, "A popular national cinema is a social investment, not just in patternings of image and sound but in complex bargains over technology, national autonomy, and identity" (Chakravarty 308–12).

The signifier Bollywood was constructed in a jocular vein but caught the imagination of the viewing audience and seems to have caused a noticeable impact. Kavoori and Punathambekar observe,

The term itself, Bollywood, has been around most notably in film trade journals—it was probably invented in a slightly jokey self-deprecating way by the journal *Screen* in Bombay and by its page 'Bollywood Beat', with the companion words Tollywood for the Calcutta film industry and even, for a while, Mollywood for the madras industry (Kavoori and Punathambekar 24).

As a result of this global recognition of an ethnic film industry, foreign production houses are using Indian stories and sites for their films.

So Julia Roberts shoots in Jaipur, Angelina Jolie shoots in Pune, Richard Gere creates quite a controversy by kissing Shilpa Shetty, and a British film based in India wins the Oscar for best film. It is both a matter of pride and parody that a British director gets the topmost film award for a film titled *Slumdog Millionaire*, which cynically can be interpreted as the global North's cultural assessment of the emerging global competitor from the abject colony, as a slumdog who becomes a millionaire. A rags-to-riches stereotype, however, competes with some of Bollywood's powerful films on similar issues such as *Traffic Signal* or even Mira Nair's *Salaam Bombay*. There is an uncanny resemblance in attitude between Arvind Adiga's *White Tiger* and Boyle's *Slumdog Millionaire*. It is uncanny as it shares the same contempt behind the compassion, the same superiority complex masquerading as empathy and tolerance. This difference in affect can distinguish Madhur Bhandarkar's films dealing with contemporary urban India and Boyle's film.

Tina Basi points out how Bollywood film texts track popular culture and societal norms and the transition that has been taking place in the last few decades. Bollywood film texts address issues of family, women, national, and diasporic affiliations. As a matter of fact, Hindi films have acquired a status of representing the nation, while films produced in other vernacular languages such as Bengali, Oriya, Assamese, Tamil, or Malayalee among others, are categorized as regional films. This linguistic divide is region and culture specific too, and regionalism, national identity, nostalgia for the rural, empathy toward the tribal are represented in vernacular films with greater rigor than the 21st century Bollywood films that address issues of transnationalism, with the focus on retaining Indianness as the primary agenda. Recent films such as *Namaste London*, *Aaja Nachle*, *Swades*, and even *Chini Kum* among many others, bear this out. As Basi points out referring to M. Featherstone's *Undoing Culture: Globalization, Postmodernism and Identity*, "...Indian films increasingly feature scenes and storylines set in Europe and North America, working as batteries to 'charge up' emotional bonds in the production and consumption of India as 'home'" (Basi 99). In this connection referring to the fact that India's film industry is the largest in the world and with the corporatization of the film and entertainment industry with the government of India permitting export and deregulating the erstwhile strictures on media and communication networks, Daya Kishan Thussu sums up:

It can be argued that corporatization and chasing crossover audiences has led to the advent of a new kind of cinema, a hybrid cultural product that fuses the language of Hollywood with the accent, slang, and emotions of India. Indian filmmakers appear to be aiming to reach the coveted

Western markets, privileging scripts which interest the diasporic audience—by 2004, exports accounted for nearly 30 percent of the industry earnings. (Kavoori and Punathambekar 107)

The popularity of Bollywood cinema and the relative marginalization of regional Indian cinema that includes the South Indian film industry that has remarkable quantitative and qualitative output is more about economic profit rather than social and cultural inclusiveness. As Veena Naregal observes:

The recent enthusiasm for Bollywood cinema among Western critics and mainstream audiences may signal a closer engagement between cultures promised by the experiments with the moving image that began almost simultaneously in different parts of the world just over a hundred years ago...Significantly, much of the interest has been in the area of distribution, rather than film production, propelled ostensibly less by cultural openness than by the quest for a share of easy profits in a lucrative market.... (Naregal 531–32)

Film critics notice a parallel process in the two categories, art cinema and popular cinema, that make Indian cinema cater to the informed audience and the lay audience, respectively. So it is observed, “the plurality of Indian cinema has attracted attention and one characteristic standing out is the clear demarcation between the ‘quality product’ (art cinema) and the ‘mass-produced’ one (popular cinema)” (Raghavendra 24).

Deshpande suggests a radical rejection of patriarchal norms and promotion of gender inequality as the alternative to mainstream stereotyping of Indian visual narratives. Deshpande therefore argues:

The Hindu/Indian woman’s *pati-paramshewar* (my husband is my god in all circumstances) or suffering mother syndrome reflects this forcefully. This reality can be changed only if patriarchy itself is overthrown in films as well as society. The gaze is turned upon the male or the upper caste only in the progressive cinema of film-makers like Ray, Benegal, Patel, Nihalini and some others. Commercial cinema in contradistinction to a critical realistic cinema produced by the school of so-called parallel cinema in India, very rarely challenges the canons of patriarchy. How heavily loaded the star system is towards the male stars is evident in the difference between the acting fee charged by male and female stars. (Deshpande 28)

To refer back to the interplay of change and continuity, a theme that remains at the center stage of our analysis, Bollywood has played a leading role in reinstating the same. While the temptation might be to immediately attribute it to the filmmakers and distributors the “audience factor” cannot be undermined in any way. Shakuntala Rao thus refers to

the demand of “an Indian touch” by the audience of the Bollywood films, whose response to the increasingly global and westernized sartorial and musical styles and settings has a mix of pleasure and anxiety, which in turn leads to the “almost universal expectation” that Indian values and traditions be retained and reinforced. It also has a dubious gender-specific heritage. As Rao elaborates:

Although the overt sexualization of the dance creates anxiety, such tensions are appeased with a logic that the ‘foreign’ backup dancers can be sexy but the ‘Indian’ heroines and heroes have to maintain the decorum of modesty and tradition. While globalization has created a niche for the ‘Indo Anglo heroine’ who can dress and dance Western...the foreign dancers are often seen in the films as performing the more risqué dance moves and wearing the more revealing costumes. While the films and audiences integrate the ‘MTVization’ of dance borrowed from Western MTV music videos, the Indian touch remains in the way the heroes and heroines are perceived as untainted by the overt sexualization of the other dancers... (Rao 13)

This remains the dominant trend despite Raj Kapoor’s “pioneering” (re)presentation of scantily clad and “drenched” heroines in landmark films like *Mera Naam Joker*, *Satyam Shivam Sundaram*, and *Ram Tere Ganga Maili*. It is a matter of academic debate that to what extent such interplay of change and continuity is an integral part of the content formation and to what degree it is integral to the organizational-constitutive logic of Bollywood in particular and the Indian filmdom in general. The fact, however, remains that a more intense and deeper probe into the syndrome would give weight to the latter.

To reiterate a point made in the chapter on *Indian Media in Transition: Recent Past and Present*, any attempt to cross the *Laxmanrekha* has witnessed violent opposition by the proclaimed champions of the “Indian tradition.” In terms of representations of its heroes, Bollywood has come a long way from the days of dominance of the singing heroes fighting villains and rescuing heroines, mostly from the den of the gangsters. No doubt, Amitabh Bachchan, the “angry young man” with utterly unconventional looks, literally played a key role in this changeover. But at the same time, Bachchan’s overwhelming screen presence relegated the heroines to the margins. It will not be an exaggeration to note that the Bachchan phenomenon contributed to a huge and unforeseen “gender gap” in Bollywood scheme of things. It can be argued that the Bachchan era was also distinctly different from the earlier era in which heroines like Meena Kumari or Nutan, who by their sheer acting skill and incredible screen presence, could to a great extent twist the “hero-oriented”

scripts to make their presence felt. To cite a couple of notable instances, in heroine-oriented films like *Pakeeza* or *Mere Apne* (in the case of Meena Kumari) and *Bandini* (in Nutan's case), which were solely based on the female protagonists, one could see the astonishing ability of such actors to inject life into the reels. But the point cannot be stretched too far. The era also witnessed the presence of a select group of powerful women as actors. One can think of Shabana Azmi, Smita Patil, and Rekha in the foremost category. But while the first two were not much into the "mainstream" films, Rekha, who would singlehandedly carry films like *Khumsurat* or *Umrao Jaan*, and the brilliant actor like Smita Patil would remain only an "appendage" in films with Bachchan, such as, *Mr. Natwarlal* or *Shakti*—more as a "soothing effect" to the incorrigibly rough and tough hero, in the same league with Hema Malini, the reigning superstar who would do the same to tame the virile Dharmendra. The Bachchan persona, backed up by scripts written solely with him in mind, at best ensured only secondary status for the heroines. At worst, as in *Deewar*, the heroine was "unnecessary." It was so much so that in the heydays of Bachchan's megastardom there was a joke going around that the only regular heroine in Bachchan's films was none other than Shashi Kapoor whose role was that of a "softie," if not downright effeminate.

Today Bollywood films of the mainstream variety continue to take care of the tradition of singing and dancing heroes though in a widely different and more technology-induced choreography paradigm, they also in the process indulge in maximizing the macho image of the male protagonists by projecting their "six packs," as in the cases of Salman Khan in films like *Partner*, *Wanted*, and *Dabangg*; Shahrukh Khan in *Om Shanti Om*; and Aamir Khan in *Ghajini*. In a number of cases, as in the pioneering case of Shahrukh Khan in *Baazigar*, when the hero would throw out his fiancée out of the roof, no hue and cry could be heard about the "violation of Indian culture." The silence was perhaps part of the normalization process by which the audiences are accustomed to relating such acts to the domain of "male power." However, such cries resurfaced when *Fire* was released. The film shows the sisters-in-law of a middle-class family, metaphorically named Radha and Sita, played deftly by Shabana Azmi and Nandita Das, in lesbian act. Foundationally, in *Fire*, as Sujata Moorti aptly notes, one finds "an arena in which a number of discourses around female chastity, modern nationalism, and (more broadly) morality intersect and feed on each other with significant political effects" (Moorti 136). It is important to remember that *Fire* was released for public viewing in November, 1998—seven and half years after India's formal foray with liberalization. Moorti goes on to elaborate:

The controversy over *Fire* occurred at a historical moment when Indian woman was being reconstituted as a diacritic of Hindu nationalism.... At the same time, politicians attempted to institute an affirmative action program(me) that would ensure that women comprised at least a third of all elected officials at all levels of representation.

Incidentally, *Fire* was a part of trilogy of which another film, *Water*, released in the year 2006, met the same kind of violent resistance on the same ground—that it makes a pervert representation of the Indian tradition and hurts the dignity of the Indian women by depicting the female protagonist as an exploited woman.

Such protest reminds one of the reactions of the “scandalized” viewers—even beyond the shores of Bengal and India, in America—of Satyajit Ray’s *Aranyer Din Ratri* in which a young widow of a upper-middle-class family would seek to seduce an unsuspecting guest in a forest bungalow. Much later, in filming Tagore’s landmark novel *Ghare Baire* in the 1980s, Ray did not face the same degree of resistance for a kissing scene but nevertheless there was a mild murmur in some quarters that it was “unnecessary,” especially because it concerns Tagore. But obviously it is a different standard for the other sex. Thus, Moorti adds, the film *Bombay Boys*, which depicted gay identity, faced much less resistance. It is also worth noting that such incidents of crude protests generally escape subtler versions of representations in films. Thus, there was hardly any overt opposition to a film like Ray’s *Charulata* which dealt with the heroine’s discrete love for her brother-in-law. In this case the bogey of Indian tradition was not brought into the scene by the exponents who are too crude to comprehend the nuanced affair.

To refer back to the “audience factor,” it is the vital hinge between the reel and the reality. Then again, the moot question is who constitutes the audience? The Indian filmdom is faced with a “divided” audience with a segment expecting and appreciating the reflection of the reality in films while the other segment, not necessarily in conscious ways, is reacting against such trends. Whether the latter constitutes the audience with a substantial quantity of critical faculty or whether they are just a crowd or a mob created by a sudden reflex is a subject of academic debate, which is beyond the immediate purview of this volume. But the fact remains that both the segments, in whichever way they are described, are here to stay. No less important is the fact that while the generation of appreciation of the convergence of the reality and the reel is slow, it is relatively greater and instantaneous in the cases of resistance. And as long as this scenario is there the Indian filmmakers continue be part of the tussle between “tradition” and “modernity” and negotiate the same in their respective ways.

## Alternative Bollywood

The film that made the world and the Indian viewing public notice a transformation in film narrative was of course *Lagaan*, followed by *Mangal Pandey* and *Rang De Basanti*. The films together may be regarded as a trilogy and trace the historical and sociopolitical evolution of the Indian subcontinent addressing issues of British imperialism, the official history as juxtaposed against the unofficial histories of personal relationships such as love and friendship between the colonizer and the colonized that Edward Said had referred to in *Culture and Imperialism*. But again Indian history is not contained by the experience of British colonialism alone. The Mughal emperors had ruled in India before the British arrived and trade with the East India Company was initiated. Filmmakers have used the extravagant life and spectacular history of the Mughals in such well-known films as *Mughal-e-Azam*, *Taj Mahal*, and *Noor Jahan* but a recent film which attracted a lot of attention due to its historical position in terms of time and place however did not reach the full potential of the riveting title of the film, *Jodha Akbar*, which is basically a love story between the supreme Mughal emperor Akbar and the Hindu princess Jodha, whom he married.

Ashtosh Gowariker's ambitious historical extravaganza *Jodha Akbar* was a compelling cinematic narrative and one could not but help admire those brilliant and intense scenes such as the playful sword fight between Jodha and Akbar, the dramatic moment of Jodha's discovery that Akbar was illiterate among several other such memorable sequences. But there was a serious lack in the film content, and this caused a feeling of disenchantment. The film seemed to be a rather sad case of missed opportunity despite the remarkably spectacular endeavor to reenvision a most riveting period in India's history.<sup>1</sup>

Though it is possible to agree wholeheartedly with Dimple Kapadia's recent remark that *Jodha Akbar* is not a historical documentary and so nit-picking about factual slippages is of no importance and little relevance to the fictionalized historiographic visual narrative, one becomes aware that Gowariker did imply consciousness raising by endeavoring to sensitize the viewers about communal harmony, interreligious marital alliances, the benevolence of the Mughal monarch, and the freedom of women to make choices and take decisions even in one's marital home. The very final scene of the film very explicitly states the intention of showcasing communal harmony and human tolerance through a love story between a Mughal emperor and a Hindu princess.

One, however, expected the film would include some subtle interventions about Akbar being a patron of the arts, architecture, and fine arts, with luminaries such as Tansen and Birbal gracing his court and that

one of the highlights of his reign was that it marked the renaissance of Persian literature. Also a cursory reference could be made about the fact that Queen Elizabeth I's cultural emissary Sir Thomas Roe had visited Akbar's court. This would have underscored the fact that the East was not entirely cut off from the West even in the 16th century. One cannot help but notice that the reign of Akbar was when Shakespeare was writing and staging his timeless classics on the English stage, then regarded as popular culture texts.

However, a feeling of sadness and disappointment was about Gowariker's silence regarding Akbar's founding of a new school of religion, secular, philanthropic, and profound, in total rejection of all religious dogmas—the *Din-i-Ilahi*. This fact could have been inserted even as a postscript, as is the practice in film versions that are based on historical documents, true life stories, and memoirs. This idealistic, philosophic, intensely secular, pantheistic religious manifesto created by an illiterate Moghul emperor could have been another USP for Jalaluddin Muhammad Akbar, the elephant tamer, fencer, braveheart, fierce in rage, gentle in love for his Hindu wife, his care for his subjects, his secular outlook, and his great regard and deep sense of commitment for the land that he governed without arrogance, with religious tolerance and humane understanding.

Admitting that *Jodha Akbar* is not a historical documentary; nevertheless, we feel it is not entirely out of place to suggest that such interventions could have had instructional value for school students, as we all know that the reach of visual texts is more penetrating than printed texts. Maybe even the youth of India, the dynamic *Rang de Basanti* generations that learn from *masti ka pathshalas*, would have been impressed by the inspirational contribution of Akbar to our nation's cultural history, and who knows very soon we could have had a range of Akbar T-shirts, coffee mugs, and other merchandise not unlike the ubiquitous Che and our own Gandhi.

Historians will be in a position to comment on Akbar's rule, misrule, and other such problematics that are about macro issues, but a book by Makhan Lal Roy Chowdhury published by Dasgupta & Co in 1952 and reprinted later titled *The Din-i-Ilahi or the Religion of Akbar* can make interesting reading for readers curious about this period of India's fascinating history of cultural cross-fertilization and interracial, interreligious alliances before the more sophisticated MNC, the East India Company, stepped in with its civilizing mission and its strategy of divide and rule. In fact in *The Idea of Justice* Amaryta Sen specifically referred to Akbar's secular, egalitarian attitude, which, however, the filmmaker may have addressed with determination. As films are the most powerful signposts

of awareness campaigns, eliding or ignoring such pathbreaking issues may be looked upon as a lapse on the part of the filmmaker. Sen wrote:

Taking note of the religious diversity of his people, Akbar laid the foundations of secularism and religious neutrality of the state in a variety of ways; the secular constitution that India adopted in 1949, after independence from British rule, has many features already championed by Akbar in the 1590s. The shared elements include interpreting secularism as the requirement that the state be equidistant from different religions and must not treat any religion with special favour. (Sen 37)

In such respects some of the dominant filmmakers may consider viable strategic modes so that culture and historical facts are not downplayed for political correctness and commercial gain. It would be absurd to suggest that filmmakers are expected to ignore the economic compulsions of such huge investments in film production for incorporating factual data. But filmmakers at the same time must consider themselves answerable to history and society if the representations do not address the turning points that contribute to cultural evolution and human progress.

## NRI woman filmmaker

The interesting case study and career graph of Mira Nair, the NRI woman filmmaker who has addressed many complex Indian issues in her films ranging from poverty and gender inequality to the lived experiences and the cultural makeover of the Indian diaspora, maps the changing India and the many Indias with empathy. A reading of Nair's films against the political ideology of her position as a nonwhite filmmaker in the Global North can be an interesting study. This apparent location of advantage can simultaneously be a difficult location in terms of recognition that carries the inherent expectation that performance requires to be of a significantly higher standard than the white mainstream talent pool. After all as she has successfully gained international recognition, Nair's cinema has increasingly challenged western cinematic paradigms while using production resources of the North.

I do have a private agenda, I suppose, to resist the cultural imperialism of Hollywood by putting *people like ourselves* on screen. It is an enormous validation to see people on screen who look like us in India or elsewhere in the South. We must tell our own stories, because nobody else is going to do it for us. I must say I enjoy the responsibility of exploring and portraying these stories through filmmaking. After all, film, unlike academia, reaches millions. (Dasgupta)

In her interview Nair confidently identifies her career path and also suggests her own location in postcolonial cultural politics—"to resist the cultural imperialism of Hollywood" and to make visible "people like ourselves." Nair's films may be read against the political ideology of her position as a nonwhite filmmaker in the Global North. This apparent location of advantage can simultaneously be a difficult location in terms of recognition that carries the inherent expectation that performance requires to be of a significantly higher standard than the white mainstream talent pool. After all, as she has successfully gained international recognition, Nair's cinema has increasingly challenged Western cinematic paradigms, while using production resources of the North. It is this act of resistance that needs to be recognized, though Nair's film texts are not entirely free from clichés and essentialisms.

Nevertheless, this element of resistance enables us to situate Nair's films in the third or combative phase of Teshome H. Gabriel's three categories as signposts that distinguish the development of third world filmic representations and institutions. The three phases—*assimilation*, *remembrance*, and the *combative*—track the road map of third world cinema and points out how it succeeds in breaking free from Hollywood's hegemonic influence. In the combative phase, Gabriel argues, the film themes focus directly on the "lives and struggles of Third world peoples. This phase signals the maturity of the film-maker and is distinguishable from either Phase I or Phase II by its insistence on viewing film in its ideological ramifications" (Gabriel 33).

In India, the contemporary popular Hindi cinema that enthralls viewers as highly successful mass entertainment, mimics Hollywood representations, through a process of indigenization and appropriation by refashioning the influences:

Hollywood thematic concerns of "entertainment" predominate. Most of the feature films of the Third World in this phase sensationalize adventure for its own sake and concern themselves with escapist themes of romance, musicals, comedies etc. The sole purpose of such industries is to turn out entertainment products that will generate profits. (Gabriel 31)

Critiquing the style and subject matter of the popular Hindi cinema and the creation of the Bollywood myth and mystique, Jyotika Viridi expressed her skepticism about the sense of the unreal or even the surreal that such films produce, though its consumers remain mesmerized by these melodramatic elements of exaggeration and romance:

Despite its permeating Indian culture, Hindi cinema's stylistic conventions are paradoxically in complete disjunction from everyday reality: the films

use dialogues instead of speech, costumes rather than clothes, sets and exotic settings, and lavish song and dance routines—hardly everyday familiar surroundings.... Even though they abide by other realist conventions, such as cause and effect linear narratives, continuity editing, and spatial/temporal unity, the films show scant regard for looking “authentic” or bearing a similitude to realism. (Virdi 2)

## Mapping Mira

From 1991 to 2007, is a long journey of more than 16 years for a woman filmmaker who made her debut with a disturbing documentary-feature film *Salaam Bombay*. The film made cinegoers notice the powerful dual use of cinematic technique and the postcolonial exposition of national hypocrisy and corruption in the visual text. Nair very quickly stood out among the very small group of both global and local women filmmakers as a creative and dynamic filmmaker who did not fight shy of strong ideological underpinnings in her visual narratives. Nair’s zest and creative energy are obvious in the three films (*Mississippi Masala*, *Monsoon Wedding*, and *The Namesake*) which will be discussed at some length in order to map the creative mindscape of a filmmaker whose films on India, Indians, and Indianness break free from the stereotypes of not just Bollywood films but many Indian films as a whole.

Nair very carefully detaches her cinematic gaze from the grand cinematic narratives and the hegemonic filmic structures of Hollywood, in order to revisualize her subject by insinuating the oppositional gaze that is directly linked to oppositional consciousness and differential consciousness. By instigating and imbricating the interracial solidarity in a multiracial and multicultural environment, the oppositional gaze that Nair directs, is undoubtedly transgressive and creates a sense of counter-memory that bell hooks identifies in her seminal essay that critiques Mulvey’s essay on visual pleasure and the subjectivity of the gaze.

Through the oppositional gaze empowered by the need to present deconstructive images Nair invites the audience to look differently—*looking at* and *looking through* the scenes projected—“they act to critically intervene and transform conventional filmic practices, changing notions of spectatorship” (Hooks 220). The Indian woman filmmaker located in the North creates, directs, and eroticizes her transgression from western paradigms of the South through the robust use of the carnivalesque and the dialogic mode. However, we need to remember that with the emergence of Internet images, blogs, and the politics of the hypertext, oppositional visibility, and politics have been further problematized, but discussion about discursive cyberspace and cyberdemocracy lies well beyond the scope of this chapter. Jigna Desai situates the positionality

of the diasporic films and filmmakers by referring to their transnational and transcultural significance as she states, “diasporic films function significantly as part of the shifting economic, political and cultural relations between global capitalism and the postcolonial nation-state, raising questions regarding the negotiation of cultural politics of diasporas located within local, national and transnational processes” (Desai 36).

Mira Nair’s debut film *Salaam Bombay* was recognized both at home and the world as a deeply disturbing and powerful film. There was some mixed critical response about glamorizing Indian poverty and abject living conditions that find a ready consumer market in the West, but one recalls that Satyajit Ray too faced similar criticism about *Pather Panchali* that has now become an indispensable text in many film studies courses globally. Since *Salaam Bombay* Nair became an internationally accredited filmmaker who has that magic touch of blending the components of art films with mainstream feature films, with varying commercial and popular success. Of Nair’s many important films *Mississippi Masala* stands out prominently, as the film addressed many political issues in many cultures, African, British, African American, tracking the journey of an Asian immigrant family to Africa, UK, and the USA. The catchy alliteration of the film title however may seem misleading, as Nair’s film is quite unlike the typical Bollywood “masala” films of songs, dances, love, marriage, crime, and punishment. It is a very serious film on many levels and its multiple layers and nuanced ideological sequences represent the crucial historical context with sensitivity.

### *Mississippi Masala* and multiculturalism

*Mississippi Masala* is a film about Indians in the world—in Africa, briefly in the UK, and then in the USA. Though immigrants can muster displacement and accept relocation, language, and even religion if the need arises, the racial tag, the skin color places them in the ethnic margins of the white mainstream. The irony of the film lies in the fact that Asians are exiled from black Africa, for preferring to remain British citizens in Africa rather than opting for African citizenship. But in Britain, Asians are regarded as part of the “black” population. Furthermore, “black” in the United States is different from “black” in the United Kingdom. In the UK, “black” would signify all nonwhite immigrants, including the Caribbeans, the Africans, and the Asians. In the United States usually black would signify the African Americans in the US, many being descendants of the black slaves who were forcibly brought in ships to America, to serve as bonded menial labor.

*Mississippi Masala* commences with a date, November 7, 1972, that is, two days prior to the deadline that the Ugandan dictator General Idi

Amin had set for noncitizen Asians to leave Uganda. Jay Loha, a lawyer of Indian descent is jailed for calling Amin a madman, bailed out by his black childhood friend Okello. Along with hundreds of Asians, Jay takes the decision to leave Uganda with his wife Kinnu and his daughter Mina. This period of Jay's life with his family in Africa takes up 10 minutes of film time and then the 10 years in England is just about a camera pause on the map tracing how the family have traveled from Kampala to England and then to Greenwood, Mississippi. It is in Greenwood that the film unfolds the complexities of the cultural border crossings, contact zones and the intra-cultural resistance within multicultural America. Mira Nair problematizes the native term "masala" not just as a blend of pungent spices but polyglot culture of the Indians which overtly signifies the hybrid nature of the Loha family, which is Indian, Ugandan, briefly British, and eventually North American (Shohat and Stam 165).

The irony in the film builds up when the young woman Mina who spent her early childhood in Uganda with Ugandan friends falls in love with Demetrius, a handsome African American young man. Mina does not feel the race superiority that her parents feel when they try to distance themselves from African Americans and their culture. This seems a bit odd for those who made Africa their home and had not only done business but had socialized on many levels with Africans. However, it is a well-known fact that Asians invariably consider themselves to be superior to the black Americans, and are eager to identify themselves with the ethos of white America.

For Mina, her lover's skin color probably reconnects her to the happy days in Uganda and her black friends. Memory, loss, nostalgia are deeply implicated in her love for Demetrius, the African American young man. When she leaves with her black lover, she romantically relinks with the Africa from which she had to escape. Similarly, the black are socially marginalized in the US and this reinforces the argument about the dominance of light skinned people over the dark skinned ones. Identifying color prejudice and recognizing the positive rejection and simultaneous recognition of the spirit of multiculturalism Mark Reid observed, "Mina and Demetrius fight the prejudice that censures people of brown, black, yellow, and red complexions from loving outside their racial and ethnic communities" (Reid 28). But bell hooks and Anuradha Dingwaney strongly criticized the film as pandering to a Western ideology of personal choice, "The American dream of a love that triumphs over politics is a negation of our need to seriously examine the West's relationship to India, Africa and global liberation movements for national freedom and self-determination" (hooks and Dingwaney 42).

Mixed critical review and reception of the film probably had been due to the fact that it dispensed with any valorization of a single ethnic group, and in a flamboyant dismissal of custom, culture, and practices brought in the western paradigm of assertiveness and choice, as the young lovers heedlessly snap familial ties and walk into a new horizon, ready to accept risks and challenges rather than succumb to the threat of unknown dangers. As Binita Mehta pointed out:

Moreover, although Mina is not given to making political speeches on racism and equality, her leaving Greenwood with a black man in a society where blackness has come to be feared and loathed is nothing less than radical. Breaking the social taboos of both her own community and the larger society around her, she is engaged in a revolutionary act for an Indian woman under any circumstances. (Shohat and Stam 162)

### "Plural monoculturalism"

Nair gives into the western essentialisms about Asian cultures, familial binding, as opposed to the much valorized freedom of choice in Caucasian cultures, as in this rather significant exchange between mother and daughter. This inter-exchange is not just about intergenerational conflict but problematizes the effect that slices through intergenerational ethnic identities in a western location:

So Kinnu (mother) asks Mina, "Who is he? What do you know about him? What about his family?"

Mina tells her mother, "This is America, Ma! No one cares"

But Kinnu says, "We care. Your father and I. You're our only child. If we don't care, who will?" (Warlinberg 140)

America's cultural composition is about a multiethnic, multiracial society with a dominant Anglo-Protestant mainstream culture encompassing many subcultures. Referring to the hype surrounding multiculturalism, cultural freedom and the reductionism implied in identity disregard, and diversity of cultures in their exclusivist ghettos, Amartya Sen made an interesting comment in his recent book titled *Identity and Violence*, "... having two styles or traditions coexisting side by side, without the twain meeting, must really be seen as plural monoculturalism" (Sen 157). Citing the dating of an immigrant girl with an English boy, as evidence of multicultural initiative and cultural freedom, Sen argues that if guardians oppose such interracial dating it is "hardly a multicultural move, since it seeks to keep the culture sequestered" (Sen 157). It is widely noticed in many studies of immigrant behaviorism that while

out of the homeland of one's origins, ghettoization is preferred by immigrants as a mode of cultural security. As a result the children of migrants face severe cultural confusion and bicultural stress as they are caught between two cultural polarities. To be an Indian and feel like an Indian in personal life and to be American in the public spaces is a fiercely exclusionary demand that inevitably leads to a sense of split identity that is often an inherent part of any hybrid culture. So, Indians form cultural associations in their new homelands but rarely are they called Indian cultural associations, these are mostly Bengali, Punjabi, Gujarati, or Tamil cultural associations, preserving the tradition and customs of their respective regions like self-appointed vigilantes of their very specific regional language, literature, music, dance, and other customs and practices.

### Filming urban affluent India: *Monsoon Wedding*

*Monsoon Wedding* in a different mode tries to cut through the veneer of silence, secrecy, and hypocrisy within the deeply valorized Indian family system. It is a sort of reverse gaze, a self-introspective analysis of tradition, change, and transforming value system and the discovering of self, identity, and the cultural paradigm shifts. As a matter of fact, Mira Nair was the first Indian woman director to have received the Golden Lion award in 2001, for *Monsoon Wedding*. Forty-four years earlier, in 1957, Satyajit Ray was the first Indian filmmaker to have received this same award for his film *Aparajito*. Nair's entire film is set in Delhi and shot with handheld cameras. This technical experiment invited a lot of critical attention to cinematic strategies that included time management ploys and cost-cutting factors. The film went on to gross \$ 20 million, a landmark in Indian film sales figures and the film was coproduced by India, US, Italy, France, and Germany.

*Monsoon Wedding* maybe regarded as a pastiche that enshrines the exotic extravaganza of an Indian wedding with family members playing a crucial role in the observance of customs and rituals that obviously include songs, dances, and wedding costumes. But the traditional, conservative, and conventional are not only part of the Indian family life. Nair's text explores the conflicts, cruelties, expectations, double standards and even through a series of exposures foregrounds taboo subjects among the urban affluent middle classes such as marital infidelity, pedophilia, sexual advances, and malicious gossip, which after all are deeply enmeshed within the Indian family life. Such exposures, however, do not detract from the essential message that the Indian family system is the glue that is the hallmark of Indian familial consciousness. So, in the

film text we find that the senior male family member takes upon himself the responsibility of protecting each member of the family, regarding *familyism* as a sacred duty, not unlike religion.

Nevertheless, in *Monsoon Wedding* Nair's irony seems to penetrate the veneer of culture, education, and sophistication by telling the viewer that love as a mysterious and innocuous romantic concept beyond sexual desire probably survives among the less privileged social groups. In the film the wedding contractor and event manager P.K. Dubey fantasizes about his newly awakened love and passion for the live-in maid Alice, who works for the Verma family. Their mutual attraction, shy expressions of love, distress, and eventual happiness have been subtly introduced in the film as a counter-discourse that also distributes attention to the diverse economic classes and multiple regional cultures of India. At the same time the romantic foreplay of Alice and Dubey parodies the romantic sequences of songs, dances, lovelorn pensiveness, the invariable formula of many blockbuster Bollywood films. In a way, it incisively parodies the Bollywood conventions and interrogates the stereotyping of Bollywood films that adheres to the fixed binaries of good versus evil, self-sacrifice versus selfish motives, youth and romance versus age and asceticism, in intergenerational, interpersonal relationships cutting across all economic classes.

## Postcolonial reviewing of Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*

In 2004, Mira Nair made *Vanity Fair*, based on the well-known 19th century British classic by William Makepeace Thackeray, who incidentally was born in Kolkata. Not unexpectedly, the film received mixed reviews and of course the British critics sternly criticized the intrusions of Bollywood exotica in the film. But then Nair was trying to sensitize the viewers about the important role India played in 19th century Britain's socioeconomic environment, when hundreds of British men made a career in India. As India cannot be dissected by Nair, nor can colonial India be forgotten by British history, as official archives and unofficial records from photographs, architecture, colonial buildings, travel accounts, and memoirs even now open up new vistas inviting further investigation. This was undoubtedly a remarkable venture, making a serious bid to sensitize contemporary international audiences about colonial India and India's British connections. As a matter of fact, Gurinder Chadha made *Bride and Prejudice* based very slimly on Jane Austen's classic *Pride and Prejudice*, reconfiguring the character of Darcy as an American investor to India, adding a subtle hint

at the agenda of American neocolonialism and globalization. Unlike in Nair's film, the colonial connections remain as silent in Chadha, as they had remained absent in almost all of Jane Austen's literary texts.

### *The Namesake* and transcultural identity

*The Namesake* was recently reviewed by a senior school student who observed in *Voices*, an exclusive page for schoolchildren of a national daily *The Statesman* that, "Mira Nair has attained a perfect blend of the old and the new and thrown light on the typical middle-class Bengali family stuck in a country far from its culture and tradition" (Sen).

The word that is significant in this very positive review by the teen-aged reviewer is the word that I have italicized—"stuck." The same second page of *Voices*, however, includes another review of another new film. The film is *Namaste London*. The review is very positive except a short section that is severely critical of the playback singer. The young reviewer comments:

On one level, this is one typical Bollywood masala film—with bits of romance, comedy, patriotism and tear-jerkers ... On a deeper level, it is an excellently well made film that speaks of the plight of Indian children growing up on foreign shores, among cultures that are not theirs, so that they remain struggling to find their own identities. (*Voices* 2)

It is apparent and quite expected that the two schoolkids haven't yet read their Amartya Sen or postcolonial theorists celebrating the transnation as a smooth space, nor are they, we may assume, yet familiar with the theoretical problematics regarding fluent cultural two-way flows and fluid identities, the straddling of many geographies, inheriting and owning multiple residences in many locations, at home in the world, making the world a home.

Interestingly, the prestigious Bengali literary journal *Desh* (April 2007 issue) carried a review of the film *The Namesake*. The confused response of the reviewer and the mixed review indicate the local film critic's lack of familiarity with the problematics of the diaspora and the dilemma of the diasporic subject (*Desh* 89). This is doubly interesting because of the fact that when in 2000, Jhumpa Lahiri received the Pulitzer Prize for her debut book of short stories *The Interpreter of Maladies*, *Desh* featured Lahiri on the cover and claimed her as a Bengali writer. As a second generation immigrant, Lahiri, was expectedly rather forthright when she declared without ambiguity in her many newspaper interviews during her visit to Kolkata, that Bengal/India was her parents' home, not hers.

A recently released film *The Bong Connection* (2009) mentions that the American desi musician Andy visiting Kolkata has been invited by Mira Nair to set the musical scores of *The Namesake*. This interlude in the film is much more than name-dropping, for by naming Mira Nair and *The Namesake*, the filmmaker Anjan Dutt tries to knit the agenda of the two films together, as both essentially explore the roots and routes of the diasporic subject. However, through its critiquing of the contact zones and spatial relations in terms of gender, race, and the subaltern status of the immigrant that leads to cultural ghettoization, this film by Anjan Dutt perhaps addresses the complexities of cultural politics and its conflictual tensions far more than Mira Nair's *The Namesake* does. But the cinematic and filmic textures of Nair's film may be regarded as far more sophisticated and emotionally subtle and sublime, in comparison to Anjan Dutt's *The Bong Connection* that sometimes seems to be a series of impressionistic collages not entirely free from essentialisms.

In *The Bong Connection*, the essentialist cultural representations about the permissiveness of the West in terms of drinks, drugs, mugging, sex, the danger that illegal immigrants face, in the film a Bangladeshi illegal immigrant is killed by the US police, the second generation immigrant's cultural confusion, the ghettoization of the Bengali professional middle-class families with their mushy nostalgia may be new in a Bengali film made by a resident Bengali filmmaker but seems rather clichéd and tired by now. As a counter-discourse again the Bengali pride without the drive for performance and productivity, groupism, lack of professionalism, adapting Western lifestyles and culture outside their homes have been interrogated in the text of Dutt's film, once again in a mode that has been overexposed but nonetheless effective. The climactic courtyard scene where the American desi nephew does some plain speaking to expose the hypocrisy and verbal make-believe world of the dissatisfied Bengali, reveling in the past and unable to keep pace with the changing times is about a clash of generations and a wake-up call to be in tune with the transforming times.

In comparison, therefore, Nair's *The Namesake* is another diasporic novel about cultural negotiations, an excavation of roots, rootlessness, uprooting, re-rootings, tracking roots, and routes to discover oneself at home in many homes in the world, despite a single or dual citizenship, a passport of a particular color, a skin color that cannot be changed easily like that of a chameleon. As Roger Bromley observed:

The transcultural and transnational narratives, texts of cultural translation, do not so much restore geography and the arbitrary, but, rather, open up again their conditions of possibility, a release, especially through women's writing, from the "locked within boundaries" of patriarchal hegemony—not

by simple reversals, but through emergence texts of the third scenario: the indeterminacy of diasporic identities, the production of difference as the political and social definition of the historical present, the contemporary. (Bromley 73)

*The Namesake* reiterates the longing to belong somewhere, a syndrome of the diasporic subject. Identifying a psychological change in the Indian diaspora settled in the West, Mahesh Bhatt makes some important analytical observations:

The Asian abroad is getting more assertive. He wants to celebrate his status, he doesn't want to emulate the white man any more, he is not apologetic about his likes and dislikes. He is today unashamedly saying, "I like bhangra and I like Hindi film music and I like Shahrukh Khan more than I like Tom Cruise." He's celebrating his cultural heritage, where his parents came from. A part of him is saying there is no point pretending that he is comfortable with only an alien culture; he can have the best of both worlds. He can have all the comforts and luxuries of the west and yet tune into the bhajans or his favourite Hindi film songs. He can maintain contact with that India which is no longer a geographical territory for him, India is something that exists inside him, in the crevices of his mind and heart. That's why he feels the need to see more and more Hindi films. (Kabir 216)

Chris England who played the role of one of the English cricketers in *Lagaan*, which was a huge success though it failed to secure the Oscar, makes some succinct observations about Indian/Bollywood films from the point of view of the outsider, which may seem interesting:

Bollywood is not a real place, and not just in the sense that Hollywood is unreal. There actually is no such place ... Bollywood is only a name, a nickname for the Indian film industry. It is a play on the name Hollywood, of course corrupted by the first letter of Bombay, where the bulk of Indian film-making takes place. (England 2)

Furthermore he elaborated:

Typically Bollywood films released in the UK are aimed at a traditional niche Asian audience. They are promoted in Asian newspapers and magazines, and advertise on the Asian-oriented satellite television channels, which offer them their core audience on a plate. Few of the prints that circulate are subtitled, and little attempt has so far been made to break into a cross-over market and attract non-Asians in any sort of numbers. The huge, critical, Oscar-winning and box-office success of the subtitled *Crouching tiger, Hidden Dragon* suggested that it might also be possible for high-quality Bollywood film to appeal to an English-speaking audience. (England 325)

## Between Hollywood and Bollywood

Mira Nair's films about India, mostly produced by the North, have found a niche between Hollywood and Bollywood mainstream cinemas, and it is precisely from this interstitial space that Nair's films make a bid to engage not only the South Asian viewers but viewers of all colors. Nair stands apart for she can interrogate and even parody the ethnic exotica package as in *Monsoon Wedding*, avoiding what is described as the cringe factor in order to please western viewers and move beyond disdain and desire, the binaries that are often steadfastly separated in Bollywood films. Nair explores the possibilities of cultural dialog as in *The Namesake* but Nair seems to empathize with Gogol's need for freedom of choice that recognizes cultural roots and also the place of relocation as "home."

Interestingly, films about the diaspora and the Indians at home and abroad made outside India are most often dismissed as lacking authenticity, as being historically and socially quite off the mark in their representations of Indian culture and cultural practices. Diasporic films made outside India earn the tag of being "too hybrid."

"These diasporic film products become understood here as mongrelized, bastardized and therefore inauthentic from a range of perspectives parallel to perceptions of them as subjects of intrigue and mirth" (Kaur and Sinha 324).

Similarly, in what is now recognized as a classic statement, Stuart Hall prioritized the concept of hybridity and elaborated, "Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference" (Hall 402). Homi Bhabha identified a Third Space that engaged a spatiotemporal cultural negotiation. In *Location of Culture*, Bhabha explained:

The theoretical recognition of the split-space of enunciation may open the way to conceptualizing an international culture, based not on exoticism of multiculturalism or the diversity of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture's *hybridity*. To that end we should remember that is the "inter"—the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the in-between space—that carries the burden of the meaning of culture...And by exploring this *Third Space* we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as others of ourselves. (Bhabha 38–39)

Mira Nair's creative transnational lens zooms, pans, and focuses uninhibitedly on frontal images of race relations, gender issues, local and global familial relationships. Her subjective postcolonial cinematic agenda and her deeply political oppositional gaze represent the wretched, wicked, and the worthies of the world, exposing the ruptures and slippages, as well as, sustainable development within the nuances of the

micropolitics of daily living on all three levels of the local, national, and the transnational. It is this agenda that lies at the heart of cultural pluralism and constitutes an integral part of civil society despite the disjuncture and differences. Mira Nair's creative dynamism images the South and the North with sense and sensibility, by resisting the easy racialized binaries and economic inequalities. Nair's films effectively make use of deconstructive textual strategies that powerfully identify the contact zones that proposes positive dialog and powerful engagements between the global and the local in all cultures and races.

If Mira Nair has successfully tracked sameness differently, other recent Bollywood films that have been significantly different and therefore, quite unequivocally stressed that Bollywood films sometimes even at the risk of replicating Hollywood versions are *Black*, *Ghajini*, *Maqbool*, and *Omkaara* representing a postcolonial *Macbeth* or *Othello* by localizing the universal value systems of Shakespeare, romantic and youthful films such as *Jab We Met*, *Rock On!!*, *Chak de! India*, *Wake Up Sid*, investigative research-oriented films by Madhur Bhandarkar such as *Page 3* and *Metro* among others which were mentioned earlier and *Taare Zameen Par* and *3 Idiots*. The last two can be read along with *Rang De Basanti* as a trilogy of 21st century cosmopolitan youthful India on its inclusive journey of self-discovery and gender equality. Some other films that go beyond the obvious stereotypes and may be considered as trailblazers are *Khosla Ka Ghosla*, *New York*, and *Parzania*.

This chapter has tried to address the issues of thematic stereotypes in popular cinema, from Hollywood to its regional counterparts, specifically the Bengali cinema, in order to identify the sameness and difference. At the same time films, which have been able to script cultural transformation and have made significant contributions to the collective cultural progress of India, have been mentioned briefly in order to emphasize the creative dynamism of the entertainment and culture industry. The chapter also includes the priorities and constraints of a censor board, and an insider's viewpoint makes us understand the compulsions that the members of a censor board have to deal with before certifying a film for public release. The chapter also focuses on two women filmmakers, a resident Bengali woman filmmaker and a nonresident woman filmmaker, Aparna Sen and Mira Nair, respectively. A juxtaposition of this nature identifies the themes and variations in approaches and attitudes toward society and gender, positioning that contributes to the representation of popular culture, in popular as well as, serious cinema of the present times. Also the stereotypical notion that a resident filmmaker would be more inhibited in her choice and treatment of subject is belied as one views the films of Aparna Sen and Mira Nair and this is also

applicable to the films directed by resident women filmmakers Sai Paranjape, Megha Gulzar, and Revathi as well. The sheer span and variety of Indian popular cinema, has obviously led to this chapter becoming the longest one in our book.

## Note

1. This is a revised version of the piece published as "Missed Opportunity" in *The Sunday Statesman*, 8th Day, 9 march, 2008.

## Mira Nair's films

### Directed films

*Salaam Bombay* (1998), *Mississippi Masala* (1991), *The Perez Family* (1995), *Kama Sutra: A Tale of Love* (1996), *Monsoon Wedding* (2001), *Hysterical Blindness* (2002), *11 9'01 September 11* (section 'India') (2002), *Vanity Fair* (2004), *The Namesake* (2007), and *Shantaram* (work in progress).

### Documentaries

*Jama Masjid Street Journal* (1979), *So Far from India* (1982), *India Cabaret* (1985), *Children of a Desired Sex* (1987), *The Day the Mercedes Became a Hat* (1993), *My Own Country* (1998), and *The Laughing Club of India* (1999).

### Productions

*Still, The Children Are Here* (2004), *Gangsta M.D.* (to be announced).

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# 4

## Television: Images and the Imaginary

I think we have a scoop.

—(Brants et al. 113)

Enslaved by audience ratings, television imposes market pressures on the supposedly free and enlightened consumer.

—Pierre Bourdieu (Durham 336)

Television in India began with the state-monitored national channel Doordarshan in the mid-1970s. Those were the times when having a TV antenna jutting out of a terrace or balcony of a home was considered a status symbol. But in the course of three decades television is just about everywhere, from homes to tea stalls, from slums to remote villages. However, with the advent of cable television and multiple channels international, national, and regional television shows have had a hegemonic impact on the collective psyche of the nation. There was a time when television and the VCR detained people indoors and the footfall in the single film cinema houses decreased so much that many cinema halls had to shut down or lost their erstwhile charisma. At present however, despite the readily affordable DVDs and VCDs the relatively recent Inox multi-movie theatres brought viewers back and single screen halls too stepped up their infrastructure, leading to a revival of Indian cinema and the emergence of the imaginary space—Bollywood, the Bombay film industry in Mumbai. Nevertheless, television has proved its overwhelming reach to such an extent that the Union Health Minister even advised watching television as an effective antidote to population increase. Ghulam Nabi Azad stated categorically, “If there is electricity, people will watch TV late into the night and fall asleep, they won’t get a chance to produce children” (Blakely 12). The filmmaker Mahesh Bhatt elaborates on the penetrating power of television:

Television is almost impossible to avoid. It bombards and overwhelms. Streams of images from distant lands, shaped by the world's best image-makers, pour into our homes. And the simple Indian man suddenly goes from being a big frog in a small pond to a small fish in a vast ocean of images, where he is endlessly entertained.... The audio-visual drug has proved to be efficient as a birth-control method in our billion-plus-and-still counting nation. (Blakely 12)

The common factor that seemed to emerge from viewing popular films or television shows was that there has been a paradigm shift in the ideology of image making.

"Television—for producers and audiences—is increasingly about pleasure, it is argued, not about ideals which smack of paternalism, duty, effort or even social responsibility" (Brants et al. 94). The prime agenda or better still the desire of the consumer has been defined clearly, "The consumer belongs to the realm of the popular culture project, where the focus is on entertainment and fiction, and where questions of pleasure and taste take predominance" (Brants et al. 174). However, with television sets transforming themselves into home theaters and surround sound systems, the audiovisual media (AVM) has invaded the environment within homes as never before. TV programs seem to direct action, reception, and leisure activities of family members. So it is not just about switching on the television, but the television directing the family members about when to watch and what to watch through active viewer participation as phone-in, text messaging, and direct participation in TV shows. Deshpande warns against the hegemonic controlling power of the media, specifically television and its narcotic effect on the minds of the masses, both young and old. Deshpande elaborates:

Modern existence, which often means the denial of modernity to the masses in most Third World societies, is suffused with an imagery brought into our lives by media, such as radio, cinema, and above all, television... There is no point in reposing an ostrich-like trust in the media of so-called objective information, while being pulverized by scripts, screens and speakers working in tandem everywhere: shopping malls, homes, hotels, offices, workshops, airplanes, buses, trains, stores and even slums. (Deshpande 15–16)

Media commentators forecast that diversity in terms of hundreds of channels will not necessarily lead to wider coverage but may even lead to convergence instead of the intended divergence if digital technologies may lead to reruns, repeats, remixes, and superimpositions. Instead of television broadcasting, the present era maybe about narrowcasting or bitcasting as first described by Gilder in his *Life after Television* (1992). However, such refined viewing maybe of interest of a select few, for

overall it is broadcasting and its schedule that will be the prime determinant that will create media flows and effects. Gary Edgerton et al. assert the rapid progression of technological advancement in developing locations and the concomitant effects that fuse entertainment awareness campaigns and information leading to a virtual construction of a knowledge system:

Television audiences have greatly expanded during the past few decades. About thirty years ago, only 5 per cent of the world's television sets were found in developing countries; by 1993, the numbers had increased to 50 per cent. In two of the world's most populous countries, China and India, television now reaches a combined one billion people. (Edgerton et al. 209)

Information is not necessarily about knowledge search; instead, the neologisms as infotainment and edutainment register entertainment as the intrinsic agenda of the AVM that has invaded the domestic space and engaged viewers of all age groups, from play-school kids to senior citizens. The ubiquitous visible presence of images and audio commentaries and dialog are programmed to hold the viewer's attention in a seductive and often provocative package that makes television journalism command greater attention than print journalism. The role of the mass media through televised images and information contributes toward a positive role in terms of education through AVM, which can be far more effective as the retention of visual images by the mind is of a much longer duration, as has been scientifically proved. This is doubly true of developing countries and their vast populations along with the first-generation learners. As Edgerton summarizes:

By 1995, over fifty developing countries were actively engaged in media projects that disseminate educational messages through entertainment programs. These programs, variously called prodevelopment, prosocial, enter-education, edutainment, and infotainment, promote persuasive educational messages through the use of entertainment media. The use of entertainment media to promote prosocial messages is more generally referred to as the entertainment-education strategy in mass-communication. (Edgerton et al. 208)

In a country like India this is even more significant with the majority of the population being illiterate or semilliterate. The divide between the literate and the educated is a fearful gulf and it is precisely this gulf that visual images bridge. The viewer's gaze is a subjective gaze. A feminist will be appalled by TV shows where women weep endlessly, while majority of the target viewers will smile and weep as the fortunes of the TV persona in the serials rise and fall. TV advertisements about

moisturizing lotions where men in western wear fantasize about desirable women's skin as being as smooth and silky like strawberries and cream are accepted as normative as the patriarchal media consistently floats these images. A recent Boro Plus television advertisement has very fair, seemingly western or westernized men expressing through their body language the exhilaration of touching a smooth skinned woman. Visual images of parts of the woman's nude body, including the navel are off set against men clutching themselves in joyful arousal in their recounting of the "mulayam" or smooth skinned women. The ethnic word "mulayam" uttered with relish by a man gyrating joyfully, unclasping and clasping his hands is deliberately introduced to destroy distances and bring home the erotic sensation of touching a Boro Plus-softened female body. In a more recent advertisement a smooth skinned rather luscious female sprinter challenges a bunch of men by smiling and running and saying "khelna chahogey" *a catch me if you can* ethnic rescripting of signifiers. The woman's smooth and slippery body that the men reach out to clutch but cannot is the ultimate sexist provocative playfulness that a skin lotion can effectively stimulate. Such visual images on television watched by both adult and minor family members merely consolidate stereotyping of gendered images.

On the macro level, politics and the parliament where politicians perform engage the Indian media with remarkable intensity and consistency. Though the issues discussed may often be very local ones, the news and talk shows replicate the BBC and CNN news channels, even in terms of the sartorial image preferences of the newscasters. Women anchors and newscasters are regularly dressed in western executive suits, or blazers, trousers and western tops. On days of ethnic festivals, however, the preference seems to be to wear ethnic clothes even traditionally draped along with traditional accessories such as period jewelry. This mode of sartorial images representative of the multiple national and regional channels varies somewhat from state to state, but can be regarded as a representative model. For example, the newsreaders both male and female, are seen wearing western executive suits regularly in the national elitist English or Indian English news channel NDTV. Interestingly, even the competing Bengali news channels Star Ananda and Chabis Ghanta have their newsreaders and anchors wearing western executive suits. On the other hand newsreaders of the national channel Doordarshan wear the Indian national dress, that is, the saree regularly, whereas male newsreaders are usually seen wearing western suits and ties.

Of the many national and state issues that are represented in the AVM and the print media, politics, politicians, campaigning for votes, and results of closely administered electoral processes form a riveting topic and

invariably enjoy page 1 status and are itemized as the premier matter of public interest in the AVM. The career graph of politicians and their poll prospects in various elections from *panchayats*, assembly, and parliament and exit poll speculations and analyses of the same in meticulous detail can create news for weeks. To create viewer interest, election reportage and analyses are publicized and advertised by the competing regional and national channels as being authentic, reliable, and even prophetic. It must be remembered that electronic transmission is not about ongoing sustainability but a cognitive involvement created by the mass media through image projections that distances the real or non-virtual world and makes the virtual seem to be the real, that is, the truth as opposed to actual or factual ground realities. So Milan Kundera remarks:

The politician is dependent on the journalist. On whom are the journalists dependent? On imagologues. The imagologue is a person of conviction and principle; he demands of the journalist that his newspaper (or TV channel or radio station) reflect the imagological system of a given moment. (Kundera 130)

## Television Coverage and Media Responsibility

It is the very transitory or fleeting attention span of media reportage that can distract, disturb, and/or even result in callous viewership. On August 3, 2009, the transport minister of the West Bengal Left Front government died in a city nursing home battling cancer. All vernacular channels invited politicians and lay persons to talk about the minister who had served the government for over 30 years. Subhas Chakravorty who has been often blamed for his atypical flamboyance by the media was projected for one evening as an epitome of philanthropy. This oscillation of the media in terms of image construction extends, interprets, represents, and misrepresents the real, the factual, and the truth in a sort of viscous format. Incidentally, Kundera's essay on "Imagology" in *Immortality* may be considered for inclusion in any media studies curriculum as a complementary text to Baudrillard's essay on simulacra.

The news channels that claim to have a perpetual presence—24 × 7—has news flash, breaking news, showbiz sessions, hard talks titled *Big Fight*, many debates, and daily news scoops from both within and outside the country. *The Argumentative Indian* is projected through transmissions that can often be about omission, commission, selective, deconstructive, or even downright propagandist overtures, mostly related to politics and

the government, corporate sectors, entertainment industry, celebrity cult, and the cosmetic/fashion/hospitality industries. It is here that the question of ethics becomes important. Can there be an ethical media? Or are ethics and the role of the media on entirely divergent tracks?

Television, therefore, has taken on the role of the watchdog of civil society often with remarkable success, as in the high profile crime cases such as the Jessica Lal murder case and the BMW murder case. But the excesses of such TV investigative journalism may have been the reportage on the Kargil war in parts, but most appallingly in the case of the Mumbai attacks on November 26, 2008. The TV anchor's shrill if not frenetic reporting of every gunshot heard, every combat police sighted was chilling to say the least, it seemed as if the viewers were being given a ball by ball (read bullet by bullet) team sport commentary. The government of India has now set up regulations about such media coverage that demands greater responsibility, discretion, and accountability about what can be a media "story."

However, the media must be conscious that there are other principles and obligations in life that are outside the ambit of the "story" but require sensitive response, that is, about a ethical value system that encircles invisibly all that is positive and progressive in human life. This comment is made with the consciousness that the media in its unbridled zest and pursuit of the story of the day often denies the roles of discretion, modesty, and moderation in its buffet of the day's stories poised to compete with others in channels serving stories that can range from sizzlers, stings, spins, to barbecues, and hash browns. The candid camera runs the risk of becoming the cruel, callous, and even anti-human camera all for the sake of that one story that will beat all others at least for that day. Sometimes if luck prevails then the same story can be stretched, re-molded and reserved for even weeks, but exceptions do not make the rule. Citing the irresponsible media coverage of the second Lebanese war, Simran Sodhi reported that Israeli journalists welcomed the proposal of media censorship in order to protect national security:

The end result is that today articles relating to foreign policy, security issues are first sent to the censors. The censors make the corrections and send it back to the newspaper and then there is general to and fro between the two till an understanding is reached as to what can be published. (Sodhi 7)

There is no need to exaggerate or underestimate the penetration of the AVM—its commercial success story is the crucial pointer to its span and thrust. But media censorship is considered a draconian measure by the Indian media houses, as was noticed during the Kargil war and more recently during the coverage of the Mumbai terrorist attack on 26/11, both referred to earlier. Sodhi commented:

The tragedy in India has been the stubborn refusal in India by the media, especially the electronic media to look at their role in the coverage of the 26/11 events and their irresponsible journalism. Far from admitting their mistake the media here has taken a stand in blaming everyone else ... Media censorship is a tricky issue .... At the end of the day, every journalist will have to answer to his conscience the simple question: Is a page one story worth it if it entails endangering national security? (Sodhi 7)

Very recently it was rather riveting to view regional language channels, specifically Star Ananda, a Kolkata-based channel absolutely immersed in Michael Jackson memorabilia and live coverage of the last journey of the celebrated singer who died on July 2009. The same can be said about the print and visual paparazzi that hounded Diana to death and which relentlessly stalk celebrities representing arenas of power by violating basic norms of personal privacy, all for the sake of that one story that will sensationalize the world, whether it is Saddam being made to wear the noose, battered bodies, shoe flinging publicity hunters for a cause among many others. Along with sneak peek at celebrity lives, bare-all stories of ordinary people from the working class upwards and the reality television invading homes and hearts and eagerly commodifying private emotions, hopes, desires, aspirations, heartbreaks, depression, and even violent tendencies have transformed the so-called modern living. As Zoonen has observed:

For the media then, the public/private divide seems to have vanished into one undivided spectacle of matters of public attraction. The fact that many ordinary people confess their most intimate thoughts effortlessly in talk shows and other public arenas, and the increasing use of mobile telephones in public spaces are signs that the public/private divide may be eroding in the daily lives of ordinary people too. (Brants et al. 115)

A recent case was reported in the *Times of India*, where again the need for media censorship and media insensitivity in its aggressive pursuit of the winning story led to national outrage. A live TV show of a woman stripped by a self-appointed moral police contingent led to the Bihar Chief Minister's remark, "You can change the government, not a society." The news report narrated the following:

A woman from Jharkhand was publicly beaten and stripped by a group in Patna over allegations that she was a sex worker and had a tiff with a man, suspected to be a pimp, over remittance. The incident shown live on TV channels, appalled many, including the political class as well as the National Commission for Women, who denounced the public humiliation of the 20 year old. On Friday, National Commission For Women (NCW) sought a

report from the Bihar government, with chairperson Girija Vyas saying she was “shocked to see TV footage” of the incident. Both culprits and spectators ought to be punished, she said. (*Times News Network* 10).

Interestingly again, on August 25, 2009, the *Times of India* carried a news report that the NCW had proposed the setting up of a panel to monitor indecent depiction of women in the media. The news report ran thus:

Opposed to “indecent representation” of women and children, *The National Commission for Women* (NCW) has proposed setting up a quasi-judicial authority that will be authorized to investigate complaints related to representation of women in electronic media, including television, internet, mobile phones and other forms like laser light, sound, smoke, gas and fibre optic. This is part of the amendments proposed by NCW to the Prohibition of Indecent Representation of Women and Children Act, 1986. (*Times News Network* 10)

In this general discussion about ethics and the media, media censorship, and media accelerating freedom of choice in terms of commodification of culture by just channel surfing and pushing buttons of a remote gadget, one cannot but also focus on the interest in sports and sports personalities since the time corporate houses entered the sports market through sponsorship, merchandise, and brand promotion and publicity images inscribed on the players’ bodies and the sports equipments. In the arena of media coverage of sports, however, geography, skin color, racism, nationalism, regionalism, region-specific cultures all come into play whether it is the Olympics, Commonwealth Games, Asiad, or even interstate sports played within the country, say between Bengal and Assam or in international sports, the classic case of cricket matches between Pakistan and India which seem more like ethnic clashes as the semantics used by the media reporters such as *war*, *victory*, *defeat*, *failure*, *attack*, suggest a military onslaught rather than competitive sports. The body language of sportsmen as they raise their arms and open their mouths wide in exclamation or take off their shirts, suggests masculine militarism.

It is therefore not possible to ignore the risk factors that are inherent in the reportage of television commentators that effects instantaneous impact due to the power of the visual images conveyed in the live coverage and these can generate more harm than print journalism on sports. The psychological motive that leads to such commentaries is once again the obsessive desire to totally arrest viewer attention so that the viewer

becomes passionately involved in the vicarious game of war—winning, losing, destroying, conquering—the semantic choice of the commentators underscores the elements of violence and combat. As it has been analysed by Andrew Tudor:

When television and radio commentators use highly charged concepts of difference and identity in mediating sport—most obviously those relating to race and nation—they do so to provide effortless involvement for audiences, but at the risk of giving sustenance to divisive and unacceptable attitudes and behaviour. (Brants et al. 155)

But along with its macro implications and the fallout thereof, it is an undeniable fact that television has received an overwhelmingly positive reception because it contributed to the sharing of news, views, and relaxed enjoyment within the domestic space for family members. Families, which watched television together, remained together, was a well-advertised concept that received positive reception. In some ways, *television may even be regarded as a nonhuman, technologically animated family member*. As Spigel had observed, “Television was the great family minstrel that promised to bring Mom, Dad and the kids together; at the same time it had to be carefully controlled so that it harmonized with the separate gender roles and social functions of individual family members” (Spigel 37). Spigel’s comment may be appropriate for the developed societies but the Indian small screen, more specifically cable television’s transmission of mostly upper-class-specific serials, stories, and advertisements has created a notion of a singular urban elite class as representative of the India changing scenario. Deshpande states, “The Hindu, upper-caste, middle class and predominantly male ‘worlding’ of India emerges quite sharply from the overwhelming majority of contemporary films and television programmes” (Deshpande 20).

A media imagined classless society is significantly different from ground realities and even popular culture. It is this imagined singular class of economic power, joint family squabbles, extramarital complications that skirt around crucial urban issues such as renting of accommodation, commuting to the workplace, competition and cruel rivalry between colleagues, spousal distress regarding shared domestic chores, schooling of children, social obligations such as caring for aging parents. Working-class homes, slum dwellers, grassroots workers, farmers, industrial workers, men and women workers in unorganized sectors, child labor, and child abuse are not considered attractive marketable “stories.” This selective, deliberate eliding of the real India is a disturbing factor. Uma Chakravarti sums up:

[R]ural India has virtually disappeared from the media, except to feature as disaster arenas in the news...The continuing poverty, illiteracy, inequality and vulnerability of most sections of rural men and women has been completely erased from the screen and from the consciousness of globalized India. (Bel et al. 313)

As a matter of fact, as television seems to be totally indifferent to rural masses and their lifestyle hardships, ironically poverty is now projected in Bollywood films as no longer a matter of serious national concern but amusement at the plight of losers in the struggle for survival and survival of the fittest scenario. A hugely popular recent film *3 Idiots* starring Aamir Khan refers to the black-and-white 1950s films in a parodic mode, making the audience laugh. Through such imaging, classics such as *Mother India* or *Pather Panchali* are regarded as alien and antiquated and lose their contemporary relevance. Parody and pastiche are effective tools for deconstructing shibboleths but may also denigrate the timeless quality of human ethics that liberal humanism foregrounded. On the other hand, for a period in the 1980s, Hindu myths and epics gained supremacy and were tagged to political parties that used religion as their central motivating ideology. The Bharatiya Janata Party and the Shiv Sena among others were significant participants in such media flows and media hypes. As Deshpande observes, "Ramayana and the ensuing Ramjanambhoomi agitation which drew upon the popularity of the serial-converted television into a great force in people's lives" (Deshpande 25).

## Imaging Gender on the Small Screen

Indian television soaps and serials have constructed a virtual myth of the contemporary middle-class, upper-middle-class, and business-class Indian families. In these serials the changes that have revolutionized the lives of urban Indians, such as microwave dinners, desktop computers, blackberry, laptops, DVD players, working parents instead of a working father and a homemaker mother, crèches, children's schooling, caring for senior citizens, fast food, westernized lifestyles, and sartorial preferences are seldom addressed. Instead, the soaps and serials glamorize the roles of plotting, scheming adult women who are bad, and valorize the roles of silent suffering women who shed more tears than speak because they are good women. Sartorial images of adult women in chiffons, georgettes, crepes, gold, and diamond jewelry hanging from various parts of the anatomy, elaborately *mehendi* patterned arms, legs, feet, dazzling *bindis*, some spiraling like silver snakes on the forehead create virtual images

that are not noticed in the everyday lives of people. It is indeed very rare to have ever met such people in the workplaces, bus stops, metros, malls, movie halls, or parks.

In the section above we referred to Spigel and observed that the television shows brought families together. We may now add that the viewer-families watch family dramas that are melodramatic, high strung, and exaggerated beyond the semblance of the real, creating an imagined world that is mostly unrelated to the lives that most middle-class families live. John G. Cawelti explores the close connections between gender constructions and genre formations and states:

The popular romance, for example, has always been thought of as primarily a woman's genre, just as during the height of Hollywood studio system there was a kind of production widely known as the woman's film or "weepie." Contrarily, action-adventure genres like the hard boiled detective story, the western, and the war adventure have been produced with the image of a male audience in mind and have often been characterized by misogynistic themes, symbolic abuse of women and macho masculinity. (Edgerton et al. 79).

Cawelti also foregrounds the recent attitudinal changes that are increasingly becoming manifest in popular culture through the "regendering and reethnicizing of contemporary popular genres" (80). Through a programmed inclusive approach in terms of cross-cultural and intercultural representations the media through television images has now been able to promote better cultural understanding and social connectivity. The emphasis, however, remains on family structures and familial relationships, where women play non-threatening, traditional roles as daughters, sisters, wives, and mothers.

Inevitably women in such families perform within tradition-dominated lines of control. The central focus is invariably the males within a home; the women play secondary roles that advance the action. This marginalization of women as the primary focal point is normative and leads to the sex determination tests, preference for male progeny, census sex ratio indicating an appalling disproportion, an average rating being 900 females to every 1,000 men, though this statistical data varies from state to state. This gender disbalance leads to sexual violence, rape, domestic violence, and the total cultural neglect that women are made to internalize in their negotiations with the micropolitics of daily living. However, Indian television almost excludes sexual content, that is, the sexual act in its prime-time viewing, though late night serials are replete with discreet sex-oriented images, images of horror and grotesque and gruesome sequences, religious superstitions and other spine chillers and

thrillers that are both ethnic and western in their inspirational origin. This is a cultural distinction from television in developed countries, where explicit sexual content can well be a part of prime time viewing (McQuail et al. 552).

Uma Chakravarti (Bel et al. 295–314) locates a paradigm shift from the earlier TV serials that was about national concerns and issues, spanning the historicity of the colonial experience and the postcolonial, from *Buniyaad* to *Hum Log* and *Tamas* and even *Malgudi Days* along with the epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. In the last 10 years, however, the *K* serials that indulge in melodrama and family conflicts with overdressed men and women, and infinite number of weddings and religious rituals as pujas, show women not as progressive decision-makers in families but conspirators not unlike the queens and their maids, such as Kaikeyi and the maid Manthara in the *Ramayana*. Also remarkable is the paradigm shift in terms of making one of the most serious issues in the family, the mother-in-law–daughter-in-law relationship that is completely turned around as farcical and the bid to outsmart each other becomes a ridiculous indulgent play, when in actual circumstances the reverse is more often the case. The farcical battle between mother- and daughter-in-law in the *Tu Tu Main Main* soap has gained so much of popularity that regional language versions of the same are being created and consumed now, such as the Bengali version *Ma vs. Bouma*. Other Bengali soaps that continue the images and content that seem so extraordinarily out of their time and place include soaps such as *Durga*, *Ogo Bodhu Sundari*, *Prabahini E Shomay*, *Ke Tumi Nandini*, *Sonar Horin*, among others. However, the advertisement of *Ogo Bodhu Sundari* carried images of a smiling daughter-in-law reclining on the lap of her beaming mother-in-law, perhaps indicating a reversal of stereotypes of quarrelling mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law. But the serial merely consolidated the roles and hierarchy that the middle-class family system internalizes. Some relatively contemporary soaps are *Ekhaney Akash Neel*, and *Kurukshetra*, yet these two do not venture beyond the expected normative practices, though the dialog is more contemporary and attuned to the social environment.

Three Bengali soaps *Bhalobasha.com*, *Maa*, and *Ganer Oporey* are quite remarkable in their stereotyping, the last mentioned, however, standing apart from this drift. In *Bhalobasha.com* the most alarming issue is that high school children seem to be obsessed with ideas of romantic love, while their parents and guardians energetically encourage them to prioritize marriage, engagements, and religious festivals often participating as conspirators to destroy the relationships of their offspring or motivating them toward marital alliance with partners selected by senior family members. *Maa* is a confusion of identities and the maternal spirit

is mystified and romanticized, though the mother in question is unable to recognize her own child, who returns home after being lost for some years. Once again there are conniving widowed aunts, married women, uncles, nephews, and grandparents who complicate issues every evening as the tussle of muddled identities of the real and fake daughter continue. A refreshing change is of course *Ganer Oparey*. The script is written by the filmmaker Rituparna Ghosh. In fact, it may be regarded as a pathbreaking Bengali TV serial that addresses Bengali culture and identity, by using Rabindranath Tagore as a symbol and metaphor for youth, change, and the ability to think out of the box. Even the “puppet” status of the Goddess Durga being manipulated by male gods is introduced with subtlety, though sometimes the moribund customs of Bengali homes are identified with aggression, which is remarkably different from the rest of the serials such as *Bou Kotha Kou* and *Ogo Bodhu Sundari* that churn out content that often suggest cultural regress.

However, even if films try to feature women who have not just attractive bodies but cerebral spunk as well, popular culture such as TV serials and everlasting soaps and even TV ads fall back on constructing the stereotypes with strange energy. Madhur Bhandarkar’s *Corporate* that starred Bipasha Basu had her outsmarting men by stealing data from a laptop in a pen-drive or Satyajit Ray’s son Sandip Ray’s film *Hitlist* has a woman as the central character who swears a vendetta against men responsible for her husband’s murder. She deletes the names of targets after she eliminates them by hook or by crook. Unlike film narratives, television serials rarely venture into such role reversal representations and merely consolidate images and narratives that do not belong to the world around us. This becomes obvious if even cursory attention is paid to the shimmering and glittering ethnic clothes of women and their bejeweled and *mehendied* bodies. As a matter of fact TV serial images have generated mass interest in jewelry and body tattooing, among both unmarried and married women, the latter more so. Interestingly, both Hindi and Bengali soaps seem to tell us that the paradigm of *The Argumentative Indian* does not include Indian women, for whom a more descriptive phrase could be *The Quarrelsome Indian*. The ceaselessly quarrelling and conspiring women in the regional language soaps can be traced back to the mythic precedent—the classic female conspirator, the hunch backed Manthara in the epic *Ramayana*, referred to earlier in this chapter. As a matter of fact, women’s quarrels can be an area of study in Women’s Studies Research Centers, for a close reading of these incessant quarrels may reveal low self-esteem and a desire for agency.

The images of male dependent, thin, *rich if he is rich* women seem to be preferred by the viewers of these soaps, and ironically the enthusiastic

viewers of soaps are mostly female. Susan Faludi sums up the propensity of TV productions of marginalizing independent professional women and foregrounding the non-threatening homemaker in TV serials and advertisements. Referring to the television backlash against independent women Faludi observed:

...it succeeded in depopulating TV of its healthy independent women and replacing them with nostalgia-glazed portraits of apolitical "family" women. This process worked its way through television entertainment in two stages. First, in the early eighties, it banished feminist issues. Then in the mid-80's it reconstructed a "traditional" family hierarchy, placing suburban homemakers on the top. Career women on the lower rungs, and single women at the very bottom. (Faludi 148)

In a similar vein Joanne Hollows following the post-Friedan feminist agenda underscored by Gaye Tuchman pointed out the "symbolic annihilation" of empowered independent women as the media reverted to the traditional images of nonprofessional women, who were housewives, mothers, and daughters. Hollows observed, "research into television showed not only were women far less likely to be shown in employment outside the home than men but were also heavily under-represented in general" (Hollows 21).

Supporting the contention that media was sexist, patriarchal, and misrepresented reality Hollows argues that historical context, geographical standpoint, cultural politics, and ideology of the media houses all contribute to the construction of media images and media effects. Referring to Stuart Hall's arguments about popular culture and its distinction from high culture Hollows asserts:

[P]opular culture should not be seen simply as either the means by which dominant groups impose their ideas on subordinate groups, or the way in which subordinate groups resist domination. Instead, Hall defines popular culture as a site of struggle, a place where conflicts between dominant and subordinate groups are played out, and distinctions between cultures of these groups are continually constructed and reconstructed. (Hollows 27)

If this was the backlash in America, in a more traditional Asia and specifically India this propensity to prioritize the traditional women and traditional lifestyles with modern frills such as gadgets and gizmos seems to have become a normative media practice as comparative channel switching can readily prove. Deshpande analyses the overall agenda and ideology of TV serials and Bollywood commercial films clearly:

The plots of Bollywood commercial films and prime-time television serials are the same in general. These serials are miniature Hindi films wherein the story emanates from a rich, joint, presumed upper-caste and patriarchal family. The women in the serials derive their existence and social status almost entirely from their positioning in the family hierarchy which following the rules of patriarchy, is determined by male power. (Deshpande 20)

Interestingly, though women form the central discourse and enact major roles within the familial space, the remote control for their traditional lifestyles and their complex experiences seem to be entirely in the hands of the male members of families. Sometimes this domination is shared with an equally dominant mother or more often mother-in-law who corroborates and consolidates patriarchal norms with a crusader's zeal. Deshpande sums up:

Generally, these women are of two kinds. The first exude a subdued sexuality, are simultaneously docile, obedient, devoted to home-making, traditional in the sense of observing rituals like *karva chauth*, etc, and carriers of *samskara* and *parampara*. This is the ideal Hindu *nari*, the dream of modern India. The second kind is selfish, scheming, vamp-like, outgoing and a threat to family stability, often dressed in Western clothes—a female Viagra, the supreme threat to male sexual superiority. (Deshpande 20)

In such a discourse, what emerges very interestingly is that techno viability erases boundaries in terms of geography and target consumers, but the media images that are constructed seem to have a shared agenda in consolidating traditional paradigms and de-recognizing the changes that are taking place in the contemporary scenario. That is, lifestyle changes, increase in number of professional women, multitasking women, shared household work, women in higher salary structures than their male partners or husbands are elided or seem to govern a systematic low representation, that is programmed to seem as if these roles are anti-normative and not serious. In all urban developed and developing locations that have been penetrated by the media, such images are overwhelmingly the dominant ones, almost in a concerted effort to turn back the clock and consolidate tradition and simultaneously regard the changes as casual ripples that will ease out into the vaster expanse of mainstream stereotypes. These observations, therefore, are equally true about media flows in the global societies as well as in media representations in urban India. The following examples from recent media images on television will bear this out clearly.

Though midnight films and television serials in India are still not about sexually explicit content and nude human bodies, mostly that of young women projected as objects of desire, popular culture has

in the very recent years, maybe in the last three to five years, revealed the motivating power of television in constructing and controlling cultural preferences. The audiovisual culture industry has invaded Indian middle homes in the urban, suburban, semi-rural, and rural areas that are totally unprecedented. The reality shows, the talent search shows in the performing arts predominantly dancing and singing, has kept a section of the viewers absolutely mesmerized. Viewers comment, use mobile phones for text messaging, vote, and eagerly participate as television audience clapping or commenting on cue on topics as wide ranging as terrorism, education, cricket, and film music and dance. When national television began to make its presence felt as family entertainment, soap opera content blended concerns about ethics, politics, poverty, and notions of nationalist idealism. However, that was in the 1980s of the previous century.

In the first decade of the 21st century a paradigm shift in terms of content and gender perspective became very noticeable. Indian soap operas in Hindi and other regional languages such as Bengali harped on the efficacy of the joint family system, intrafamilial complications that were triggered by conspiring women who victimized the idealized suffering woman who was modeled on that of Indian Goddesses who played multiple roles as avenger of evil, good daughter-in-law, supporting wife, and nurturing mother. The success of such a formula was astounding. The serial productions of Ekta Kapoor, popularly called the *K* serials made women not only consume the narratives with enthusiasm, but effected in promoting religious customs and rituals leading to women fasting and valorizing self-denial and passivity as the desirable track to follow in order to ensure inter- and intrafamilial harmony and domestic peace and prosperity. So Deshpande observes:

Family stability, symbolic of bourgeois national stability, is a recurrent and esteemed motif in these serials. These families, obsessed as they are with themselves, reflect the narcissism of the supra-male dominated Hindi movies. In serial after serial the honour and integrity of the family is held above everything. The gravest threat to this honour comes naturally from deviant women and hence a great deal of character energy is spent in these serials to keep women in their "proper" place. (Deshpande 20–21)

One cannot fail to notice the marginalization, eliding if not total absence in these serials of people belonging to caste categories such as the scheduled caste, scheduled tribes, and other minority groups including dalits. Non-Hindu, non-middle-class, non-upper-caste Indians seem to fall outside the interest of media houses that create and invest in TV soap narratives. In this perspective, therefore, one may ask whether Indian TV

is upper caste and class controlled and therefore not adequately representative of the heterogeneous synthesis that is ensconced at the core of the collective psyche of India—the fascinating Indianness that celebrates social diversity and national unity and that endures and absorbs explosions and implosions that threatens national, regional, and personal integrity as well as human, social, and cultural capital?

Some of the Ekta Kapoor soap operas that kept women glued to the sets were *Kahani Ghar Ghar Ki*, *Kasauti Zindagi ki*, *Kalash*, and *Kyun-ki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi*. The last mentioned, often described as a present-day epic serial, ran for over eight years, commencing in 2000 and the last episode on the small screen was on May 7, 2009. Newspapers ran reports about how the good wife Smriti Irani was being approached by political parties to be their brand ambassador, if such a phrase can be borrowed to describe political parties that use film and television celebrities as their members. Or else, the case study of another TV serial that drew a lot of criticism was *Balika Vadhu* (Girl-child Bride). The serial did glamorize and romanticize child marriage leading to serious protest and petition to ban the serial. In a newspaper article Madhavi Goradia Divan advocate and author of *Facets of Media Law* asked:

The question is whether the rights envisaged under article 19(1)(a)—the right of the broadcaster to telecast as also the right of the viewer to be entertained by the TV serial in question—can be restricted on any of these grounds, in particular, in the interests of morality and decency. (Divan 6)

Arguing further how such serials may harm the collective psyche of both adults and children, primarily the latter, Divan comments:

If it were to be found that the serial in question actively encourages, glorifies or propagates child marriage, as opposed to merely depicting it, it may be crossing the limits of artistic freedom and become liable to censure. The audio-visual medium is far more potent in its impact on the viewer and has the capacity to arouse emotions in a manner that cold print simply cannot match ... The Programme Code under the Cable Television (Networks) Act of 1995 prohibits the carriage of any programme on cable television which offends good taste or decency, encourages superstition and blind belief, denigrates women or children or injures public morality. (Divan 6)

Significantly, in serial after serial whether in Hindi or in any other regional language, the girl child is being projected as victim of callousness and cruelty ranging from issues of dowry, adultery, dysfunctional marriage, female infanticide, and feticide. The overt agenda may seem to be as if the media houses are keen on awareness campaign and consciousness raising about women's issues, but the covert impression that lingers

is the irreversible power of patriarchy that can allow compromises and compensations through some exhibitions of resistance, but not total rejection. So the film critic Shoma A. Chatterji observes,

Content and serial makers put forth the argument that serials being reflective of reality are intended to reform men who indulge in violent acts against girls and women...After thousands of episodes of the so-called women and girl-centred serials, crime against have increased not decreased (Chatterji).

In a *Times of India* write-up Seema Sinha states categorically:

The more things change, the more they remain the same...that's Indian television! ... In teleserial *Jyoti*, the character Sushma continues to live with her abusive husband, wailing and falling at his feet whenever he tortures her. For money, he even forces her to sleep with another man!... The small-screen is full of prospective perfect brides, who try to keep their in-laws happy. (Sinha)

The executive creative directors of the media houses however argue that regressive factors projected on television result in a negative impact about these in the minds of the audience and therefore should not be considered to having socially harmful content. The Programming Head of the channel Colors asserts, "Most shows in fact are doing a great job of informing and educating the audience about certain social evils. The shows have to depict certain regressive situations in order to bring progress in the society" (Sinha). Also, the executives of TV channels argue that they cater to the public demand from the suburban and rural viewers who are eager to consume the so-called historically antiquated narratives that foreground joint families, submissive wives, glamorous women as home-breakers, assertive men, living in large houses fitted with in-house temples, family members plotting against each other, the senior women in the family in period clothes and jewelry while the teenaged family members are in jeans or other western clothes.

Along with the mass consumption of these family-centric traditional role-playing by women in the 21st century, where educated women, professional women, and independent women were marginalized systematically and the religious, nonprofessional women were foregrounded as representative of Indian culture, the other major TV attraction has been the reality shows. Wedding ceremonies seem to be compulsory content in serials, elaborate in rituals, lavish in décor and the bride, groom, and all invitees from relatives to friends are all seen sporting expensive clothes and jewelry. These images are reiterated in advertisements on public hoardings and the print media, thereby suggesting the close association between corporate sectors, marketing strategies, and media involvement in constructing images that will create consumer interest.

Reality shows sponsored by music CD companies such as *Sa Re Ga Ma* and others have made parents enforce vocal music and dancing as compulsory skills to be acquired by their children. The lure of Bollywood and the immediate lure of making instantaneous fast money, cash, and commodities heaped on winners have made parents of suburban areas painstakingly train their children to sing, dance, and perform on the reality shows. The models to follow, whether in singing or dancing, are of course Bollywood models. So girls and boys replicate the singing styles of Shreya Ghoshal, Lata Mangeshkar, Asha Bhonsle, and dance like Prabhu Deva, Hrithik Roshan, and Shahrukh Khan among others. The judges of these shows are trained to play to the galleries and each show ends with both joy and tears as the winners smile and the losers try to smile bravely through their tears. The TRP ratings of such shows makes the media rather harsh and indifferent toward those who are eliminated in each round, the disappointment and distress that are often seen in the faces of parents and their unsuccessful children, may make one wonder whether the easy parent-child relationship is being destroyed by the desire for gain and fame generated by the need to be successful in such reality television shows. Reality dance shows have generated great popular interest and competitive programs such as *Dance India Dance* have led to even children gyrating like the adult movie stars in Bollywood films. Children sing Bollywood songs and dance like Bollywood stars and are rewarded by the corporate sponsors for their performances. These competitive shows are indeed very popular among the middle-class suburban sections of society, as success in such shows leads to the dream of being on the path of stardom and achieving celebrity status.

One such reality show advertisement had a hollering Anu Kapoor shout out "Sing and Get Money: 'Gaan Gao, Taka nao.'" Other such shows as *Rakhi ka Swayamwar*, and the *Big Boss* shows replicating the *Big Brother* shows of UK TV are worth mentioning. In the former, Rakhi is seen interviewing eligible young men for possible marriage, parodying a practice in Indian epics and myths where women could select their husbands from a group of eligible bachelors who would assemble in the king's court. Such practice was perhaps not common among the non-elite classes in epical times. The UK reality show *Big Brother* led to the not-so-successful film star Shilpa Shetty's reemergence as an internationally recognized celebrity as she protested against racist remarks made by another inmate of the *Big Brother* residency. Also, American TV boom show *Who Will Be a Millionaire* led to Amitabh Bachchan anchored *Kaun Banega Crorepati*, that enjoyed viewership and participation throughout the nation followed by aspirant singer shows *Indian Idol* that followed the US model of the *American Idol*. All such shows that involve active viewer

participation enforce the binaries of achievers, winners, and losers in the minds of the consumers often leading to depression and other stress-related maladies. A very popular Bengali equivalent of such participatory shows is of course *Dadagiri* that is coordinated by the celebrity cricketer Sourav Ganguly. However, reality shows that demand confessions and candidness can lead to disastrous results and personal tragedy. For instance, though the Delhi High Court turned down petitions for banning the *Sacch ka Saamna* (Encountering the Truth) reality show on the following ground, “We don’t think our social values are so fragile that one TV programme will damage them,” that is precisely what happened as reported in the *Telegraph* (August 15, 2009). *The Telegraph* correspondent stated:

[T]ruth, inspired by reality TV has claimed its first victim. Surinder, 30, killed himself unable to accept that his wife Ratna (both names changed) had a serious affair before marriage, a confession she made after being forced to take the hot seat in imitation of the show *Sacch ka Saamna*. (*The Telegraph*, 8)

Also, the UK reality show *Big Brother* has inspired an Indian counterpart show titled *Big Boss*. Recently, model Pamela Anderson of *Baywatch* fame came to India in order to feature in several sequences of *Big Boss*. The central government ordered the viewing time to be changed from prime time to late night. Also the screening would have to carry a cautionary notice that the reality show could be harmful for children viewers. The court, however, issued a stay order on the government directive till hearing was completed. Another reality show that takes its name from the TV host—Rakhi Sawant—has however been transferred to a late night slot. The main objection to these reality shows is their explicit sexual images and dialog.

Television shows both global and local, thus, have become the national, regional, and local talking point that have invaded the Indian homes, minds, and hearts in a manner that the cyberworld is yet to do and that is understandably so. Due to obvious economic reasons computer access is yet to be to as pervasive as TV towers and computer browsing and social networking is rarely a shared engagement unlike the shared viewing, on the familial and domestic level, that is an integral part of television watching in India. Describing television as *electronic glue* 21st century India’s best-selling Indian English writer Chetan Bhagat writes, “For dysfunctional families, television is the biggest boon. Without this electronic glue, millions of Indian families will fall apart” (Bhagat 227). This observation, not without some innate humor is increasingly emerging as a perceptive comment that has wide ramifications on the social and psychological levels in terms of defining social behavior.

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# 5

## Advertising: Encoding Seduction

### Introduction

In the first section of this chapter we would like to explore how Bengali literature has responded to the impact created by advertising in the print media. A few illustrative references that have intrinsic wit and humor are provided here, and even in translation do not lose their sting, serious concerns, or sense of fun. This section proves how advertising can inspire the imagination and creativity of authors and authorial responses and also point to social accommodation of marketable commodities. Though we are aware that the audiovisual advertising creates a greater impact as it is a micro-story that is told with intense focus on a particular aspect, print advertisements did carry a great impact when the television commercials were unknown and in some cases even thereafter as the evidences below selected from two Bengali language speaking locations, West Bengal and Bangladesh exemplify.

I

### Media and Advertising in Bengali Literature

The media and advertising have increased their scope, reach, and power by leaps and bounds during the last decades. In 1972, the Screen Actors

Guild declared that more of its members were employed in the advertising business than in stage, film, and TV taken together. The size has greatly increased since then, aided by liberalization. Bengali literature has had a close, though somewhat complex and paradoxical relationship with media and advertisement for a long time. Both were often ridiculed in Bengali fiction, yet often found its considerable place in it. A few examples might be given here.

In the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, a Bengali company, producing a hair oil named Kuntalin (from the word “kuntal” or hair) and certain other cosmetics, which were very popular, adopted rather strange means of advertisement, all linked with literature, one way or another. Perhaps those who ran the company realized that the Bengali middle classes, devoted to culture, could be best approached in this manner. For instance, the company had an arrangement with certain theatre groups. The following lines appeared on the curtain:

Put in your mouth Tambuline.  
 In your hair put Kuntalin.  
 Spray your body with Delkhosh.  
 Thus you will oblige H. Bose.

Thus, the three products of the company gained publicity.

We do not know how the audience, making a transition from the just completed play to this marketing device reacted. However, the company must have judged the method rather effective, for it continued to act as a sponsor to theatre groups for quite a long time. Moreover, it advertised in the most noted literary journals of the time, such as *Sabuj Patra* (Green Leaves, also Green Letters). Pramatha Chaudhuri, who belonged to the top rank of Bengali writers and was a close relative, edited this journal by marriage, to Rabindranath. Rabindranath himself patronized *Sabuj Patra* and was a frequent contributor. Moreover, the journal was thought to create a new era and direction in Bengali literature. Some issues of the journal carried page-long advertisements of the following type. A wife tells her husband to buy a particular brand of hair oil for their young daughter. Though otherwise pretty, she is losing her hair fast. Should not the father, who loves his daughter more than his son, be concerned?

The advertisement reflects the ideas, fears, and desires of the Bengali middle classes. Women, the world over, consider their hair an integral part of their beauty. Bengali women were, or are, especially proud of their long dark hair. Classical Bengali poetry portrays the lovely face of a woman, framed by her black hair, with the full moon surrounded by dark monsoon clouds. In the marriage market, a girl's hair was

considered important and often examined by women from the family of the prospective bridegroom. Hence, the anxiety of the mother about the condition of her daughter's hair is portrayed in the advertisement.

The hair oil motif and its advertisement reappear in a short story by Santosh Ghosh, a noted fiction writer. The story is entitled "Suka Sari." Suka (the male) and Sari (the female) constitute a pair of legendary birds, who often appear in Indian myths, ancient and medieval literature, and fairy tales. In this case, of course, the terms are used ironically, in the context of sordid, modern, lower-middle-class life. The story is as follows. A poor, unemployed youth and the daughter of a relatively wealthy man are in love with each other. They do not, however, trust one another. The girl fears that the youth will leave her, if he finds a job. He, in turn, fears that the girl might abandon him for a more suitable marriage, which her good looks and her father's wealth might secure for her. So she hides an answer to his job applications, while he destroys the letters, which she sends to a company, which has advertised a particular hair oil. For, the use of this oil might improve her hair and thus her chances in the marriage market. A tragic-comic use of the theme of advertisement appears in this story.

To return to Kuntalin, the company invented another somewhat bizarre—at least, in those days it was considered strange—way of publicity. A short story competition was started and the winner received the Kuntalin prize, a substantial financial award. It was expected that the merits of the hair oil in question would be mentioned somehow in the story, but this was not compulsory. Even without this, the publicity generated was favorable for the product. The young Manik Bandopadhyay won the prize with a short story, "Atasi Mami" (Aunt Atasi)—his first published work. All in all, the advertising campaign of this hair oil and its allied products can claim a place in the history of Bengali literature.

Comic and satirical stories concerning advertisement and the media (which, in an earlier period meant only the press and subsequently the radio) were also not unknown in Bengali fiction. Shibram Chakravarti, considered the doyen of comic fiction in Bengal, provides a couple of examples. He made an agreement with a businessman, to provide what we today call copywriting material for an advertisement. However, his language was so abstruse and difficult, that those who read the advertisement rushed to buy dictionaries. Thus more dictionaries were sold through the attempts of Shibram than the product which was supposed to be marketed! Undaunted by this disaster, Shibram agreed to a contract with another businessman, Seth Diltrusta. This time, razors were to be advertised. Using poetry, instead of prose, Shibram wrote many verses of advertisement, exalting the clean-shaven model of masculine attraction.

These striking verses were posted on large placards along the road. Dilrusta, driving his car along this road, was amazed and stunned to such a degree that he met with a fatal accident. Shibram now composed an elegy:

Here lies Seth Dilrusta  
 In an eternal sleep,  
 He could read advertisements  
 But not the road keep. (Chakraborty 30)

Another story of Shibram deals with the radio and its influence on the masses, whether real or imaginary. Shibram was supposed to read a short story on the radio. He told his friends the date and time. But having become the victim of an accident, he could not do so. When he came out of the hospital, many of his friends, not knowing what had happened, declared how much they had enjoyed the story. Doubtless this was a white lie, to prove that they were interested in the affairs of Shibram, when actually they cared little. However, it also proves the all-embracing power of the media and the way it affects even those who do not partake of its direct influence.

Another very prominent writer, Rajshekhar Basu, dealt with the theme of advertisements in a comic and satirical way. Rajshekhar was a noted scientist, as well as an expert in Sanskrit. He had translated the Ramayana and the Mahabharata into simple Bengali prose. He also wrote very popular comic and satirical stories under the pen name Parasuram—a mythical character. His first published short story, “Sri Sri Sidheswari Limited” is a hilarious yet biting tale of a group carrying out a large-scale financial fraud in the name of religion. This involves the extensive use of advertisement for the purpose of fooling people.

Sunirmal Basu, a popular writer of juvenile stories and poems, wrote a very amusing story about media manipulation. The story, entitled “Kirtipodor Kirti” (The Master Stroke by Kirtipada) is as follows. Bangeshwar, staking all his property, runs a daily newspaper, *Dindim* (the name is meaningless, nonsensical). However, the newspaper, though by no means without merit, finds few takers. When the paper is almost bankrupt, Kirtipada, a distant relative of Bangeshwar and the assistant editor of *Dindim*, finds a new and startling publicity device. The daily publishes the following headlines:

- (1) Mahatma Gandhi swims for 50 hours in the Hedua (a lake in North Calcutta).
- (2) Acharya Prafulla Chandra plays the role of Chanakya in the Star Theatre.

- (3) Rabindranath shows remarkable skill in sports on Calcutta Ground.
- (4) Valuable jewels stolen from Bhawal Sanyasi.
- (5) Prafulla Ghosh completed his fast.
- (6) Sisir Bhaduri was given a reception in Khadi Ashram.
- (7) The plane flight of Gostha Pal to Persia.
- (8) Did the Maharani of Gopalganj previously have a beard?

A few footnotes of information might be added for those not familiar with Bengal of the 1930s. The “sanyasi” or hermit of Bhawal was a young aristocrat who had supposedly died but returned many years later—if indeed he was the man in question. A complex case concerning his identity and claims to vast property continued for decades and the media played an important role in it. Speculation concerning the various problematic aspects of the royal sanyasi really appeared frequently in the newspapers of the period. Sisir Bhaduri was the greatest actor of the Calcutta stage at this period and Chanakya, in a historical play by Dijendralal Roy, was his star part. Gostha Pal was a great football player whose statue adorns the Calcutta ground to this day and Prafulla Ghosh a famous swimmer.

Needless to say, the sale of *Dindim* increased by leaps and bounds. All copies were sold out and more had to be printed. Bangeshwar was terrified but Kirtipada reassured him. The next morning the paper published the following news items:

An Apology: Yesterday, due to troubles in the press, there were some terrible mistakes in presenting the news. For this we apologize deeply. The actual news items are as follows:

- (1) Mahatma Gandhi completes his fast.
- (2) Sisir Bhaduri appears in the role of Chanakya at the Star Theater.
- (3) Gostha Pal showed remarkable skill in sports on Calcutta ground.
- (4) Did the Bhawal Sanyasi have a beard previously?
- (5) Prafulla Ghosh swam for 50 hours in the Hedua.
- (6) Acharya Prafulla Chandra was given a reception by the Khadi Ashram.
- (7) Rabindranath went by plane to Persia.
- (8) Valuable jewels were stolen from the Maharani of Gopalganj.

Bangeshwar feared that this would mean the doom of his beloved *Dindim*. In fact, the daily gained unprecedented popularity. The final line of the story tells us that Kirtipada had now bought a car and was looking for a plot to build a house in a fashionable area of Calcutta. Bangeshwar appears relieved of his worries.

The irony of the apparently light and comic story is obvious. A newspaper can succeed more by staging a gimmick or stunt. The relationship between advertisement and the media, though far less important then, than it is today, is likewise stressed. Since the paper did not sell very well, it was hard to find advertisements. Even those who had earlier given advertisements because of personal friendship were now withdrawing them.

Another comic story concerning the role of advertisements might be mentioned here. The spoilt child of a rich man insists that he wants to eat something called "phonngong." Nobody has the slightest idea as to what he means. Finally, it is discovered that the word refers to "Phone number," attached to an advertisement. Though comic in spirit, the story hints at a manipulative use of advertisements.

Turning now to Bangladesh, the other Bengali-speaking area, we might cite the example of a skit by Humayun Ahmed, arguably the most popular writer in that country. The skit, entitled "Rabindranath comes to Rasulpur in Netrokona," lists a series of advertisements issued by Manna Mia, a get-rich-quick businessman of a district town in Bangladesh.

Surely some of the readers have seen  
 The advertisements of this lungi (a  
 piece of cloth wrapped round the waist  
 by men in East Bengal and people of  
 both genders in Burma) on the T.V.  
 The hero had gone  
 to his girl friend in the advertisement  
 film. The beloved declares, "How  
 beautiful! What lungi is this?  
 The hero replies, "What kind of  
 woman are you that you do not  
 recognize this lungi? It is a Manna  
 Mia Modern lungi. Cheap and durable.  
 This is followed by their dance together and a jingle:  
 The modern lungis of Manna Mia are  
 As charming and colourful as you could desire.  
 Besides lungis, Manna Mia has other businesses as well:  
 (a) Jarda (a kind of spice, used with pan leaves)  
 Manna Mia gold dust jarda.  
 Taking this, you do not have to spit.  
 (b) Lacha Semoi (a form of sweet eaten on festive occasions).  
 Manna Mia first class lacha semoi.  
 The delight of Id. Fried in pure  
 ghee (clarified butter) made from the milk of cows. If anyone can prove  
 that this semoi is fried in soyabean oil,

he will be given a prize of one lakh rupees.

(c) Ganji (a form of undergarment for men, covering the upper part of the body) Manna Mia super ganji. Available in Three colours. Black, white and green.  
Slogan: Manna Mia  
Super Ganji you must wear  
Know that joyful days are coming near.

(d) Umbrella  
Manna Mia special Number 1 Umbrella  
Slogan: The great use of number one  
To keep out the rain and sun.

(e) Rotten Soap  
Rotten washing soap  
Slogan: This is more rotten than any other rotten soap current in the market.

So far, the theme of advertising has been discussed as a matter of comedy, hilarious, if slightly satirical. But a darker strain also appears. Humayun Azad, a namesake of Ahmed, was another extremely prominent littérateur of Bangladesh, though one of a totally different sort. A few words about Azad might help clarify his approach. Azad was a remarkably versatile man, a professor of linguistics, poet, essayist, fiction writer, and tended to be involved in various controversies. He was fiercely polemical and guided by three ardent and ungovernable passions: feminism, anti-Communism, and aversion to all religions, particularly the one prevailing in his own country. One of his novels specially angered some of the religious fanatics of his country and he was physically attacked in early 2004. Though wounded, he recovered sufficiently to go to Munich, Germany, in order to attend a conference. There he died, under somewhat mysterious circumstances. It is not clear whether his death was the result of the former wound or whether he had been subjected to a second, secret attack, while in Munich.

The hero of one of Azad's novels, *Kobi Athaba Dandita Apurush* (Poet or the Punished Eunuch) is Hasan, a poet. He is not simply a poet but one who considers the creation of poetry his vocation, his entire life, and suffers deeply when he is not creative according to his own expectation. But he is forced to work as an advertisement writing man, in the agency of a friend. Can he reconcile this task with his poetry or even with his humanity? This is how Hasan sees his work in the field of advertisement:

The very next day Hasan was given the responsibility of writing two scripts for ads.

Ad 1: Mother's milk would have to be praised. It must be painted out firmly that there was no viable substitute for the milk of the mother.

Ad 2: For "Radhika" an Australian Company, selling milk powder. The customer would have to be enchanted into believing that this was far better, more nourishing than mother's milk. Mother's milk might dry up but The "Radhika" flow was eternal. The contrary nature of the two demands enchanted Hasan and made him very happy. It was a play of opposites, the sort of thing he used in his poetry with a terrible effect. Did he not juxtapose a volcano with a drop of tear? Was it for this reason that this task had devolved on him?

The imagination of Hasan, poet-cum-adman, runs riot. He imagines making mother's milk so popular and attractive through his ad that even adults would want to drink it! What of the feminist point of view? Does the suckling of infants raise or lower the status of women? Hasan has an imaginary dialog with a feminist, who believes that the emphasis on mother's milk is part and parcel of a conspiracy against women, to reduce them to the status of milch cows. A colleague of Hasan, in charge of the advertisement department, explains the double, apparently contrary tasks, in his inimitable East Bengali dialect:

You understand, the two ads are one hundred and eighty degrees opposite. In one, we have to teach morality, there is no question of selling anything. We have to sell philosophy, we have to sell ethics, we have to sell morality. In the other case, we have to sell a commodity, .... Philosophy, ethics and morality will disappear in a few months but the commodity will remain. Remember that while writing your scripts.

Hasan tells the boss that both the advertisements seem to him the work of Satan. The other replies that the world was ruled by Satan and it was their task to make him appear as the Great God. We see here, the morally ambiguous nature of advertisement and publicity agencies, which are ready to promote any scheme or product, even quite contrary ones, provided the customers pay them.

Kabita Sinha, a noted poet and fiction writer, had also held important positions in the All India Radio for many years. Her experience in the media world perhaps inspired a well-known novel, *Raktakta Gombuj* (The Blood-stained Dome). The story has for one of its principal themes, the manipulation of electronic media channels by the modern "robber barons" of the corporate world.

A similar use of advertising for purposes other than purely commercial appears in a novel by the already discussed Manik Bandopadhyay, *Shahartali* (Suburb). The business magnate in the novel, Satyapriya, is not content to run his factory and control the work force, with a mixture of cunning manipulation and state-backed force. He wishes to appear as a thinker, a "guru" on a high moral and philosophical level. The newspapers are very reluctant to publish his views and articles, particularly since they are pro-British and hostile to the independence struggle and its leaders. (The novel was written in the colonial era.) We are told that the products marketed by Satyapriya were not such as needed to be advertised constantly, like patent medicines. But he used advertisements, generously paid for, as baits to induce some newspapers to publish his writings. The indirect inducement, subtle or not so subtle manipulation of the media by corporate power, has indeed become a feature of our times and was anticipated by the novel of Manik.

The agenda of advertisers had been interrogated by Betty Friedan in her arguments about the feminine mystique that defined the American women in the 1960s. A similar advertisement drive with a "sexual sell" angle is also perceptible in India. Indeed, it has been so for a number of decades, though the trend has gained great force with globalization and liberalization. "Busy hands can be beautiful," was the advertisement for a popular cosmetic cream. The question, with what the hands were busy is left open. The owners of the beautiful hands might be simply housewives, occupied with work at home, or the busy hands might include corners, as well. Either way the cream is made to appear necessary, even essential.

This kind of "dual use" advertising is common in many fields. A girl cannot get married and is refused by prospective bridegrooms because of some defect of hair or complexion. We are reminded of the old story of Kuntalin. The cosmetic is supposed to remedy the defect and the girl

in the advertisement is happily married. But the same defect, in other advertisements, might be a bar to a career, for example, preventing her entry into a secretarial course or an institute for training airhostesses. (At that time, both careers were considered somewhat daring for middle-class Bengali girls.) The removal of the defect would likewise open the doors of a desirable career. Thus, the commodity to be marketed was meant to appeal both to career women and would-be career women, as well as pure and simple housewives.

Certain advertising strategies take care to target female consumers of different age groups. Perhaps the most compulsive sale for Bengali women is sari shopping, particularly during the *puja* season. Even young girls, who hardly wear saris nowadays in normal circumstances or their work-day lives, turn to this dress of matchless grace and elegance in the festive season. For the same reason, elderly women wish to appear attractive. More than one sari shop or company puts forward large advertisements, presenting various types of saris, suitable for different generation of women, from granddaughter to grandmother.

Since women are generally regarded as providers of nourishment and childcare within the family, supposedly nourishing food advertisements target the feminine consumers. Pictures in the print or electronic media show a good-looking happy housewife surrounded by happy, healthy children, to whom she is feeding a particular food or beverage. In some advertisements, the smiling grandmother appears to partake of the same food or drink, which is seen to nourish the old and the young alike. In one or two advertisements, the grandmother is so much revived by the commodity in question, that she takes a more active role in household affairs, relieving the daughter or daughter-in-law. Incidentally, the women and children in such advertisements appear fair-skinned since this is the upper-class ideal of Bengali beauty. We may mention in this context, the trouble faced by Japanese advertisers when trying to adjust Euro-American features to the national model.

Western models have influenced recent advertisement trends in its appeared to a special category of feminine consumers. Engagement rings were not very common in South Asia, except among minority communities of Christians or Anglo-Indians. However, like the Christians cake, the engagement or wedding ring has made its way to a wider range of feminine consumers, and advertisers seem eager to cash in on the trend.

To sum up, women as targets of advertisers is as old as the advertising industry. However, the ups and downs of society, economy, many local factors, in interaction with globalization, have brought about changes, within a general frame of continuity.

Thus, advertising is an essential and ubiquitous part of modern life, for good or ill, and as such has found reflection in literature. The great

French novelist Balzac understood the trend even in the early days of capitalism, in the first half of the 19th century. He created the remarkable character Gaudissart, perhaps the pioneer of all advertising agents and public relations men. We find something like a similar trend in Bengali literature on both sides of the border, as well as in the earlier undivided Bengal. Advertisement, media, and literature in its various forms seem closely bound to this day for the descendants of Balzac's hero. The advertisements used in the print media in both West Bengal and Bangladesh also underscores the fact that the shared Bengali language between the state of West Bengal in India and the nation of Bangladesh, is about political severance since the partition and cultural sameness and difference between the two locations.

## II

An advertisement cannot afford to be cast aside or leafed over; it must stand out in the flow of signs that bombard us daily.

—Zoonen 79

As stated earlier, advertising is ubiquitous. Advertising prioritizes signs and signification that combine the semiotic and the symbolic with the overt and covert agenda being not just the hypodermic syringe model of brainwashing the consumer but by provoking the consumer to choose from a consumer shopping mall of endless choice. A paper napkin, a book mark, even a key chain is used often as an advertisement text, ranging from merchandising culture as books, music CDs and DVDs to advertisements of building materials, interior home products to cars, jewelry, detergents, and pest killers. Advertisements in the print media, on FM radio, big and small screens target a vast cross-section of consumer groups, often split according to economic classes, purchase behaviorism of economic classes, and the specific class desires and purchase abilities.

Advertising is itself a “multiplexing” form that absorbs and fuses a variety of symbolic practices and discourses. The substance and images woven into advertising messages are appropriated and distilled from an unbounded range of cultural references. Advertising borrows its ideas, its language, and its visual representations from literature and design, from other media content and forms, from history and the future, and from its own experience; then it artfully recombines them around the theme of consumption. (Leiss et al. 144–45)

Ruth Holliday, however, points out the gender bias and gender exploitation in the use of images in advertisements. She argues that capitalism

and patriarchy both play a systemic dual role in the construction and consolidation of images of men, women, and the family in industrially advantaged societies. Holliday states, "Media and advertising images continuously display idealized versions of women—as good, beautiful, glamorous and feminine women caring for their husbands and children, or bad seducers and manipulators of men and uncaring 'career bitches'" (Richardson and Robinson 188). The films *The Devil Wears Prada* and *Monster-in-Law* referred to in the chapter on films in our book, can be cited as evidence of a linked ideology shared between media and the entertainment industry.

Popular culture, social preferences, customs, traditions, and lifestyle practices all contribute to the construction of advertisements, which therefore emerges as a powerful tool of capitalism that inscribes cultural flows and effects that seduce, provoke, control, and determine consumer desires. So Sujata Moorito observes, "Advertisements offer a unique window for observing how commodity interests conceptualize social relations and facilitate the production and reproduction of ideology (Valdivia 298)." Classifications of advertising processes can be oriented to include product, retail, corporate, business-to-business (B2B), political, directory, direct-response, public service, and advocacy. The use of visual images construct culture and region specific texts that are consumer-friendly, as they establish direct links with the lifestyle desires of the consumer addressing issues of religious customs and social rituals. As a result advertisements are an integral part of material culture and the marketing strategies of product, price, promotion, and place, popularly known as the four Ps of marketing (Leiss et al. 8) and become internalized within the social and cultural dynamics of contemporary societies. So Leiss and others argue:

Advertising is not just a business expenditure undertaken in the hope of moving some merchandise off the store shelves, but is rather an integral part of modern culture. Its creations appropriate and transform a vast range of symbols and ideas; its unsurpassed communicative powers recycle cultural models and references back through the networks of social interactions. This venture is unified by the discourse through and about objects, which bonds together images of persons, products and well-being. (Leiss et al. 5)

Asia is now on the map of capitalist consumerist material culture with production and products being driven and designed by global producers for local needs. Multinational corporations target the Asian markets with products that range from automobiles to cosmetics. In India, advertising is not about visual images of products alone. The linguistic text that

supports the images is equally important as the choice of language determines the target consumerist group. If the advertisement is in English, the target is the affluent class, if in Hindi, then the target is still the elite and the middle classes. Regional language advertisements about detergents and saris have a target consumer group located in the lower-middle classes and working classes. In this connection the divide between government national television Doordarshan and the private television companies is quite significant in terms of quantitative data and content analysis. While the rich are bothered about aging and skin, the poor are more interested in washing powders and light jewelry that can be purchased in easy installments. The very poor hovering around the poverty line though significant in terms of numbers does not usually fall under the purview of potential consumers. As Curran observes, "Advertising thus causes economic inequalities in society to be reproduced in the structure or audience orientation of some media" (Curran and Gurevitch 97). The cosmetic industry and its aggressive marketing of image-enhancement products have constructed body images, sexuality, docile bodies to active nontraditional body images, processes that have impacted Indian culture, primarily in the urban and suburban areas. Maitrayee Chaudhuri observes:

[W]hat is evident is that the growing awareness of the body by urban, upwardly mobile Indian woman is represented as a mark of women gaining agency. They have taken control. They make choices. They are empowered and not passive dolls. Both Sushmita Sen and Aishwarya Rai's success in the Miss Universe and Miss World contest respectively, have been projected in this manner. (Sethi 253)

If that is so, the representation of the "new woman" in the globalized environment is not about reiterating the traditional images with certain superficial, cosmetic face-lifting. Does this imply that advertising not only consolidates but also continues to construct gender inequalities despite atypical subversions? Though advertising does now recognize, the sex/gender paradox and the ambivalence of gender roles in patriarchal systems in both developed and developing societies; this seems to lead to the possibility of recognizing female viewership and female voyeurism. The male underwear advertisement with the tagline "*eto bara twang hei*" with shy, sly female gazers and more explicit detailing of the sexual life of amorous monkeys is a case in point that certain changes are being subtly slipped into the overtly conservative Indian viewing culture. Zoonen's observation rings true in terms of globalizing media representations of gender, "...images of women and men in popular

culture are increasingly hard to interpret in traditional object/subject-active/passive-masculine/feminine dichotomies; a promising prospect for female voyeuristic pleasure” (Zoonen 103). Zoonen argues that the overtly feminist ripples of media transmission however conforms and conflates the broader middle-class aspirations and desires and as a result may not signify the cultural freedom of women and equal power relations between males and females in all societies, developed or developing.

At the same time, even progressive advertisements about participatory domestic work can have a subtext that can counter the overt progressive participatory role that is often reduced to a farcical ulterior motive as winning over an annoyed wife or mother. It is this problematization of the contextual intentions that Hollows cites:

For example, a series of advertisements in the UK for the household cleaner Flash Excel has portrayed the male partner doing a range of domestic duties: cleaning the bath, the top of the cooker and the kitchen floor. If this was included within a content analysis, it might signify “progress”—evidence of men’s responsibility for domestic labour. In this way, it would totally ignore the way in which the adverts work to confirm the “exceptional” nature of men’s involvement in these tasks, and the way the male character is presented as doing a favour for his wife by helping out in order to get in her good books, thereby confirming the notion that it is normal for women to be responsible for domestic labour. (Hollows 23)

Also, Ruth Holliday argues that advertisements are compelled to be dynamic, as products and commodities compete with each other for attracting consumer attraction and reliance. Advertisements of cosmetic products in India have not only changed the use of makeup products but have also changed the body images and sartorial preferences. Of course the “thin is beautiful” body image has become the desirable target for youngsters leading to gyms and fitness parlors mushrooming in every locality, with facilities in these outfits matching the economic ability of that particular area. Holliday stated:

Advertising must constantly evolve in order to address its markets. Globalization has led many companies to target wealthy elites in an ever-expanding number of countries—China, Japan, Korea and India, for instance—who represent eager consumers for high end products. Expanding global markets for fashion, for example, have significantly increased the number of black, Asian and East Asian fashion models represented, breaking with the tradition of using only light-skinned, blonde models to connote success. In addition, older models are now being used, to appeal to women in their 40s and 50s who represent an independently successful and highly lucrative target market. (Richardson and Robinson 190)

But the stereotypical images continue to be transmitted too. As Creedon and Cramer assert quite categorically that women continue to be regarded as the second sex, "Women thus have been treated as the Other, marginalized in mainstream media representation by the powerful men who control media industries, with media content helping to systematically reproduce that unequal gendered social relationship" (Creedon and Cramer 226). So, the professional woman is still shown as one who feels success lies not in intellect and skill but fair skin and glossy, silky long hair. Unmarried women are seen in advertisements in western wear or stitched ethnic outfits, while married women are seen in shimmering saris and loads of jewelry. Picturization of weddings is common in both television serials and advertisements with obsessive camera focus on saris and jewelry. The big fat Indian wedding with beaming, gleaming, gorgeous fair-skinned brides and their handsome grooms is a regular content in advertisements. This amply bears out the fact that popular culture and contemporary times resists the independent educated woman who can have a fulfilling life as a professional or business magnate. The success at an interview for a young ambitious woman is a tube of fairness cream that her mother places in her cupped palm. Similarly, in a recent advertisement a female flight attendant who has her mother on the flight ends with the mother cleaning her shirt on which a passenger had spilled some beverage. As Zoonen sums up:

Instead of signifying progress, the presence of a "new woman" in contemporary advertising can thus be perceived as the co-optation of feminist ideals into acceptable fantasies of individual middle class achievement and success. A second problem with the cheerful visions of the "new woman" is that the image itself is not problematized. The methodology of content analysis only allows a recognition of social roles which women perform: the evidence of advertisements portraying the "new woman," however, reveals that she only departs marginally from her older, more traditional sisters. (Zoonen 72–73)

The advertisers and their advertising policies control the print and even the visual media in India, as advertisements are the primary revenue resource for sustaining media operations. As a result, advertisements create myths and construct icons and dominant images as the model to follow, the leader to emulate. Brand ambassadors beam and seduce and the readers become willing or unwilling accomplices. The hypodermic needle method of injecting needs, aspirations, desires, and targets have created a world of fast-paced competition and the seductive world of endless choice and freedom of choice in an incestuous relationship, it is this that is the driving force of successful capitalism. Advertisements that use images of women consolidate the traditional stereotypes of women

as caregivers in the family with supreme knowledge about domestic consumption from detergents, toilet cleaners to health food and cooking oil. Betty Friedan outlines the invidious agenda of the advertising agencies in her tellingly captioned chapter “The Sexual Sell” in her seminal feminist manifesto *The Feminine Mystique* as she reports a conversation with an advertising agent of motivational research operation, “...we have to liberate women to desire these new products. We help them re-discover that homemaking is more creative than to compete with men. This can be manipulated. We sell them what they ought to want, speed up the unconscious, move it along” (Friedan 227).

Interestingly, though Betty Friedan had made such an observation when her path-breaking treatise was first published in 1963, one needs to notice that the situation in terms of media targets and corporate ambitions has not altered much in the 21st century, that is more than half a century later. The situation in terms of media targets and corporate ambitions has not altered much in the 21st century. In Indian television advertisements a married woman is seen to become vocal as she claims that she is the Home Minister and the Home Ministry functions totally at her behest. The exploitation and containment of women as domestic ombudsman and factotum if ever addressed in advertisements, is done in the form of burlesque. A recent add of a bunch of boys presenting a bottle of a fizzy drink to a plump “auntie” in order to make her cook a meal for them, in one such very visible imaging of emotional blackmail that women still consciously surrender to. Fizzy drinks or even a persuasive tone is enough to switch on the target woman to the caregiver mode, as she has been socialized into accepting the role that after all makes her acceptable. Jean Kilbourne argued that advertising sells much more than the product. She argued that because advertising is so pervasive, it has an immense cultural impact, especially on women and girls. She also stated that advertising “objectifies people, turning them into things—things that we learn to love in place of people. She argued that women and girls are particularly vulnerable to the glamorized portrayals of cigarettes and alcohol and the addictive power of advertising” (Creedon and Cramer 99).

Advertisements along with images on television construct gender roles both in the public and private domains. Women are mostly noticed as full-time in-service personnel within the domestic space, vigilant health advisors to all family members, infants to adults. Women’s own medical needs are generally about pain balms that women apply in order to attend to more domestic chores apart from hair and skin-care aids. In fact in a very recent advertisement her daughter, for neglecting her daughter’s hair care needs for office work, reprimands an office-going mother driving her daughter to school. The daughter subsequently gets the desired long lustrous hair and her mother asks her whether she

can attend office now that her daughter's desirable hair-care needs have been attended to. The skin tone lightening creams or fairness creams as they are popularly known had led to protests by women's groups who argue that the advertisements could be safe for skin but were not safe for society. In *Marketing News* (2003) Arundhati Parmar observed that the withdrawal of the Fair & Lovely advertisements, as these had violated the Indian Cable Television Networks Act of 1995 underscored the "changing social mores in India and highlights tensions between the government and the Advertising Standards Council of India, an autonomous industry group, over how to regulate Indian broadcast content, including advertising" (Lee and Johnson 45). Interestingly since 2009, *Fair & Lovely* advertising competes with *Fair and Handsome* fairness creams and seems to have won acceptance from all dissident groups. Interestingly, women projected in fairness cream advertising narrate in order to secure jobs and husbands, wherein a lighter skin tone is essential. In the case of men, the advertisements are about light-skinned men securing female attention, skin tone does not seem to be a matter of consideration for successful job placements. So we may reiterate that despite the overt attitudinal shifts, the shifts are subcutaneous at best, not tectonic. The inherent gender inequalities and sexist bias that are manifest in the collective social psyche of Indian culture may be the reason for Amartya Sen's analysis, "India still has a long way to go in removing inequalities in the position of women, but the increasing political involvement in the social role of women has been an important and constructive development in democratic practice in India" (Sen 351).

As a matter of fact the media objectives in advertisement planning are about identifying the target audience. This is generally and overwhelmingly the urban and suburban consumers of products, once again divided into economic segments that can determine the need for the quantitative analysis required for identifying the reach, frequency, weightage, continuity, and cost of each advertisement including their time of screening, as the time has to be slotted according to the generation of viewers who may be watching the small screen around this time or the consumers who read printed advertisements. Statistical data, demographics, and case analysis of content input and their consumption all become crucial in advertising. Commercials in Indian television on prime time compel the viewer to watch the advertisements. This is done in a subtle and smart manner. Advertisement slots known as "break" slots are all screened at around the same time, so channel switching does not facilitate escape from advertisements. This is an aggressive strategy of the advertising market, which has led to phrases and words from advertising texts being used in common speech and jingles sung, as these are

recognized as a pan-Indian link notes. So Thumbs Up urging consumers to “Taste the Thunder,” or the “Seven Signs of Aging” and the Total Effects cream that guarantees youthful skin, the user-friendly washing machines that are child’s play, the toothpastes that kill germs as if it’s a Kargil battlefield, are constructed to linger long in the memory.

Interestingly, due to the conservative reception of television viewing that entails content should be for family viewing, universal, explicit sexual images are used with subtle sexual innuendoes, as the Wild Stone male fragrance commercials and those of male underwear where a man has lipstick marks all over his body, smiling smugly after being attacked by a female gang. The reverse of such an advertising after all would be about sexual violence not gratification, and therefore untenable. The other male underwear commercial, “*Ei to bara twaing hei*” was censored for its sexual explicit images of a woman washing male underwear in a village, and another which had monkeys or baboons, underwear, bananas and smiling, shy women. Not to be discouraged, the banned commercial has now been re-invented as the need for the “macho” man, after being oppressed by women who appear to be Adam-teasers on buses and public places and bosses at home. The underwear advertisement, therefore, continues with the ringing of temple bells, urging the man to shake off his slavery, claiming that enough is enough, therefore his macho image must be roused. So in his underwear he accosts Indian women in western outfits, and the women wrap themselves around him for he is the “twang” guy, the signifier for the desirable one. Among the more domestic ads if men are made to serve tea for women, or family members the body language is demasculinized, deliberately creating the image of a slave or bonded labor. On the other hand women serving tea is invariably imaged as smiling and complacent, expressing exhilaration that she has been given the opportunity to serve her family members with total dedication.

All this merely underscores that the conservative approach of 21st century advertising texts and marketing of products that is socialized and culturally attuned to the patriarchal norms. As in the TV serials, similarly in the commercials and advertisements, women are projected as homemakers, wives, mothers, daughters, rather than professionals in decision-making sectors. A working woman seems, therefore, extraordinary in commercials, and the homemaker woman is projected as a doctor on call, a resident doctor whose choice of safe cooking oil like Saffola, or health food for children as Horlicks or Complan is valorized with as much enthusiasm as her choice of detergents and floor cleaners and pesticides. Globally, however, this trend continues, and Indian advertising follows this global trend, as the economic risk factors to do otherwise can be too forbidding. Women in non-threatening roles as

caregivers, beauty conscious, seduced by jewelry, or pressure cookers seem much more acceptable, than that rare advertisement where a daughter offers to buy the father a larger car. In that advertisement too the mother is projected as the dumb caregiver who has to be informed by her wise husband that their daughter has indeed grown up. Not unlike in the Global North, women in daytime channels are projected as housewives in subservient roles, in sportscasts women are projected as sex objects as the cheerleaders during the Twenty20 cricket matches, in the evening prime-time viewing, however, smart professional women are projected to a degree. In American advertising too it seems gendered progressive advertisements were common in the 1970s, only after the Women's Liberation movement.

In the last two decades, however, there has been a backslide and backlash, more so as male dominated marketing agencies made this continuity of the traditional images of women's roles as a desired and desirable status quo. As a matter of fact there is an observable disconnect between the lives of urban women in India and the way in which women are represented in commercial advertising and television soaps. This has become a normative position in both, the global north and south. As a result Leiss states:

In the niched marketplace advertisers tailor their stereotypes of women to suit different audiences. They continue to rely on women's tolerance to buy brands and watch television programming designed for men, and they are not inspired to radically change their mode of address toward women.... (Leiss et al. 447)

Ruth Holliday states:

Products are frequently linked to idealized families where a mother provides healthy meals (breakfast cereals) or fresh clean laundry (washing powders) for her family...In particular women's bodies are central to adverts for both women's and men's products. Groomed, slender, attractive, made-up (mostly white) women's bodies are semiotically linked to products... (Richardson and Robinson 189)

In India, cosmetic manufacturers have identified the obsession of young people about a lighter skin tone. So, "fairness" creams have swamped the market to such an extent that advertisers create the promise that its fair skin that can get one a good job or even a break as a model or film star. But the cosmetic industry being insatiable has now shifted its women-centric target and now aggressively sells not just aftershave lotions for men but also "fairness" creams. Shahrukh Khan, the matinee idol of millions of Indians warns against using the feminized "fair and lovely" cream and invites men to use "fair and handsome" fairness creams for a

tough skin as opposed to a smooth skin that is promised to women in fairness cream advertising.

However, media critics do not always take such a negative view, many are of the opinion that ripples of change have been perceived in the representations of women that can be persuasive though not manipulative. So Belch observes, “While sexism and stereotyping still exist, advertising’s portrayal of women is improving in many areas. Many advertisers have begun to recognize the importance of portraying women realistically” (Belch and Belch 767). This, however, is still a point of debate. In all cultures the gender stereotypes continue despite significant changes. The stereotypes command greater statistical averages than the transformations. The patriarchal normative implications are inscribed in the media images that consolidate the traditional binaries that are sexist and discriminatory. Jib Fowles’ arguments in this context are equally applicable to media images of the Global North and South:

Advertising and popular culture are heavily imbued with highly delineated images of masculinity and femininity not because the culture industries are committed to foisting particular gender depictions on their spectators but because the audience, and especially the young, are captivated by gender imagery and seek out those models, performers, and performances that best exemplify cultural concepts of maleness and femaleness. (Fowles 215)

A recent instance about a young woman in jeans mistaking a square cut for “slice” as her husband enlightens her at a time when we have female sports journalists, anchors, sportswomen winning laurels for the country and films like *Chak De! India*, which is really about women’s hockey, also points to gender inequality as a normative practice. Or the other, commercials about banks and judicious saving where a male senior citizen tells his wife that she will have to give up certain material facilities she had been used to for so long—car, domestic helpers. She suggests turning to her son for financial support. Her husband spurns it *like a man* and declares proudly that in his whole life apart from asking for her hand in marriage from her father he has never asked for any financial help. When she says that after all this proud speech she has to see such a day when he cannot afford domestic helpers to do the cooking and mopping jobs, he indicates that he was just joking and offers to show her Singapore. This advertisement once again consolidates the stereotype, romanticizing the woman’s economic dependence. There is no question about the husband asking her whether she actually wants to go to Singapore—she may have suggested San Francisco or even Singur.

It is interesting how inherent is this problem without a name. Sometime ago in another advertisement we saw how a husband playfully

cheats a blindfolded wife by scooping spilled ice cream from the floor and making her eat it. It was a commercial for floor tiles. Also, a pre-adolescent boy cheats a girl maybe a trifle younger than him by ordering a dam to respond to his command. Her interjection “wow” makes him take on the stance of a jingoistic empire builder—what should I build next? The redeeming feature perhaps is that he asks for suggestions from her that can be interpreted as a gesture of magnanimity from a male tiny tot with the potential of a megalomaniac. Such advertisements on television create a greater impression on the mind than advertisements in the print media. As Chanda states:

[T]he difference between print and television ads lies in the greater possibility of positioning the person addressed more explicitly through the audio-visual media. The print ad is static, it is generally restricted to a single highlighted image. But in the television ad the persona bearing the image is placed within a narrative situation and acts in relation to this situation. (Chanda 71)

Proposing amendments to the Prohibition of Indecent Representation of Women and Children Act, 1986, the Chairperson of NCW, Girija Vyas said the definition of “advertisement” had to be amended too as “there have been many changes in technology in the past years. We wanted the legislation to reflect that,” she said. Advertisements will include any notice, circular, label, wrapper, or other documents, besides visible representation made by means of any light including laser, light, and smoke, Vyas said. Indecent representation of women means depiction of women as a sexual object which is lascivious or appeals to the prurient interests, she said (Vyas 10). An advertisement of condoms has a woman dressed in a swimsuit and thereafter in western outfit. Apart from the erstwhile Kama Sutra condoms this latest product advertised on Indian television screens is being marketed as Manforce condoms manufactured and marketed by Mankind.

Commercial advertising of consumer products in India, both in the visual and print media, is most often male-centered and patriarchal with emphasis on traditional normative practices that denote gender inequality. In conclusion, mention must be made of the excellent awareness campaign advertising which are mostly state government or central government sponsored micro stories that advertise literacy, polio drives, AIDS campaign, also inclusive policies regarding marginalized sections of society, such as the little girl picking up the flower that had dropped off from the flower-laden tray and placing the dropped flower between other flowers in order to complete the floral outline of the map of India or the computer literate son warning his fisherman father not to go out on

sea as a storm was brewing in the distant horizon. One may venture a suggestion that instead of such mutually exclusive formats of commercial advertising policies replaying traditional roles for men and women at both public and domestic levels and progressive awareness campaign advertising run by government agencies, a subtle and sensitive blend of the latter's objectives in commercial advertising may contribute to the progressive building of human, social, and cultural capital on three levels, the local, the national, and the global. In this connection, *The Telegraph* matrimonial advertisements of the ideal suitable boy and girl are significant. Both these young achievers and jet setters are "global in outlook but rooted in our tradition." The images are those of a handsome young man in ethnic ceremonial attire who the text reassures the readers is never oblivious of his tradition, beginning with saying *namaskar*, despite the fact that he has been living abroad for a decade. The young woman in a traditional red bordered sari and jewelry is actually an investment banker but she is as focused in her domestic responsibilities regarding *puja*, as she is about shares and equities. Does this become obvious from the cell phone in her hand? The telltale images clinches and elaborates our arguments effectively (see Photo 5.1).

**Photo 5.1: Matrimonial Ad Image**



Source: *The Telegraph* 7 (groom) and 9 (bride) juxtaposed for effect.

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# 6

## Print Media and Popular Culture: Agents with a Difference

### Introduction

Down with mediocrity, sharpen your brain.

—Motto of a little magazine

Print media in recent times has been under the scanner of scholars who are particularly interested in media–popular culture relations. As such how the different varieties of print media “respond” to the demands and appeal of popular culture is a fascinating field of investigation itself. The analyses in this context can take various forms—from the historical approach tracing the roots of the contemporary forms and manifestations of the same through the past to a cultural approach, which explores primarily the use of language—both in terms of the internal strategy of the print media to formulating its own idioms to appeal to the people and in terms of responding to the idioms and rhetoric that emerge from the terrain of popular culture itself. A major theoretical initiative in this regard has been made by Dahlgren and Sparks who would argue, reorienting the ideals of their intellectual predecessors that the relationship between the popular press and popular culture is too close and that the former can be treated as a component of the latter. It is quite obvious that such studies began to emerge at a point of time when popular culture became academically “respectable” and print media was still considered as the “fundamental” media. The attention of the scholars

in such studies overwhelmingly concerned the daily newspapers, and to a lesser extent, the magazines for the simple reason that more than any other segment of the print media the dailies are supposed to indulge in *everyday* negotiation with the mass market, in which the tastes of the people matter much. Later on, the attention was extended to popular magazines. It is, however, important to point out that most of these initiatives emerged in the West and the Indian analysts were a little late in encountering their reality.

This chapter treads the same path but in a different way. It adopts an unconventional route in diverting from the practice of near-exclusive attention on the mainstream segment of the print media and its consequent focus on two lesser represented and under-researched categories of the print media, the little Bengali magazines which by themselves constitute a unique genre, and women's magazines which are popular and yet peripheral when compared to the dominant English language magazines. The following discussion would present details of these little magazines. But it is important to state here that even with limited capital investment, limited circulation, not-so-professional management, little or no advertising revenue, and deliberate detachment from sponsorship the little Bengali magazines remain a potent force in generating enlightened popular culture. The little magazines are agents with a difference, because rather than toeing the line of dominant popular culture they seek to reinvent popular culture in their own terms. It is said in half jest that even a Bengali who has never read a little magazine in her/his life would hardly admit so for the fear of being ridiculed! Notably, even if the little magazine movement was initiated to create a "niche in the mind of the reading public"—as opposed to the efforts of the big media to cater to the lowest common denominator—the movement over the years made attempts, as already noted, to redefine popular culture by reorienting popular taste through idiosyncrasy, radicalism, and a range of extremities. The effort to promote little magazines as cutting-edge popular culture, especially in the turbulent decade of the 1970s had signaled a paradigm shift from the earlier exclusive emphasis on literary objectives. We shall return to this point in the last part of the chapter.

## I

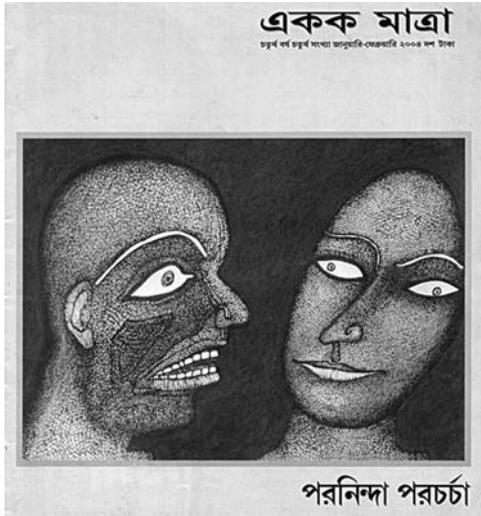
### Heritage of Little Magazines

Little magazines constitute an important and inalienable part of Bengali popular culture, as much as group theater, Rabindra Sangeet, and

Durga Puja. Bangla Academy estimates that there are at least three thousand little magazines in West Bengal at present, which exclude those published in Bangladesh or the Bengali diaspora. No doubt, with the tradition dating back to classic varieties like *Bangadarshan*, *Bharatbarsha*, *Prabasi*, and *Sabujpatra*—which did not explicitly carry the baggage of little magazine—many die out and are replaced by new ones, but significantly enough their total number has remained more or less unchanged for many years. Paradoxical though it may sound, the heritage of little magazines lies in a major way in contesting the set literary culture. Thus, while *Sabuj Patra*, established in 1914 under the genius Pramath Chowdhury, had set the ball literally rolling by proclaiming an “anti-traditional” stance and bringing Tagore to the public realm, in 1923 *Kallol* emerged in a pioneering role by moving away from the great influence of Tagore on the then contemporary literature and setting aside the “conventional items.” Being influenced by western literature the *Kallol* group exerted great influence by “bringing themselves among the mass of subaltern and marginal masses, lower middle-class households, in the mud-tiled slums, footpath and in the duped and discarded areas.” In the process the little magazines most often survive by being irreverent. In a way, it is their USP. Obviously, this calls for demystifying the set ideas and stereotypical images. The covers (See Photo 6.1 and Photo 6.2) of a premier little magazine, *Ekak Matra*, provide a glimpse of how the set notions, be they social and cultural or political, are sought to be challenged by the little magazines.

The Bengalis on both sides of the border have an obsession with little magazines. In erstwhile East Bengal (now Bangladesh) one can mention the instances of *Kabikantha*, *Yatrik*, *Swadesh*, *Nagarik*, *Purbamegh*, and so forth—which would involve eminent literary personalities as Shamsur Rahman, Ahmaed Chafa, Zillur Rahman Siddiqi, Burhanuddin Bhuiya, and Khaleda E. Chowdhury. It is not that the Bengalis have a monopoly of this literary-cum-journalistic genre. The University of Wisconsin, for instance, has carried out a survey (Mukhopadhyay 365) of little magazines of English speaking countries, such as, Britain, Canada, the USA, Australia, and New Zealand. Apparently, more than eight thousand such magazines have flourished in these states in the last half century or so. Simone de Beauvoir, recalling her days as a student in Paris of the 1920s in *Memoires d'une jeune fille rangée* (*Memories of a Dutiful Daughter*), speaks of magazines which bloomed briefly like flowers. However, though not necessarily unique, the attachment for little magazines among the educated and “radical” Bengalis is certainly striking. The following excerpt from the “Calcutta Diary,” a popular column in *Economic and Political Weekly*, is pertinent in this context. Referring to

**Photos 6.1 Role Reversal in Little Magazine on Gossip: Man Playing a More Proactive Role**



**Photos 6.2 Challenging the Stereotype in Little Magazine on "Democracy in South Asia": Woman Leading the Way Forward**



Source: *Ekak Matra* magazine.

the Bengalis', especially the Bengali youth's passion for iconoclasm and vacuous romanticism the columnist writes:

...but any attempt to rid of the Bengali of his (sic) core of cynicism-altering-with-romanticism would hardly do much good. Take away their little magazines, and several of these youngsters would be deprived of their privilege of the only praxis they know of. The closure of the magazines would not automatically lead them into the anterooms of money-minting companies, or into the cozy parlour of government.

...In case you happen to be a cost-benefit megalomaniac from the ravine of economics, the disappearance of the little magazines might even seem a crucial significant development, bottling up a 'non-priority' activity, with so much saving of precious paper. By shutting down the little magazines, you would be killing many loves; quashing many dreams...you would be shutting off a modality of expression. A complex of urges would grope about in search of an outlet. If there is not going to be a letting out of words, who knows, there might be a lot of extra letting of blood. (Mitra 1001)

This chapter does not intend to present a detailed case-by-case history of little magazines of the past or present. Some notable features of these magazines, certain trends or tendencies going back as far as the 19th century, will be touched on, posing them as a mirror of Bengali culture.

## What It Is

What exactly is a little magazine? What defines "littleness?" The size of the magazine, the magnitude of its circulation, or some other elusive quality? Is "little" to be understood as a literal or symbolic and allegorical term? Such questions have been much debated, without arriving at any definite conclusion. Buddhadeb Bose, distinguished Bengali writer and the patron and editor of *Kabita* (Poetry), one of the pioneering little magazines, comments:

That tiny adjective (little) contains  
Many other meanings. In the first place,  
the word implies a protest, a protest  
against including everything within the scope  
of two covers.... At some historical turning  
point when there appeared no escape from  
routine monotony, these (little magazines)  
infused young blood in the tires veins of  
literature. This courage, single-minded

devotion, was not deterred by abuse,  
 persecution or financial loss. To create  
 rather than serve time—that is the  
 basic spirit of little magazines. (Mukhopadhyay 364)

Certainly, the definition of little magazines presented here is exalted, if slightly vague. Little magazines are supposed to play the role of vanguard and savior, as far as the cultural world is concerned. They are expected to infuse fresh blood into the “tried veins” of a seemingly decadent literature. It is not clear what exactly Buddhadeb means by his stricture that everything should not be included within the covers of one journal. Does he believe that a particular journal should concentrate on a single issue, rather than look in many directions? His own *Kabita*, as the name implies, was devoted almost exclusively to poetry and critique of poetry. Little magazines, in fact, have been and still are varied, in this respect. Some are, so to speak, specialized, others multidimensional, as we shall subsequently see. But there is no mistaking the high honor and important role, which a writer and editor as prominent as Bose assigns to such magazines. The question of verbal abuse, even most active persecution and most important of all, financial problems and insecurity have plagued little magazines from the 19th century to this day. That they have still survived as a genre is a proof of the serious commitment and sense of mission, which inspire those who run and, to use their favorite expression, “manage” these magazines.

There is no uniformity concerning the concept of a little magazine. In the first place, “little” is a relative term. As regards size, there is a good deal of variation among these magazines. Some consist of little more than a dozen or so pages, handwritten or cyclostyled. They are mostly distributed from hand to hand. In the annual Book Fair of Kolkata, young people, particularly students, hawking enthusiastically their very little “little magazines,” can be seen. On the other hand, a not inconsiderable number of little magazines can compete with and even surpass “normal” magazines, as regards size, some even adopting the Royal size, coming close to the coffee-book shape. The special issues of many little magazines, usually published during the Durga Puja (the biggest festival of Bengal in a cultural as well as religious sense) or in the Kolkata Book Fair, extend from two to five hundred pages. Thus, there is no uniform standard as to how little a magazine should be in order to qualify as a “little magazine.”

It should be emphasized that there is no necessary correlation between size and importance in the world of little magazines. Let us take a few instances, both from the past and present. A notable theater-centered magazine, *Nachghar* (Dance Hall) appeared in Bengal, in the

1920s and 1930s, more specifically during 1924–33. The editor was Hemendra Kumar Roy, a very popular writer of adventure and detective stories for children as well as an eminent drama critic. The journal, for some time, was also closely associated with Sisir Bhaduri, arguably the greatest Bengali actor of the day. These facts, together with the high quality of the magazine, ensured its popularity and circulation. Yet *Nachghar* did not exceed eight or ten pages, though special issues for the *pujas* and Christmas being somewhat larger. The price range was between two and three paise.

Today, a number of well-considered little magazines have a similar size and low price. Let us take only a couple of examples: *Katha* (Word), a little magazine devoted to spreading rationalism and fighting superstition and *Coffee House*—the latter, not content to be a little magazine, claims to be a “micro” (*anu*) magazine. All its contents, stories, poems, articles are “micro.”

Is it the level of circulation, which determines the “littleness” of little magazines? This is a matter one cannot be sure about. While the size of a magazine can be clearly seen circulation remains a less transparent and problematic issue. But even then the scenario is by no means uniform. There are little magazines with dozens or hundreds or even with few thousand readers. Moreover, while judging the market share of little magazines one important point is worth considering. The overwhelming portion of the market in Bengali books, magazines, and newspapers are highly skewed in an oligopolistic manner. The (*Anandabazar Publication ABP*) group, publisher of two newspapers—one in Bengali and the other in English—along with a host of magazines and publication of books easily beats the rest. Compared with the circulation of the ABP magazines almost all other magazines, excepting one or two here and there, might be considered to be little magazines. This reinstates our argument that “little” is a relative term and “there are various grades of ‘littleness.’”

To reiterate, there is no definite standard or yardstick to judge or define a little magazine. Neither the size nor the market share can be considered a definitive and infallible guide. Yet there is something, not quite explicable in words, which characterizes little magazines and which anyone familiar with the Bengal literary would sense somewhat instinctively. Perhaps it is what Bose meant by “creating time not serving it.” It could be a synergy of a sense of independence, noncommercialism, serious commitment, intellectual enthusiasm, the qualities associated with the production and management of little magazines. This remains the “high ideal” though none can claim that the numerous little magazines attain the same.

## Contents

We remember the stricture of Buddhadeb Bose against placing too many eggs in one basket. In fact, little magazines might be divided between the “generalist” and “specialist.” Most might be said to belong to the first category. They include poems, short stories, essays pieces of biography or autobiography, and even occasional serials.

“Specialist” little magazines are not lacking either. Many of them concentrate on drama and the theater. We have seen *Nachghar* of an earlier era. Today, a number of group theaters or theater groups publish their own little magazines, at least a single, fair-sized issue in the festive season. The *Shudrak* group annual magazine, for example, is particularly striking. The most notable of this genre is undoubtedly *Epic Theatre*, a bilingual (Bengali and English) periodical. It was founded by Utpal Dutt, the outstanding dramatist, drama critic, actor, and producer. The name had come from the brand of drama associated with Bertolt Brecht. After Dutt’s death, it was continued by his widow Sobha Sen, herself an actress of great merit, as well as other associates. The theater-centered little magazines discuss drama in West Bengal, elsewhere in South Asia, the world, and they also print transcripts and translation of plays of different kinds. These drama-oriented little magazines probably play an important role in linking the theory and practice of drama. So did “Natyachinta” (Thoughts about Drama).

Short stories, considered the jewel of Bengali literature, also form the centerpiece of certain little magazines. These include *Galpapatra*, edited by a leading writer, Bimal Kar, till his death; *Galpagucha*, (Bunch of Stories), *Antorjatik Choto Galpa* (International Short Story). These magazines are devoted to short stories, both original and translated, as well as critical discussion of stories, poetry, arguably, provides the centerpiece for the greatest number of “single issue” little magazines. Perhaps Buddhadeb Bose started the trend with his 40-page *Kabita*. This journal had many heirs. *Kabi Sammelan* (Conference of Poets), *Darga Road*, *La Poëise* (the name, in French is self-explanatory), *Dainik Kabita*, *Mahaprithibi* (The Great World), *Baruruchi*, etc., are only a few in a very long list. Poetry, both Bengali and non-Bengali, Indian and foreign, together with discussion and criticism of poetry forms their material. Thus, both single issue and “generalist” little magazines have done yeoman service to almost all the branches of literature.

Who writes in the little magazines? Unkind persons say that only those who do not find admission elsewhere and that their criticism of “commercial” magazines is often a case of sour grapes. This is untrue, or at best, a half-truth. The contributors to little magazines include

various categories: young, talented, or not so talented writers who serve their apprenticeship in this fashion. Sometimes graduating to the bigger commercial magazines and neglecting their first “alma mater.” The complaint, “We gave them their first chance and now they will not look at us,” is a fairly common complaint in little magazine quarters. On the other hand, there are those who keep their feet in both camps. For example, Sunil Gangopadhyay, a best-selling writer, closely associated with the biggest publishing group like ABP, contributes an occasional piece to little magazines with small circulation, while continuing to edit his own little magazine, *Krittibas* dating from the 1950s, if somewhat erratically. Then there are certain writers of great fame and popularity—Mahasweta Debi, Debesh Roy, Amiyabhushan Majumdar, and Sandipan Chattopadhyay—who preferred to mostly confine themselves to little or, at least, “non-big” publications. This association has hardly come in their way to success. Thus, the little magazines are multidimensional, both as regards their subject matter and the age and social structure of the chief contributors. Fledgling efforts and the crowning achievements of nature come together.

## Little Magazines and the Past

The link between the past and the present is an important part of existence of any community or people. Burke had once declared that every society was a compact between the dead, the living, and those who were yet to be born. The little magazines have done a great deal to preserve or revive such memories, though, of course, they are not the only ones to carry out such work. To take a few instances, *Ekkhon*, a little magazine with a scintillating record,<sup>1</sup> which ran for 35 years, reprinted many memoirs, particularly those of women of an earlier time, the 19th or early 20th centuries. The autobiography of Rassundari Debi, the first woman writer to produce a work of this kind, appeared in this little magazine. So did the “Amar Katha” (My Story) by the famous actress Binodini, once the dazzling star of the Bengali stage and the disciple, so to speak, of Sri Ramakrishna. If these remarkable women of the past had not been exactly forgotten, the appearance of their memoirs in *Ekkhon* certainly roused a renewed interest in the matter. Later, the well-known historian Tanika Sarkar translated the book of Rassundari into English. The memoirs of Binodini, too, inspired further explorations of the terrain. *Ekkhon* published other similar autobiographies, some by relatively unknown women, who were nevertheless representatives of their time. The unpublished diary of Manik Bandopadhyay, one of the greatest

Bengali writers, appeared for the first time in the pages of *Ekkhon*, throwing a new light on his last days and certain aspects of his character. Other little magazines, too, followed this path. Much of what is known as partition literature, particularly the traumatic experience of women at this stage might draw on these sources.

Memory would also be stirred by the reprint of earlier works, stories, poems, and essays. Little magazines did so regularly and do so still. "International short stories," for instance, reprint stories of earlier periods, with commentaries and discussions added. "Natyachinta" does the same with drama. *Basumati*, a popular monthly of the 1930s, appeared briefly half a century later. It received a rousing welcome by old readers who were still alive, or children, even grandchildren of the same. The new *Basumati* combined current contributions with reprints of works, which had appeared in its earlier incarnation. "College Street" often publishes special and extra large festive issues, which consist entirely of such reprints.

It is perhaps significant that, in the 1950s, a little magazine, published by a group of young, ultramodern poets, was named *Krittibas*, after the doyen of medieval Bengali poetry. The interplay of the past and the present, the classics and innovation continues till this day.

## The "International" in Little Magazines

The educated Bengalis had been intensely international, at least since the battle of Plassey. They internalized the language of the conqueror, for reasons of bread and butter, but also through love. Shakespeare has arguably been translated or adapted into Bengali more than any other language. Nirad Chaudhuri declared that the educated Bengalis revered the Bard of Avon as the ancient Greeks had revered Homer. Nor were other English writers, from Tom Paine to Shelley, Huxley to Hemingway, off the radar. Though English was naturally their first concern, other European languages like French, and German, and somewhat later Russian were not neglected.

The little magazines have followed the tradition. Many pages are devoted to foreign language and literature. Special issues are brought out in honor of foreign authors or great foreign classics. To give a list would be far too long. Only a few examples can illustrate a general trend. *Bararuchi* published a marvelous Rilke issue. *Ebong Mushaiera* won the best little magazine of the year prize with its Goethe issue. A few years later, the same journal published a special issue on "Hamlet," on the fourth centenary of the play. Many magazines devoted special issues to Camus, Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, particularly on the birth centenaries

of the last two, "Proma," one of the leading little magazines, indeed, verging for some years on a "big" magazine status, published serially a full translation of Dante's "Divine Comedy" from the original Italian, a prose translation of a verse drama of Victor Hugo and a translation of a play by Camus, both from the original French. Moreover, the magazine indulged in what might be called light scholarship, appealing to popular tastes but well researched. The love lives of great foreign writers, from Balzac to Hemingway and T.S. Eliot, have been the objects of articles here.

Hispanic and Latin American literature inspires a great deal of interest in the world of little magazines. Neruda, Marcos, and magic realism have become almost brand names. Translations or discussions of such works appear in countless magazines. Perhaps the most striking is the translation of a play by Neruda from the original which appeared in *Anushtup*, one of the most prestigious little magazines. Cervantes and his great classic of the sad faced knight have also inspired special issues of little magazines such as *Ebong Mushaiera*. South Asian literature in languages other than Bengali has not perhaps received as much attention as necessary, but they are far from neglected. Here, too, little magazines, can claim a proud tradition from earlier magazines, little or big. For instance, *Bharatbarsha* a very popular journal published, in the second decade of the 20th century, two very well-researched and well-written articles on contemporary Hindi and Gujarati writers. Manto, Ismat Chughtai, or Amrita Pritam are no strangers to the pages of little magazines.

Bengali little magazines also specialize on foreign crimes! A magazine of crime and detective stories not only adapted detective stories and crime thrillers from the West but also wrote thrilling articles based on actual historical crimes. For example "Luti to bhandar" (If you want to rob, rob a treasury) was all about a daring attempt in 17th century England to rob the royal treasury.

## Nonliterary Aspects and Other Forms of Expression

The literary aspects of little magazines have been most stressed because they are of fundamental importance. But it would be wrong to believe that all little magazines are only or even mainly literature oriented. In fact, little magazines could provide material for interdisciplinary studies or multifaceted research. Take the case of pictorial art. *Sundaram*, edited once by Subho Thakur, might be considered an art journal. Other little magazines, though not mainly pictorial, contained 10 cover pages or

illustrations of high merit. In this connection, we might recall an amusing anecdote concerning Jaladhar Sen, the editor of *Bharatbarsha* and something of a legendary figure. Someone approached him with a portrait of Sarat Chandra, which belonged apparently to the Italian School of painting. Jaladhar retorted, "Why have you brought a painting by a schoolboy to me? Take it to some children's magazine like *Shishusathi* or *Mauchak*."

*Ekkhon* is a good, though by no means the only, example of multi-disciplinary activity. Though predominantly literary in orientation, it stretched out its arms to other art forms, painting, the theater, and the cinema. The composition of the editorial board was itself a pointer. Though Nirmalya Acharya was the chief editor and managed the magazine for 35 years, the coeditor for quite a long time was Soumitra Chatterjee, one of the leading Bengali actors and directors of both the stage and the screen. Satyajit Ray, though his name never appeared as an editor, was closely associated with the magazine throughout his life. (Ray's death took place three years before that of Nirmalya and the closure of the magazine.) Many issues of *Ekkhon* carried cover illustrations by Ray, who had been trained as a commercial artist, besides possessing the true Renaissance versatile talent in art, music, cinema, and literature. Several of Ray's film scripts appeared in the magazine. So did much valuable Ray's analyses and critique, including a study of his relationship with Soviet film directors. Ray also gifted to *Ekkhon* some rare letters and photos from his family collection. In short, the journal provides much invaluable source material for the study of drama and films in general and of Ray in particular, and even of the illustrious Ray family. Indirectly too *Ekkhon* has contributed to the development of drama and cinema. The publication of the autobiography by Binodini has already been mentioned. This was to inspire a very popular play which was staged with lot of success in a Kolkata theater, quite a few "jatras" (folk plays) and some films as well—dealing with various dimensions of Binodini's life, including her encounter with Sri Ramakrishna.

The pictorial element in little magazines brings us to *Sandesh*, one of the most popular and prestigious of its kind. It has been edited by four generations of the Ray family, the present editor being Ray's son. The journal presented a wonderful combination of story or poem and illustration, through the genius of Sukumar Ray and Satyajit Ray. *Sandesh* also distinguished itself by publishing simultaneously write-ups by eminent littérateurs and those of children. *Sandesh* made immense contribution to the development of children's literature in Bengali and it was instrumental in germinating the "writing culture" in the younger generations.

There have been film magazines, such as *Utarath*, which were extremely popular but not quite perhaps in the conventional little magazine category. Film-centered little magazines would include *Chitrabhan*, *Chitrabikshan*, and perhaps most important of all, *Chalachitra*. Kamalkumar Majumdar, the offbeat, somewhat eccentric, but vastly talented writer, edited the last. He could claim the distinction of being the editor at different periods of four quite distinct types of little magazines: “Ushnish” (Turban) of a “generalist” kind, “Chalachitra,” devoted to cinema, “Tadanta” (Investigation) which was full of crime and detective stories, and “Anka Bhabna” (Thoughts about Mathematics). The last one would bring us to a particular genre, the science-based or scientific little magazine.<sup>2</sup> Though not a professional or trained mathematician, Kamalkumar had a great interest in and, we might say, knack for this subject. By translating important French mathematical works from the original, he supplied important information and inputs to the Mathematics students of contemporary Bengal. It was his aim to build up a team combining academic scholars and interested amateurs. Well-known poets of the day were induced to prepare mathematical articles, at least as translations.

There are other examples of scientific technical little magazines, though perhaps not as many as could be desired. *Manab Mon* (The Human Mind) appears front ranking in this category. First started by Dr Dhirendranath Gangopadhyay, the leading alienist in Bengal, a pioneer in the field of mental illness and a disciple of Pavlov, *Manab Mon* has done yeoman service in the field of psychology and psychiatry. One of its important contributions is the creation in Bengali of the appropriate scientific jargons. It also occasionally discusses other subjects, related to rationalism and free thought. *Bigyan O Bigyan Karmi* (Science and Scientific Workers) is edited by a group of top-notch young scientists in various fields, who also possess a flair for the Bengali language. As the name suggests, the goal of this little magazine is both to set forth the problems of scientific workers and to expound certain issues of science, in a simple, attractive language, accessible to laymen.

The scientific little magazines point to another aspect of middle-class Bengali culture. There is interest in science as well as art, music, and literature, though of course not all of them are trained or professional scientists. Nor is this a new development. The barrier between the “two cultures” the scientific and the humanistic—which C.P. Snow had stressed in the 1960s and which had caused so much controversy—does not always exist. Snow himself, a noted physicist and well-known fiction writer, had his feet in both camps. Goethe, one of the greatest of literary figures, also considered himself an amateur scientist—the gap

between amateur and professional being far less in his day than now. While Tagore made no such claim, he was deeply interested in science and wrote a book, popularizing certain scientific aspects for laymen. Jagadish Chandra Bose, arguably the greatest Bengali scientist to date, was also a master of Bengali prose; Rajsekhar Basu (pseudonym: Parasuram), the writer of unparalleled comic and satirical tales was likewise a scholar in chemistry and the director of a chemical enterprise. It is possible that the scientific little magazines follow this tradition, consciously or otherwise.

Political little magazines form another important part of this journalistic and literary world. If culture has been one passion of the middle-class Bengalis from the 19th century onward, politics has been another. Naturally, the two have fused, to some extent, and both are reflected in little magazines. The history of political journalism in Bengal can be and has been the subject of more than one study. In the 19th century, the *Hindu Patriot* edited by Harish Mukherjee took up the cudgel against the notorious indigo planters. *Grambarta Prabeshika* (News from Village) protested against oppression by the zamindars. In the 1920s, the maverick poet Nazrul edited several leftist magazines, and so did some revolutionary nationalist parties of the "Agni Jug" (Age of Fire). A journal such as *Jayasree* combined the revolutionary nationalist trend with feminism. *Shikha* or *Sangat* represented progressive elements of the minority community.

One cannot claim that the little magazines were always embedded in politics in equal vigor at different points of time but the fact remains that many of them have in most cases tried to address the contemporary issues. One can in this context cite the Food movement of the 1960s, the Naxal movement, the Emergency years, the Babri Mosque demolition, and even the politics of natural (or manmade) calamities. Today, there are little magazines that combine culture and politics in varying degrees and ways with the changing forms and issues in politics. *Aneek* and *Anushtup* are perhaps foremost in this field. In general the little magazines have slowly but steadily become aware of the gender issues. While poems and short stories are increasingly addressing the gender issues, there are instances of little magazines dealing with thematic issues having special issues on gender and women's issues. Thus, for instance, an issue of *Ekak Matra*, a front-ranking little magazine, would devote an entire issue on "Nari O Naribad" (Woman and Feminism) with contributions from both sides of Bengal. Some little magazines follow the path of *Jayasree* linking feminism with some form of radical politics: *Anya Nari* (The other women), *Manabi* (Woman), *Protibidhan* (Rectification), and *Eksathe* (Together). These magazines published either by women's wings

of political parties or by independent feminist groups, are small with limited circulation but quite active. Their direct experience and day-to-day struggles are reflected in the little magazines, with which they are associated. The political little magazines follow the tradition of "Aram" or "Swadhinata."

*Manabi* (Woman), *Anya Nari* (Another Woman), *Ahalya* (the name of a mythical figure in the Ramayana, turned to a stone by her husband's curse and returned to human shape by the grace of Rama) and *Protibidhan* (Rectification) were and are perhaps the most noted feminist magazines in Bengal (as distinguished from women's magazines, to be discussed separately). *Protibidhan* was perhaps the oldest, having started in 1985–86.

All four magazines were affiliated either to some political party or small, independent, left feminist groups. These groups were active among women of the working classes in and around Calcutta. Their problems, daily lives, and struggles were reflected in these magazines. For example, *Protibidhan* and *Ahalya* were in the forefront of the struggle to open the closed-down Kanoria Jute mill in 1994–95. *Manabi* stressed the role of women in the fight against land acquisition. A booklet was printed on the theme. In short, the feminine problem was treated in the social context.

The history and theory of international feminism was also studied in these pages. For example, *Ahalya* published an article on the feminist book by August Bebel, the 19th century leader of German Socialist Democracy. *Anya Nari* published an article on Mary Wollstonecraft the pioneer of modern feminism and her critique of some well-known figures of her own time.

*Protibidhan*, perhaps alone among these magazines, reserved a certain space for literary ventures, usually short stories with feminist themes. In one story a woman college professor feels that she is taken for granted by her husband and mother-in-law and saddled with all the household work over and above her job. She stages a symbolic protest, refusing to serve tea to a visitor. After all her husband might just do it as well. A second story about a married young woman who has been killed by her in-laws (it is based on an actual incident and, indeed, such incidents are common enough) makes the father of the murdered woman share the blame. After all, he had done nothing to help his daughter, though he knew of her plight. This again is a typical Indian or one might say South Asian attitude. A family frequently washes its hands of a married daughter and leaves her to her fate.

A third story written by a woman writer who was also a noted classical musician is set in the family of classical singer. According to the

customs of the “ustaad” families, women are not allowed to learn music, or, at least, to perform in public. The feminine problems of a particular segment of South Asian society have been focused. Yet another story deals with death due to negligence in a sterilization coup for women, again, not an infrequent incident.

The magazines maintain a balance between theory and practical links with the ongoing women’s movements, particularly those involving women of the laboring classes. They were connected with active politics, without being directly involved with any party, except possibly *Protibidhan*. Such magazines reflect an important aspect of the social life of Bengal for the last three decades or so. More than that, perhaps they influenced and molded, to a certain extent, some part of the Leftist/feminist movement. As such, the importance of these magazines cannot be undermined.

## Location and Geographical Spread

In a sense, of course, Kolkata is the cultural center of West Bengal as it is the political capital of the state. The heart of culture in the great city originally lay in the north—College Street, with its educational institutions and book shops was and is obviously the heart of Calcutta or Bengal’s culture significantly, we have seen the “little little magazine” named *Coffee House* and a prestigious journal, named *College Street*. However, in recent years, the South-center of the city can also boast of important cultural hubs: the Nandan, where many people roam in the evening, in search of cultural entertainment, the Academy of Fine Arts, Rabindra Sadan, and so on. These places now are very much within the orbit of little magazines. On special occasions, the magazines hire halls in the Nandan for conferences, functions, or book launching. There is an annual little magazine fair on the terraces of Nandan, in front of the Bangla Academy. The Academy, as we have seen, awards an annual prize for the best little magazine of the year.

However, little magazines or their likes are by no means confined to Kolkata. There has certainly been a kind of decentralization and “trickle down” at the popular cultural level when it comes to the little magazines. Almost all the districts can boast of little magazines. To give only a few examples among a few hundred: *Bardhaman Sruti* of Bardhaman, *Mayurakshi* of Birbhum, *Udar Akash* (The generous sky), and *Murshidabad Bikkhan* in Murshidabad, *Sanket* (sign) in Hooghly’s Chandernagar, the old center of French culture. These magazines combine the local and the global in the sense that without being parochial, they stress the

peculiarities and distinction of the surrounding culture in which they are rooted. For example, *Samakaleen Jiyankathi* is published in the Sundarban area and its special Sunderban issue provided enough material on local conditions to help research scholars. Indeed, serious, painstaking research, combined with imagination, an aesthetic sense, concept of style might be considered hallmarks of the best little magazines, in the center or periphery. *Bartika*, edited by the famous writer, Mahasweta Debi, encourages not only readers but also writers from the “subaltern” classes. In the fast moving Information Age and changing India the little magazines are also defying the conventional boundaries of geography and are becoming part of the World Wide Web. One can cite the instances of [boipara.com](http://boipara.com) and [srishtisandhan.com](http://srishtisandhan.com), but there are an increasing number of such cites.

## Running and Financing

Who edits little magazines? The answer is anybody and everybody, from high school boys and girls to top ranking writers, artists, or professionals. Some, like Buddhadeb Bose and Sunil Gangopadhyay, started as editors when they were scarcely out of college, and continued after becoming senior and famous writers. Sometimes, little magazines are run by groups, sometimes it is a one-man show. Many people, whose names are not directly mentioned, appear involved with such magazines, behind the scene. We have seen, for example, the close ties of Satyajit Ray with *Ekkhon*. On rare occasions, magazines are family affairs. We may recall in this context, the various magazines edited by the Tagores or *Sandesh* of the Ray family. *Chaturkone* (The quadrilateral) another prestigious and popular journal, was continued after the death of the founder by his family. Of *Prabasi*, one of the best and most famous magazines of an earlier era (even though not exactly a little magazine in the modern sense), a critic has remarked that it was run on the line of a cottage industry, at least in the initial period. The editor, Ramananda Chatterjee, and his wife and children all lent a hand. Incidentally, the two daughters of Ramananda, Sita Debi and Shanta Debi, were popular writers in their own right. A group of literary or politically minded friends starting a little magazines, then some breaking away and starting magazines on their own, is also not an uncommon phenomenon.

What of the financial aspect of the little magazines? According to certain versions of Hindu myths, Laxmi, the goddess of wealth and Saraswati, the goddess of learning, are sisters and rivals. The other frowns on the favorites of one. Yet, the union of the two goddesses is essential

for most literary and intellectual enterprises, and certainly so as far as little magazines are concerned.

Ramananda had made the following appeal to his relatively well-off countrymen:

If it is necessary, temporarily, to spend a bit of money in excess of income in order to run an ideal magazine, and then means should be devised to find this money. Just as educational institutions are necessary for the education of the people, so are weekly and monthly magazines etc. Just as the wealthy give donations to schools and colleges, they should give money for funding good magazines.../do not think an editor's task less important and less sacred than that of a school teacher or college professor...Endowments are necessary for the improvement of schools and colleges. Just as, in earlier times, land was donated to trusts held for gods or brahmins, in order to defray the expenses of chatuspathis and temples. In our time, similar property is necessary to provide for the temples of learning. In my opinion, such property is also necessary, in order to maintain the excellence and honour of literary magazines. (Ghosh 150)

We do not know whether this appeal elicited a response. Judging by results, it could not have been enormous. It was through his own unaided efforts and that of his family that Ramananda succeeded in putting the magazines that he ran—*Pradip*, *Prabasi*, and the *English Modern Review*—on their feet. As the other side of the coin, Ramananda insisted that contributors should be paid. He drew a comparison with the English standard. In England, well-known writers, writing in well-known magazines, were paid about the equivalent of ₹ 15 for 500 words. Ramananda calculates in the following fashion:

While in England, a student needs ₹ 150/-  
In Calcutta, he can manage with ₹ 20/-.  
So paying writers here 2 rupees for 500  
words will not be unfair. (Ghosh 156)

The bounty of Ramananda toward writers was not always appreciated. Some even accused him of “buying” Rabindranath, a charge that the poet strongly denied. Other contemporary magazines, such as *Bichitra* and *Bharati* likewise paid their contributors. The former journal illustrates the interdependence between the goddesses of wealth and learning. The editor, Upendranath Gangapadhyay, was a near relative and close friend of Saratchandra and himself a writer of no mean merit or reputation. But Upendranath, in enabling *Bichitra* to scale new heights, was to a large extent dependent on the backing of another close relative, who happened to be wealthy. With the death of this relative, Upendranath was

forced to close *Bichitra*, though not his own editorial career. Some young editor-poets, such as Buddhadeb in his fledgling days, while financing their magazines through scholarships and tuition fees, managed to hand over at least token honorariums to contributors.

What of little magazines today? They certainly do not profit very much directly from the bounty of the rich. The appeal of Ramananda remains largely unanswered in our time, as in his. However, little magazines do receive and are largely dependent on advertisements from various small or medium companies. (The real giants scorn such humble pastures.) We may refer to an illuminating fictional example, from a Bangladeshi novel, *Dushapner Ditiya Prahar* (The second hour of the nightmare). (Little magazines in the two Bengals often face similar problems.) A young woman, a university student comes to the office of a CEO, seeking advertisements for a literary journal. The gentleman in question is not impressed. The reprint of Picasso's famous "Guernica" on the cover of the journal strikes him as childish scribbling. A long article on contemporary Latin American literature makes him comment inwardly that some madman must have wasted time writing it and another madman would read it. The writer of the novel, Muhammad Jafar Iqbal, lays an ironic finger on the problem of Philistines holding money strings.

Some little magazines proudly claim that they do not need advertisements. Others confine themselves to accepting or seeking advertisements from publishing companies and book shops, mainly or exclusively, thus confining themselves to the cultural world. Little magazines which appear with a certain level of regularity receive advertisement from the state government or institution of the public sector. Sometimes little magazines have paid for spaces, with a sign to remark, "from a well-wisher." Perhaps these are examples of generosity, indicating friends in high places.

Financially, as in other ways, little magazines are far from uniform. Many run on a shoestring budget, while a few are relatively comfortable. They get more than their fair share of advertisements, because of greater prestige or possibly better networks. A few, very few editors might be what the Victorians used to call gentlemen of independent means. Most little magazines are run from the homes of the editors, though a few can claim separate offices.

The controversy as regards the remuneration of contributors still continues. Some argue that since everybody else connected with the little magazines—technicians, paper sellers, and so on—are paid, why should the writers be left out? Or perhaps, for them, the satisfaction of seeing their works in print is enough. In fact, very few little magazines can afford to pay their contributors, and even token honorariums are a rare exception.

Are little magazines *little* through choice or necessity? This is a question difficult to answer. Many little magazines take pride in their rare and exclusive nature, their Miltonic quest of finding “few but fit” audience. On the other hand, it is doubtful if most magazines would be averse to widening their readership, if this could be done without sacrificing their quality. Political magazines, in particular, would like their message to be widespread. Perhaps most magazines are perched on a delicate balance between enforced and voluntary limitations of size.

## Little Magazines: Impact and Identity

It is important to note here that when it comes to the complex but important question of the impact of little magazines on popular consciousness there is a long and sustained debate on its supposedly changing status. The debate—which does not always come in black and white, and often remains limited to intense, regular but informal discussions in various meets and gatherings of the intellectuals and little magazine activists themselves—mainly concerns the role of the little magazines of the contemporary times in contributing to the popular political culture of the Bengalis. Interestingly, the end of the debate is not in sight. It is because there is a strong band of little magazine supporters and sympathizers who argue that the irreverent and avant-garde tradition of the little magazines is being sustained with vigor even if the form and modes of the anti-establishment stance have altered with the passage of time. On the other hand, there are critics, many of whom had strong associations with little magazines, would claim that there has been an evident decline in the radical flavor and fervor of the little magazines, and that with the passage of time and especially with the advent of globalization and the weakening of “alternatives” of various kinds the little magazine movement is a pale shadow of its former self. The latter group also point out that many little magazines have been co-opted by the political establishment and no less important, have been consciously or not so consciously catering to the “spurious tastes” facilitated by the barrage of infotainment.

Interestingly enough and perhaps predictably so, for both sides the frequent reference point remains the “turbulent journey” of the little magazine movement in the 1970s. The decade, as noted earlier, has been a “decade of turbulence” but at the same time it was a “decade of liberation” with all sorts of anomalies—from economic crisis like the fall of US dollar to oil crisis to political upheaval like the Vietnam War taking place.

It is this scenario which would once induce Sunil Gangopadhyay to write in *Krittibas* that some *last poems* of the world “are being written fast.” It is in this time of uncertainty and restlessness that Bose disbanded *Kabita* with its 100th issue in the 25th year of its publication. While Bose declared that the magazine has served its purpose of resisting the “humiliation of poetry” the younger band of little magazine activists called for “mathe nama” (to come down to the field)—the “field” signifying activism—from what they described as the ivory tower of pure literary activities. Thus the 1970s for those who still have much faith in the little magazine movement and for those who have grown skeptical over time remains inescapable, albeit for cross purposes. The fact, however, remains that notwithstanding the challenges of various kinds in contemporary times and the pressure of “mainstreaming” that they entail the little magazines are still alive and kicking reasonably well though there is always scope for adding greater zest and power to the little magazine movement.

What is it then that binds little magazines together and provides the so-called common factor? The “littleness,” as we have seen repeatedly, is not uniform whether in size, market share, or the amount in the kitty. Perhaps the distinct nature of little magazines, barring exceptions, lies in this: the selfless devotion to culture (this includes many forms of culture, as has been stressed in this paper, not excluding popular science). The editors of the little magazines spend a good deal of time, energy, and, in many cases, money (when the cost of publishing is not covered by advertisements) in order to develop and propagate culture. If nothing else, they try to bring out one, two, three issues, on the occasions of the Durga Puja, Book Fair, the Bengali New Year, and/or the birthday of Tagore. All this is simply labor of love, since those running the little magazines can hope for little monetary gain or wide recognition, at least, at personal level. Even if the editors are well-known writers, the little magazines do little to increase their fame. Rather, the editing consumes time and energy, which might otherwise be devoted to more profitable work.

The little magazines, then, reflect a positive facet of the supposedly passionate Bengali subnational character, which has survived among so many faults and failures. It goes against the prevailing ethos of liberalization and globalization, which measure and judge everything in terms of the market and money. Little magazines, being Bengali to the core, are also cosmopolitan. They open out to the world, combine the global and the local, in terms alien to the neoconservative globalizers.

## Women's magazines as a reflection of changing Bengali/Indian culture

*The Ladies' Mercury* (1693) published in London was seminal to the entire corpus of women's magazines despite having lasted for only four issues. Quick to follow were periodicals like *Female Tatler* and *The Female Spectator* which were offshoots of the Addison–Steele journalistic ventures. The primary and perhaps ubiquitous area of focus in all such journals whether global and/or local was the “agony-aunt” approach to relationships, specifically connubial. As Adburgham puts it, “It promised to respond to all the most nice and curious Questions concerning Love, Marriage, Behaviour, Dress and Humour of the Female Sex, whether Virgins Wives or Widows” (Keeble 13).

Much later, during the 1950s onward, women's magazines gained popularity in the USA—perhaps an outcome of the nonavailability of adequate options in terms of other means of communication apart from technical ones like the telephone and the radio. At one time, these magazines had a cumulative readership range of two to eight million. According to Jerome L. Rodnitzky, “Women's magazines promoted a new romanticism in more diverse ways. Some traditional women's magazines like *McCall's* and the *Ladies' Home Journal* made an effort to accommodate the new consciousness that the women's liberation produced in younger housewives and working women” (159).

Whether it is women's magazines or whether it is a regular magazine suddenly deciding to pay a special tribute to the Indian woman, the bottom line is the same—getting a lot of advertisements because women are the best targets of all advertisements in any capitalist, consumer-centric country. From motor cars to baby food, from men's shaving creams to washing machines to mixer-grinders, the major buying decisions in an urban household is made by the woman of the house. The entire mass media, including the commercial media of advertising and marketing, go all out to exploit consumerism in women. Such exploitation is based on the twin targets of maximum profit and the perpetuation of male dominance. In other words, women are fed with the kind of information the male-dominated society *wants* them to have—the latest fashions, hairstyles, cosmetics, domestic appliances, and household goods; cleaning tips, cookery recipes from exotic lands, health needs, dietary details, nutritional information, and behavioral problems are all supposedly a woman's domain; never mind that it is all masterminded by the man in charge of the advertising agency! Few women run advertisement agencies here and when they do, they simply tail the strategies of their male counterparts.

The editorial and ideological confusion reflected in all the women's magazines right from *Eve's Weekly* and *Flair* in the 1950s and 1960s to *Femina* and family in the 1990s, is a western import. None of them really have an ideology to begin with. Second, they are too influenced by women's magazines in the West. As everyone knows, everything western may not always fit the Indian psyche. Elaine Withington of the University of Michigan in her unpublished paper, "The Women's Magazines and the Business Woman, 1889–1919," reveals an interesting volte-face executed by Edward Bok, editor of *Ladies' Home Journal*. In 1900, the magazine warned women that they could not stand the physical strain of working in a fast-paced business office. But by 1916, the same journal compared the same female secretary with the heavenly body who "radiated the office with sunshine and sympathetic interest." Margery Davies in her article "Woman's Place is at the Typewriter—The Feminization of the Clerical Labour Force," writes:

It has not taken very long for the ideology to shift and for people to accept the presence of women in offices. Bok had argued in 1900 that women, by virtue of their "nature" were unsuited to the office. But only a few years later, the LHJ (*Ladies Home Journal*) came close to arguing that the "natural" temperament of women made them good stenographers. And by 1935, *Fortune* had concocted a full-fledged historical justification for the assertion that *woman's place was at the typewriter*. (Chatterji)

However, there seems to have been a second volte-face in 1944 when it clearly declared "You Can't Have a Career and Be a Good Wife" followed by "When Your Soldier Comes Home" (October, 1945), "Are American Moms a Menace" (November, 1945), "Are You Too Educated to Be a Mother" (June, 1946), "Making Marriage Work" (June, 1946), and "Occupation: Housewife" (March, 1949) (Walker x–xi)—signifiers which condone the existence of women outside the domestic arena and resulting in a coercive transformation of their social time and space into a region of otherness. Betty Friedan argues that they are conditioned to believe that housework, children, husbands, and their bodies and beauty should be fundamental to her existence and identity. She cynically labeled them as the "happy housewife heroine" (33) which happened to consume the minds of most American women of the 1950s. It was the encroachment on this private space by the family that dissatisfied women, but they were unable to trace the cause and gradually "the problem that has no name" (15) had the whole womankind as its victim. "Occupation: housewife" (18) which was once infatuating gradually became the premise for powerlessness and she realized the importance of a job/career and "yearned for a little money of (her) own" (45).

“The New Woman heroines were the ideals of yesterday’s housewives; they reflected the dreams, mirrored the yearning for identity and the sense of possibility that existed for women then” (40) and the erstwhile connotations of the images of an angel and the bitch/witch woman were altered and two neat distinctions were made, “the feminine woman whose goodness includes the desires of the flesh, and the career woman, whose evil includes every desire of the separate self” (46). The search for attaining *selfhood* was sacrilegious to her relationships with potential threats like losing the love of the husband and the child and the desire for independence and a career was considered to be incestuous by the family.

In a content analysis-centered research in the US, the covers of 21 popular women’s and men’s magazines were examined for gendered messages related to bodily appearance. Magazine covers were divided according to gender of readers and each cover was reviewed using a checklist designed to analyse visual images and text as well as the placement of each on the covers. Analyses showed that 78 percent of the covers of the women’s magazines contained a message regarding bodily appearance, whereas none of the covers of the men’s magazines did so. Twenty-five percent of the women’s magazine covers contained conflicting messages regarding weight loss and dietary habits. In addition, the positioning of weight-related messages on the covers often implied that losing weight might lead to a better life. “Men’s magazines focus on providing entertainment and expanding knowledge, hobbies, and activities; women’s magazines continue to focus on improving one’s life by changing one’s appearance” writes Amy R. Malkin in *Women and Weight: Gendered Messages on Magazine Covers* (Chatterji).

Most English language women’s magazines in India today, in some form or another, follow, subtly or openly, examples set by magazines like *Seventeen*, *Glamour*, *Mademoiselle*, etc., all of which offer endless glossy layouts and editorial content on fashion, makeup, dating strategies, marriage counseling, counseling for parents, good housekeeping, all generously punctuated with pages and pages of the glossiest of advertisements one could imagine. In fact, at times, the advertising copy makes for more interesting reading than the editorial content. We do not have an Indian counterpart of the US magazine *Working Woman*. This magazine, though not committed to any feminist ideology, emphasizes women’s career concerns and the management of a busy life. This covers a substantial commitment to work as well as to friends, fashion, and entertainment. Advice columns on legal and financial matters, health, and diet are other regular features. The magazine focuses on individual effort rather than on social change. This is a very good thing really

because without ruffling too many feathers, it logically follows that hundreds of individual efforts will naturally augur social change! This is the prize formula that got the magazine a readership of 200,000 before the end of its second year.

When financial support is in the hands of businessmen, industrialists, corporate houses, and multinationals, the editorial content of these magazines are obviously determined and defined by a more convoluted but equally purposeful process. The purpose of words and pictures in the commercial media, from the sponsors' point of view, is to give value to the advertising space they surround. They do this by attracting an audience that will then be exposed to the commercial message. Thus, whatever attracts readers is valuable in commercial terms, and its cultural, social, and intellectual value for the readers is of no concern to the sponsors. The plethora of international honors at beauty contests notwithstanding, the bottom line of Indian women's magazines remains unchanged—the total lack of options for women at any given point of time. Yesterday, they offered good motherhood and ideal wifehood. The day before, it was pregnancy and child care. Today, it is beauty of the body and face, everlasting youth, and diamonds.

However, there has been a discernable shift in the foci of these magazines, from its heydays of the 1950s to the present. The recent trend is toward portraying the “New Woman” and her lifestyle which was introduced by its namesake and as pointed out by *The Times* in May 1988. The cover girl was a charming young woman just like its counterparts—the differences being in her attire—a business suit instead of a body-defining outfit and a credit card to replace the chic clutch bag in her hand. The cover line was equally significant, “Does she want to gain £££££s?” (Gough-Yates 1). This initiative may be an outcome of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's premise in *Women and Economics* where she inspires women to be in a partnership with her husband in the perfect sense of the term. According to her marriage becomes a business and “she is in no sense a business partner, unless she contributes capital or experience or labor, as a man would in a like relation” (12). She is also of the opinion that, “Economic independence for women necessarily involves a change in the home and family relation . . . it does not involve a change in the marriage relation except in withdrawing the element of economic dependence nor in the relation of mother to child save to improve it” (210).

Similarly, women's magazines of the late 20th century onward considered a woman's potential and individuality to be key factors in the making of a dream-marriage instead of her traits as a personal femme fatale. Consequently, tips to keep herself evergreen were replaced by survival strategies to cope with her career and home and balance the

scales to the best of her ability. The readership of young, professional, and middle-class women was *the* target and as noted by Anne M. Cronin, “young is viewed by media industries as an increasingly ‘elastic’ category and many women’ magazines (for example *Red* and *Eve*) now seek core readerships of women in their mid-thirties” (Gough-Yates 4). But this is considered to be an editorial gimmick—by way of a mix and match, there is an attempt toward broadening the scope of the target readership. Thus, it is considered to be more of a marketing tool rather than propaganda for the awakening of women.

In India, the trend started much later, perhaps with the launch of *Women’s Era* in 1973 by Delhi Press Publishers which currently reaches almost 2.4 million readers every fortnight and a substantial readership is international with almost 150,000 subscribers from the US, Middle East, Europe, and South Asia (<http://www.womansera.com/shop/we.aspx>). It would be interesting to note that this magazine’s thrust area is the family and it envisions a happy home for every Indian woman. In keeping with this paradigm, they have diversified into publishing in regional languages to reach the local and/or rural corners and magazines like *Grihshobha* (The Good Home) are circulated in eight languages. Other than articles on familial issues and relationships it carries short stories based on the art of living that women should ideally adhere to. Tasty kitchen tips along with movies and fashion also rule the pages. Occasionally travel destinations, politics, and money matters also find space in some issues. In this purview, is one to believe that magazines which are meant for women are actually the key signifiers of gendered roles?

The launch of *Meri Saheli* (My Friend) in 1987 which was edited by the actor-danseuse Hema Malini gave an impetus to this subgenre in the print media. A product of Pioneer Book Company (1948), this Hindi monthly also relied on regional/local readership and sought to be their voice and a true friend. Till date it claims to be the largest selling regional women’s magazine in India. The astronomical leap in the success rate of *Meri Saheli* provided a momentum to the publishers to launch an English monthly women’s magazine called *New Woman* in 1996, once again dealing with issues like marriage, beauty, fashion, high life, and it seems to be a pedagogue in the skill of reinventing oneself. All this is done by means of questions, debates, and open-forum discussions pertaining to women and their problems. Though fashion and beauty are an innate part of these magazines, other sections like “Health File,” “Jobsmart,” “No Kidding,” and “Busybody” suggest the transition that is discernable in those belonging to the last decade of the 20th century. Women’s health is becoming a matter of serious concern in upper-middle-class segments and they are more aware and motivated to keep

fit and healthy. Also, Jobsmart and Busybody are indicators of the working woman, usually in the corporate sector and provide strategies to cope and move on despite hurdles which are specific to the XX chromosomes!

With a gradual but systematic attempt toward breaking the glass ceiling and a gendered revolution in the boardroom, such columns prove to be pertinent to aspirants of the *Women at the Top* surveys. In a recent online edition of the *Financial Times*, “The Top 50 Women in World Business” for 2010 (<<http://womenatthetop.ft.com/articles/women-top/396bb974-f182-11df-8609-00144feab49a>>) was published and the person to top the list was none other than Indra Nooyi of PepsiCo., who has successfully crossed several stumbling blocks and invested in marketing stakes like the \$ 20 million advertisement drive led by Facebook. A CEO with a mind and a heart, she is on a mission along with Michelle Obama to exonerate soda from schools as a measure to alleviate child obesity (<[http://money.cnn.com/galleries/2010/fortune/1004/gallery.fortune500\\_women\\_ceos.fortune/3.html](http://money.cnn.com/galleries/2010/fortune/1004/gallery.fortune500_women_ceos.fortune/3.html)>).

Chanda Kocchar of ICICI is a close 11, followed by Vinita Bali (Britannia Industries), Kiran Majumdar Shaw (Biocon), and Shikha Sharma (Axis Bank). Ms Naina Lal Kidwai (CEO, HSBC) has also been a prominent figure in the Banking and Finance industry and is “the first Indian woman to graduate from the Harvard Business School, the first woman to head a foreign bank in India and first Indian on the Nestle AG board and one of the few Indian non-executive directors of a global MNC” (<<http://trak.in/tags/business/2009/07/13/top-powerful-indian-women-ceos-have-arrived/>>)

This is inspiration enough for women’s magazines to think about their cover ladies, though media control and vested interests may restrict the focus on women achievers as the consumerist culture still prioritizes women in the role of homemakers who have been sensitized about the use of appropriate products for domestic consumption. The systematic use of docile female bodies even in women’s magazines exudes the indirect control of patriarchal and capitalist norms that direct choice and desire.

Moreover, the foray of these magazines into activities beyond defining fashionistas—by way of sponsoring beauty pageants such as the Femina Miss India and locally, Sananda Tilotama—may serve as viable options for diversification. This point may be under much speculation as they have successfully created a “neighbor’s envy, owner’s pride” situation by showcasing the Sushmita Sens (the first Indian to win the coveted Miss Universe title), Aishwarya Rais, Lara Duttas, Diana Haydens, Dia Mirzas, and Priyanka Chopras to the world. Beauty pageants, which may

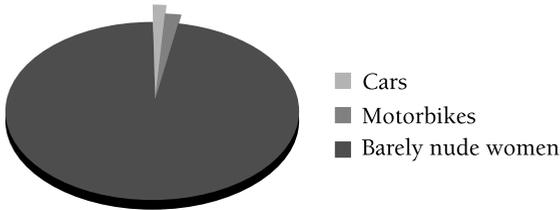
be regarded as key stakeholders in keeping the designer brand wagon rolling seem to be *the* inspiration to almost the entire populace of young women. *Femina*, a women's magazine published by Bennett, Coleman & Co. Ltd. has taken charge of the country's most sought after glam-crown(s). All the contestants who make it to the finals are handpicked through tough screening rounds and are *supposedly* the best when it comes to defining women and perhaps the winners are those who can boast of being blessed with that iota of luck which can make or mar. On following its telecast one can never fail to notice the meticulous efforts that are undertaken to groom these *personalities* as they embark on the travails of Journey Bollywood. The importance that is associated with makeup is alarming as there is a dire need to *look* good in the eyes of the beholder. Parallely, the advertisements that women's magazines carry are most obviously concerning things which appeal to women and a large share of it goes to cosmetic labels such as Chanel, Mac, Clinique, L'Oreal, and Chambor. And these are duly complimented by tips from "makeup masters" which indeed has a wide range—flirty, dreamy, tranquil, fresh, sporty, happy, sultry, mystery (*Femina* May 19, 2010—cover and content page); also techniques of applying makeup and hair styling to suit ones looks are well-mentored. In fact that is what the cover story was all about, despite having devoted pages to serious issues like fighting breast cancer, the kidnapping of newborns from hospitals and the plight of their mothers, the aftermath of choosing one's career to mothering, and the attempt of a woman to eradicate tuberculosis from the world and has been honored with a L'Oreal-UNESCO scholarship for her endeavor. Unfortunately, such success stories remain in the periphery and only *good-looking* women make it to the vanguard.

Men's magazines are fast catching up and have gained quite a reasonable platform. *Maxim*, *Penthouse*, *Esquire*, *Playboy*, *GQ* (Gentlemen's Quarterly), and *FHM* (For Him Magazine) to name a few are the toppers in the circuit, but it is indeed astonishing and to a certain extent confusing that their covers portray images of the most sensational women! Does that signal a drift toward sexual homogeneity or a harsher indictment on women who are just about important enough to be elements of desire and objects of the gaze? In fact *Maxim* has an entire section dedicated to "Girls." If the *attractive* covers are signifiers, then the message that is transmitted tends toward a negligible demarcation, if at all, among so-called men's magazines and pornographic ones. A survey shows the results in Figure 6.1.

The bottom line, very distressfully, becomes the marketability of sex. If women activists raise a hue and cry about the commoditization of the female body then there might be a reverse swing from the cultural watchdogs saying that women's magazines have led the way. Though alternative

**Figure 6.1 Is Truth Beautiful?**

Covers of Men's Magazines



Source: [http://www.google.co.in/images?rlz=1C1GPCK\\_enIN352IN353&rq=men's+magazines&rnum=1&rie=UTF-8&source=og&rsa=N&hl=en&tab=wi&biw=1010&bih=667](http://www.google.co.in/images?rlz=1C1GPCK_enIN352IN353&rq=men's+magazines&rnum=1&rie=UTF-8&source=og&rsa=N&hl=en&tab=wi&biw=1010&bih=667). Google. Web.

sexualities is very much out of the closet in the Global North in India compulsory heterosexuality appears to be normative as both women's and men's magazines are not sure about focusing on gay fashion and LGBT accessories.

Another category among women's magazines are international brands like *Elle*, *Vogue*, *Cosmopolitan*, and *Verve* which primarily cater to the elitist niche in India. Though they have separate editions in different countries focusing on preferences of the target readers, the basic component of all of them is similar—the excessive importance attached to brands and global trends in fashion and style. And if a name is considered to be an identity tag then nothing could be more significant in their cases. *Elle* is originally Latin, meaning “honorable” but had quite a different connotation in the French fashion circle. Founded by Pierre Lazareff and his wife H el ene Gordon in 1945, *Elle* denoted “she” and consequently the magazine was an exclusive women-centric glossy that promised readers that they could now read *all about her*. At present its network is spread across 60 countries with 39 international editions. A landmark feat of *Elle India* in terms of awareness campaign and commitment to human society is the ELLE Breast Cancer Campaign in collaboration with Ogaan Cancer Foundation that they are promoting with the help of jingles and some scintillating one-liners. The advertisement depicts a woman—stylish, young, and conscious of her looks—who scrutinizes herself in the mirror. But the ensuing powerful one-liners stating the following: “Check yourself for something different,” “Do a self-examination today,” “1 in 30 urban Indian women is at risk,” and “Join the fight against Breast Cancer” seem to be alerting her about the need to examine herself for a much graver cause. Her beauty lies in the radiance of her health, rather than in the charm of her looks (<[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ITuH8T1e8IY&feature=player\\_embedded#>](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ITuH8T1e8IY&feature=player_embedded#>)).

Moreover, in the new decade their representation of the woman scenario has been refurbished. They are showcasing the existential survival strategies of modern Indian women who are believers and practitioners of the cult of “shakti”—“the spirit of feminine strength,” who dare to dream, speak their mind, and follow their heart.

*Cosmopolitan* was a family magazine in its inception in 1886 which later became a literary journal and finally a renowned international women’s magazine from the early 1970s onward. Published by Hearst Magazines, *Cosmopolitan* has 58 international editions, is printed in 34 languages, and is distributed in more than 100 countries. It deals with sexual issues candidly and overtly and suggests to young ladies that men should only complement and not overrule their lives; also, that they are free to choose the way in which they would use their bodies which should not call for shame and scandal. This is perhaps not a very judicious signal that it sends out in this dystopic world where women are relegated to a position of a sex-object where she is revered for only one reason—her ability gratify the insatiable lust of men. Another essentialist style diva for women is *Vogue*—it is indeed all in the name—the bearer of the scepter in the arena of fashion magazines, the Oracle to all worshippers of luxury and high society culture and couture, a monthly magazine published in 17 countries by Condé Nast Publications.

*Verve* (1995) on the other hand claims itself as India’s premier women’s international magazine which is published and edited by Anuradha Mahindra. It has chosen subjects like fashion, business, books, and travel and often narrates the success stories of achievers in various fields. It tries to add vitality to the lives of women by broadening their outlook and providing a platform, through the print media, to foray into macro issues of life and living. However, most of the recent issues suggest that it is more akin to matters pertaining to showbiz as Sushmita Sen, Aishwarya Rai, Kajol, Sonali Kulkarni, Mehr Jesia, Komal Sidhu, Karisma Kapoor, Lara Dutta, Simi Garewal, Sonali Bendre, Ektaa Kapur, Yana Gupta, Meghna Reddy, Rani Mukherji, Madhuri Dixit, Bipasha Basu, Dia Mirza, Katrina Kaif, Deepika Padukone, Ritu Beri, Chitrangada Singh along with others have featured on the cover page (<<http://www.verveonline.com/others/gallery.shtml>>). But interestingly in their 50th volume, they had chosen Barkha Dutt as the cover icon and focused on India’s 50 Most Influential Women. They have also not forgotten the Ambani daughters-in-law, Nita (vol. 29) and Tina (vol. 14) and Avanti and Yash Birla (vol. 31). Liz Hurley too graced one of the covers (vol. 39). They do make an attempt to incorporate women from various spheres other than Bollywood though the latter seems to be their key area of operation.

Besides these global stalwarts, regional women's journals are also popular. An example of the same is *Miloon Saryajani* (Women Together) a Marathi feminist journal founded and edited by Vidya Bal since 1989 which aimed at providing a forum for women's issues which are usually peripheral in mainstream journalism. It would be interesting to note that this is a unique enterprise as an activist-journal which undertakes to organize several programs for and by women. One such is the "Sakhi-Mandal" comprising of a group of women who get together to share problems and offer solutions. In this way they are followers of the cult of "sisterhood is powerful" and gradually construct an extended family. In view of changing the perspective of prospective brides and grooms on marriage, a "Sath-Sath" (together) is planned whereby the relationship is built on mutual trust and respect and is truly ideal and essentially egalitarian—it is once again a marriage bureau with a difference. Also, there is the Nari Samanta Manch which is associated with *Miloon Saryajani* and is a platform which tries to offer succor to the marginalized sections of society. Though the name may suggest that it is an all-women's realm, the editor asserts that they encourage male participation and believe in healthy and peaceful coexistence of the genders. Though it is not a literary magazine, many Marathi authors have contributed regularly, and fiction, which is a reflection of reality, has often contributed invaluable experiences, leaving an indelible impression on the readers' mind.

## II

The enigma that is Michael Jackson  
 If you are young, rich, beautiful, enjoy a holiday in Egypt.  
 All that you ever wanted to know about money.  
 "Kama Sutra" is the top.

These are some of the headlines (the phrasing has been slightly altered) which adorned the Diwali issue, 2009 of *Femina*. This Bombay-based journal is arguably the most popular and widely circulated women's magazine in South Asia. What are the contents and attraction of such magazines? How have they changed over the decades? How far does such a changing pattern reflect the broader trends of Indian and/or Bengali society? This chapter will try to answer a few questions.

Modern popular fiction or popular magazines have been traditionally associated with middle-class women. In England, perhaps, to some extent in West Europe and North America the tie was historically strong and apparent. Circa the mid-18th century, due to the Industrial

Revolution and other factors, the commercialization of commodities made great advances. Many household goods of daily necessity, which had been earlier produced by women in their own homes, were now available in the market. Middle-class women enjoyed much more leisure than before. How were they to utilize it? The general consensus was that fiction reading was the cheapest, safest, most civilized way to do this. Women readers were the greatest patrons of popular fiction and provided the market for the magazines bringing out serialized novels. Something of an equivalent might be found in our country. In the 1920s and 1930s, a middle-class housewife would often read a few pages from Saratchandra or some such author before her midday siesta. Today, perhaps, the TV, VCR and the like have taken over this role.

Women were somewhat grudgingly accepted not only as readers but as writers of popular fiction in the West. In this way, they might spend their time harmlessly and also earn bit of pocket money. That women were often the chief bread winners of their families was a truth seldom acknowledged. Critics declared, rather condescendingly, that women might, indeed, succeed in this field. After all, the stuff of fiction, personal, and family relationships, and so on, was supposed to belong rightly to the feminine sphere. It was not like writing an epic or research in higher mathematics.

Women's magazines, though not perhaps a wholly new phenomenon, became really popular in Britain during the inter-war years. A historian of feminist studies has related (Glucksmann 239) this development in the literary-journalistic arena with the changing circumstances of the middle-class British housewife:

In Britain the inter-war period saw the first appearance of many new magazines for women. They did not go so far as their American counterparts in highlighting the psychological dimension of domestic labour but rather they cultivated the view of the middle-class housewife as a new kind of craft or professional worker, who ran her house scientifically and managed a host of domestic machinery. Whereas, a Victorian Lady may have administered a household staff of servants and viewed domestic labour beneath her, the inter-war housewife could be a specialist technician who put the new sources of power to her own use. They would enable her to engage in light and easy domestic tasks which did not tire her out or make her very dirty. "Good Housekeeping," "Woman and Home," "Wife and Home" and "Harpers Bazaar" were the new monthlies that appeared for the first time in the 1920s, aimed primarily at a middle-class audience, soon followed in the 1930s by the weeklies "Woman's Own," "Women's Illustrated" and "Woman" which were geared to the less well off ... All encouraged a return to femininity and stressed that aspiring to beauty was so longer incompatible, as in the past,

with doing your own domestic work. Then as now they gave beauty tips, budgeting hints, and recipes (often using ready-made mixes and tinned fruit or vegetables), had competition on “how to run your home without help” and reported time-and-motion studies that had been applied to the kitchen and “proved” that efficient organization could greatly reduce the time it was necessary to spend on each task.

These women’s magazines continued and flourished in the postwar period. Many of them were sold in India from the 1950s onward and proved quite popular. The young, middle-class woman of newly independent India seemed to be inspired by their British counterparts. What was, broadly speaking, the content of these magazines? There were things of supposedly feminine interest: recipes, knitting patterns, the latest fashion designs, hints on childcare, household management, interior decoration, and so on. These magazines, though not mainly literary, includes in most issues, fictional pieces: a short story, an occasional serial novel. Most of the short stories were popular romances of the Mills and Boon type, but sometimes there were touches of humor, irony, deeper penetration, a more sure emotional touch. Thrillers were understandably popular. One of the last novels of Agatha Christie appeared in a woman’s magazine.

Was there a particular type of romance which women prefer and which the women’s magazines or popular libraries provide? In 1984, Janice Radway published her classic study, *Reading the Romance*, based on a combination of textual study and readership research. She analysed the response of contemporary American women to mass produced romance novels. Her findings were as follows:

[T]he quality of a romance appears to depend on the development of the relation between the heroine and the hero, and their particular characters. The story should focus on a woman with whom the female reader can identify. The ideal storyline entails the slow development of a romance, with the heroine and hero only gradually becoming aware of their feelings and finally overcoming their mutual distrust. Explicit descriptions of sexuality are appreciated only within the confines of the romantic affair. The ultimate pleasure is to see how the hero’s masculine defence mechanisms crumble beneath the love of the heroine. The transformation of the reformed and indifferent male into a warm and loving human being signifies a victory of female values of care and nurture. (Dines and Humez)

Obviously, such books and magazines are far away from the feminist theories and assertions that were being churned out from the 1960s onward. However, nor were the women’s magazines merely the refuge of passive consumers and “homebodies.” Advertisements point to “achievers” as well.

Advertisements are seen as a reflection of the changing reality of women's social position and of the influence of the women's movement, presenting us with an image of the "new woman." (Zoonen 72)

She is independent, confident, and assertive, finding satisfaction in the world of work and recreation, seeking excitement, adventure, and fulfillment. She is a far cry from the consumer...finding her satisfaction within a rather small world and the centre of the world is her home. (Cagan in Zoonen 72)

Nor were the women's magazines totally oblivious to the outer world, though politics or sociology was not their strong point. However, political issues did enter the picture, directly or indirectly. Apart from the women's magazines mentioned above, a magazine of serious feminist research studies is *Manushi*. However, even the average women's magazines did not lack an element of seriousness. The most popular magazines of this type, obviously modeled, on "Woman and Home," "Women's Own" type of English magazines, were *Femina* and *Eve's Weekly*. Both were published from Bombay (now Mumbai), the financial capital of India, as well as the film and fashion capital. Indeed, the two magazines had a great deal to say of Bollywood and had something in common with *Filmfare* and *Stardust*. Certain features of *Femina* and *Eve's Weekly* might be noted briefly.

1. The targeted readership of these magazines was probably socio-economically at a higher level than its British counterpart. For in India, only the elite can read or, at least, are comfortable with, the English language.
2. Because of the English language, they enjoyed a pan-India, perhaps pan South Asian, readership. Though Bombay based, these magazines reflected the life style, problems, and dreams of upper-middle-class women, in many parts of the country.
3. Together with the usual staple of similar magazines, recipes, beauty tips, dress designs and the like, *Femina* and *Eve's Weekly* did discuss questions like feminine careers, legal rights of women, health problems, and the like. The latest copy of *Femina*, for example, carried letters about women who had stood up for their rights in difficult circumstances and also about those afflicted with breast cancer.
4. These magazines, while they portray men as seen by women, also sometimes carry pictures of the feminine situation through masculine eyes. *Eve's Weekly* used to carry a half serious column, "Madam, I am Adore."

5. Although the magazines stress many different kinds of feminine career, the greatest emphasis is on subjects connected with the business of performance. We are told in almost every issue, about women singers who have “made it” in Bollywood, the next likely female film star, and the like. Certain careers, like modeling, have gained respectability in the last two or three decades and this is reflected in the women’s magazines.
6. Fiction used to appear regularly in *Femina* and *Eve’s Weekly*. There were short stories, at least some of them of a fairly high standard, dealing with social and psychological problems and occasional serial novels. Sometimes there were stories set outside India, as those by a woman writer who had lived long in West Asia. For some reason not entirely clear, fiction has practically disappeared from these magazines. Is this a sign of the predominance of the electronic media over the written word?
7. The women’s magazines occasionally discussed social and even historical issues. For instance, the December issues of *Eve’s Weekly*, published a serial on Napoleon, though it was the erotic life, rather than the military or political adventures of the great man, which provided the material. These types of writing are hardly to be seen now.
8. The women’s magazines earlier, too, published regularly “Miss Lonelyhearts” type of columns, dealing with problems of love and matrimony, answering questions on these subjects by readers. However, recently, at least in *Femina*, these questions and answers often deal with explicitly sexual issues. It may be that Indian middle-class women today are more interested in or, at least, forthright about the question of sex.
9. Related to this, perhaps, is the question of single mothers, or motherhood sans marriage. Women who deliberately choose to be single mothers are certainly not yet very common in India. But judging by these magazines, they are not unknown either. In the Diwali issue of 2009 mentioned earlier, a letter by a reader poses a somewhat (in the South Asian context) strange question. A young woman has decided to break off relations with her boyfriend but first wants to have a child by him. She asks whether this is advisable and receives a negative reply from the columnist.
10. Perhaps naturally in this era of globalization and liberalization middle class, Indian women today are much more market savvy and money conscious. Two or three decades ago, even middle-class men, at least, outside certain, communities, were wary of what is known as “playing the market” or speculation. Their savings

were placed safely in the vaults of nationalized banks, the Post Office, Government bonds, and the like. Today, even middle-class women are interested in Stock Market tips and *Femina* often supplies these.

Thus, through the decades of post-Independence India, women's magazines, modeled on the English type yet autonomous, mirrors a trajectory of a section of upper-class women, whether career women or merely housewives.

In Bengal, since the 19th century, there has been a tradition of feminine magazines. *Bamabodhini Potrika* (A journal for pleasing women) was dedicated to the task of importing education and enjoyment to middle-class literate but still largely homebound women of relatively progressive families. In the 1930s, *Jayasree* combined radical nationalism with feminism. Today there are various magazines, *Ahalya*, *Protibidhan* (Rectification), *Anya Nari* (Another Woman), *Manabi* (Woman), *Eksathe* (Together), etc., attached either to small but active feminist groups or to the women's branches of political parties.

The history of women in language journalism in our country dates back to more than a century. Interestingly, most of their writing applies to our social ethos today as much as it then did. Krishnabhabini Das, one of the first women writers in Bengal, in her article entitled "Shikshita Narir Pratibader Uttar," (Response to a Protest from an Educated Woman) in *Sahitya*, (Das 474–78) wrote, "It is unjust to say that only men should cultivate that intelligence, that God has given both men and women. God could never have imparted such a great gift without a noble end in view."

Jnanadanandini Debi, in an article entitled "Stri Shiksha" (Women's Education) published in the prestigious *Bharati* in 1882 (Debi 1288) offered a manifesto arguing the cause for women's education. She argued for a desegregation of the sexes, going on to prove how education is both the cause and the effect of this process. In *Shekele Katha* (Tales of Bygone Days) Swarnakumari Debi praised the reforms introduced by her father in the areas within the domestic sphere marked out exclusively for women. Yet, she did not forget to add that this "women's world" did have its share of happiness and joy creating a space for nostalgia for a more "democratic" tomorrow. Others who demonstrated similar fluency with the language and courage of their convictions were—Sarala Debi, Hironmoyee Debi, Rassundari Debi, and so on.

One Aunt Kolli from Navsari in Gujarat wrote that *StreeBodh*—a Gujarati journal known for its focus on social reforms—that it was wrong in blaming women for marital strife and for the unhappiness of men.

She pointed out that men visit nautch girls and spend entire nights drinking and being entertained by these women not in response to their wives' behavior but due to their own inclinations for such enjoyment. The article was written way back in 1866. *Streebodh* (spelt *Streebodhe* in English) incidentally, was the first journal for women in India published in Gujarati continuously from January 1857 until sometime in the late 1950s. It was formed with the objective of offering suitable reading matter for Parsee and Hindu women who could read, indirectly making it clear from its inception that families going through the process of modernization defined its target audience. Sonal Shukla in her paper entitled "Cultivating Minds—19th Century Gujarati Women's Journals," (Shukla) states that with time, as its founder-editor Kabraji died and his daughter Shirin, followed by his daughter-in-law Putlibai, took up the editorship, *StreeBodh* changed its profile in terms of (i) appearance, (ii) language, and (iii) content. "It reflected changes that were taking place during the nationalist struggle and the new role assigned to middle-class women within it," writes Shukla.

Like the editorial stance of *StreeBodh* in its later years, the profile of the woman journalist in India has also changed. In the first week of April this year, Sonal Kellog, a woman reporter, and a male reporter from a Surat-based newspaper, were pounced upon by the police when they went into the walled city to interview women who had been attacked. Ms Kellog was hit with a stick and the man was thrashed. When they went to the Police Commissioner to complain, they were told he had no time for them. Ms Kellog was abused and hit by policemen in the course of a reporting assignment in the walled city area of Gomtipur on April 3. She was speaking to women who had themselves been beaten by the police. Before she could begin taking down their testimonies, policemen surrounded her and the male journalist with her. She was abused and hit by a policeman while her colleague was badly beaten and injured. Barkha Dutt of Star News covered the Kargil war, reporting directly from the front in the midst of shelling and firing with the mercury dipping down to minus centigrade (Chatterji).

## **Sananda: A Case Study**

At the same time, there are Bengali women's magazines of a popular kind, the counterparts of *Femina* or *Eve's Weekly*; *Manorama* is one such example. However, the most important popular woman's magazine in

Bengali is undoubtedly *Sananda*. As the name hints, it is part of the “Anandabazar” group, the biggest newspaper and publishing conglomerate in West Bengal.

*Sananda* started in 1986. The editor was the film actor and filmmaker Aparna Sen till 2004, but Shankar Lal Bhattacharjee did the day-to-day management. The aim was to appropriate the best of *Femina* and *Eve’s Weekly* together with some “alternative” Bengali-woman-friendly components. It was supposed to be a feminine edition of *Desh* another journal that was published by the same house. The noted fiction writer Santosh Kumar Ghosh was given the duty, in his last years, of conceptualizing the feminine magazine. He proposed a three-tier system: (i) Entirely feminine issues; (ii) Literary fare, irrespective of gender; (iii) Pure entertainment, music, cinema, theater with 25 percent space given to feminine things, shopping interior decoration, travel, housekeeping. Ghosh died in 1985, after having chosen the name *Sananda* for the feminine magazine. It was decided, with the consent of the proprietors that the magazine would have a gender-neutral version of editorship—“Shampadak” not “Shampadika.” It was also decided that *Sananda* would have no fiction as this might cause rivalry with other in-house publications like the widely circulated and hugely respected *Desh*, the Sunday supplement of *Anandabazar Patrika*, and their special numbers. However, after a few months, decision was taken to publish short fiction by writers who were outside the circuit of *Desh* and *Anandabazar Patrika*, thus avoiding the possibility of rivalry and distorted competition.

*Sananda* picked up fast in terms of circulation. The first issue sold up to 50,000 copies, then fell to 35,000, but again picked up when people found good write-ups by competent authors. Subjects were well-spread out, catering to the entire family. Circulation went up to 70,000–75,000, and settled comfortably at that point for a considerable period. Advertisements picked up consequently, surpassing all other publications of the house. There was no real competition, even though *Monorama*, another women’s magazine, was launched slightly later. It did not succeed, because *Sananda* included quality and variety of subjects, as well as quality in production. *Sananda* turned out to be the best-produced magazine in Bangla in terms of quality photos, lay outs, typographical experiments, and assembling scores of sections like shopping, books, music, interior décor, quizzing, fashion, travel, health, advice on legal and sexual issues for women, debates on important current issues, and interviews of people from different walks of life. A new kind of personalized editor’s page was started. Aparna Sen used the first person singular “I” and her photo was published with the editorial. There were Letters

to the Editor and a lot of lifestyle segments. This entire package was virtually unrivalled even in English publications such as *Femina* and *Savvy* (*Eve's Weekly* had ceased to exist in the early 1990s).

The magazine introduced elements from Bangladesh. There was a special issue on Jamdani saris of Dhaka. *Sananda* regularly published a people's column, Babu Bibi Sangbad, which actually published short features with photos of important celebrities and those emerging on the scene, like an upcoming author, a suddenly discovered talented musician, etc. Bangladeshis were included in this column, for example, the noted singer Firoza Begum, Abdul Hwal Minto, a stevedore with 40 ships, managing director of Bexim Company, the largest business house in Bangladesh, Iqbal Ahmed, and of course, writers like Shamshur Rahaman. This suddenly brought in Bangladeshi readership. *Sananda* became target circulating Bangla magazine in Bangladesh, so much so that in 1989 when the then Bangladesh Government was celebrating the 129th birth anniversary of Tagore, Shankar Lal was invited as an official delegate to the festival. On his return, he was able to introduce to the Indian Bengali readers such emerging Bangladeshi talents as Rizwana Banya Choudhuri, Irfat-ara Dipro, and the so-called P.C. Sarcar of Bangladesh, Jewel Aich. For a long time Bangladesh publication houses mulled collaboration with Anandabazar group for a co-publication of *Sananda*, but this did not materialize for various reasons, particularly financial.

*Sananda* was given permission to publish serialized fiction after a couple of years. It also ran a serialized autobiography by Pratibha Basu, "Jibaner Jalchabi," which became a runaway success. It was followed by Buddhadeb Guha's non-fictive serials "Bonojyotsnaya, Sabuj Andhakar," memories of his life as an amateur hunter, which was later followed by his highly entertaining epistolary fiction. "Sobinoy Nibedan," which again was followed by "Ribhu," a fictional series. Pretty soon *Sananda* would be publishing *Puspanjali*, a milder and briefer version of *Desh*, as its part. By the middle of the 1990s, major Bengali authors were looking forward to writing in *Sananda*, because of its huge circulation both in India in Bangladesh, and even among the nonresident Bengalis in Britain and the USA. The number of issues exported to subscribers in Europe and the USA. are so considerable that the magazine had to keep in mind the requirements of readers in those distant places. Indeed in a pioneering way, *Sananda* was serving a large segment of the Bengali diaspora, which eventually became the hallmark of its achievement. Even today *Sananda* is accepted as a trendsetter in feminine issues, but with the millennial change in youth perception, caused by various factors like

globalization, the so-called IT revolution, the TV invasion into the social fabric. *Sananda* had to introduce columns and segments dedicated to the teen generation, which also meant considerable changes in the representations of fashion, health, interior décor, and so forth.

The entire shopping behavior of the youth brigade had so dramatically changed in the last 10 years that a 15-year-old *Sananda* issue would look like the publication from a different planet even in comparison to its earlier issues. This is what caused a very massive upheaval in terms of planning, layouts and design, studio work, and linguistic experiments. *Sananda* has to keep running to be where it was. And the principle burden is this ever-changing format demands renewed surveys almost every six months.

Meanwhile many of the old hands of the magazines had either left or retired and an entirely new crop of young journalists have been introduced to run the machine. As it stands now much of the literary bulk of the earlier days has been done away with a couple of stories and that is all that one gets now. The bulk of all that gets published is basically lifestyle material—cuisine, fashion, interior décor, gender issues, events around the city, cultural factors, very youth specific, and a lot of experiments in page designing. The target is mainly “infotainment,” and thus even curiously, it reaches out to the whole family even now. Male readers of *Sananda* have not gone down in numbers, the reason for which is still being explored. One reason behind this may be an added dose of cover and special stories handling sex and related problems, with scintillating photographs of both sexes. *Sananda* even runs cover stories based on market research in matters related to sex. Issues like puberty, problems of adolescence, and teenage sexual behavior and attitudes are being surveyed often. Consequently, the age spectrum has enlarged and what initially began as a woman’s magazine has finally become a product, which nearly defies gender qualifications. However in detailed analyses of English women’s magazines such as *Femina*, *Eve’s Weekly*, *Savvy*, *Cosmopolitan*, and vernacular women’s magazines such as *Sananda*, *Nari Shobha*, *Meri Saheli* among others, Ipshita Chanda states, “*Sananda*’s crusade is of course to create the new woman” (Chanda 40).

Women’s magazines, however, rarely express radical feminist views and emphasize the traditional role of the feminine *sakti*, while addressing women’s issues related to education, marriage, husband, motherhood, profession, child care, beauty regimen, cookery tips, and relationship politics within the domestic space. Though resistance is sometimes advocated, rejection of the conservative parameters of culture still remains a slippery space of uncertainty.

## Notes

1. *Ekkhon* was remarkable for pursuing unusual subjects. Histories of famous pictures were narrated, as in “Radha of Kishangarh,” combining the styles of art history and fiction. Even the “cries” of Kolkata street hawkers found a place.
2. Of course, scientific articles and reviews appeared in other little magazines as well. *Porichoy* edited by the poet-critic Sudhindranath Datta is a good example. Many articles of popular science for children appeared in *Sandesh* often with the wonderful illustrations of Sukumar Ray. Children’s magazines such as *Ramdhani*, *Sisurathi*, *Mouchak*, whether or not one can call them little magazines, were also pioneers in this field. Swarnakumari, a sister of Rabindranath, a noted writer and one of the editors of *Bharati*, also worked in the field of popular science.

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# 7

## Conclusion: Media Responsibility— The Winding Road Ahead

### Introduction

The preceding chapters have a common thread in linking media with popular culture, but they go beyond it in asserting that India is changing, sometimes in tearing hurry even if the process is also marked by the pulls and pangs of continuity. In such multidimensional process in the Indian society the media is not, and cannot be, the sole actor of change; nor can it be the only channel for articulation of disquiet and angst about change. However, media no doubt is a major actor in the dialectics of change and continuity. It is important to reiterate that media has assumed such a major role because it is going through an extraordinary change, a sort of metamorphosis in the last couple of decades. In the aftermath of the satellite revolution the *convergence* of the traditional media, the Web, and the mobile media in a hypermediated world of incessant flow of communication across space and time is one key dimension of such metamorphosis. In many ways the media has exercised its claim as one of the most powerful agencies effecting the so-called Global Village.

Yet the astonishing infrastructural growth—greatly facilitated by the growth and marriage of satellite technology (often described derisively as the “invasion from the sky”) and telecommunications—is only one side of the coin insofar as the media power is concerned. No less important is the fact that the credibility of the media in the mind of the people—combining the roles of readers, viewers, and listeners simultaneously—is quite high indeed and Indians are no exception in this regard. Thus, a BBC/Reuters-sponsored study ([www.globescan.com/news-archives/bbcreut.html](http://www.globescan.com/news-archives/bbcreut.html)), conducted in the year 2006, would reveal that while 66 percent Indians have trust in their government in the case of trusting media it is as high as 82 percent. The survey also notes, with lot of significance for the ensuing discussion here, that 56 percent of the Indians believe that there is too much interference of the government in the media. Simply put, the overwhelming majority of people tend to believe what media says, shows, and suggests. Therein lies the variously called *normative power/social power/symbolic power* of the media. The credibility of the media rises all the more during the time of crisis of any kind. At the same time it puts an onus on the media—to be (socially) responsible in whatever it does.

This of course involves the delicate and dicey issue of mixing the “popular” with public interest. It is true that media often seeks to skirt such responsibility and aggressively indulge in promoting “popular culture” in all its triviality on the “market demands it” logic. However, there is hardly any clue as to how the media identifies such market because the methodology always remains guarded. Yet there are “flashes” of media’s ability to synergize sense of responsibility, sensibility, and profit motive in promoting popular culture in its higher forms. As an illustration one can refer to the film *Tare Zameen Par* or for that matter less successful commercial films like *Paa* or *3 Idiots*, which display how media can meddle in popular culture without necessarily making it superficial. On the other hand, the media can also take initiative in the making of popular culture in a deeper sense. Thus, one can see the media-created genre of citizen journalism in which an ordinary member of the media audience take up the pen or the camera to report on some events, generally relating to deprivation, dereliction of duty by public officials, or some kind of gross injustice and repression. That the mainstream media itself does not totally avoid the question of responsibility is proved by films like Amitabh Bachchan starrer *Rann* in which the inner conflict of the media organization, arising out of the “non-responsible” media indulging in aggressive profit generation emerges as the central theme.

## Commercialization: The Bone of Contention

Not surprisingly, commercialization of media has become a crucial issue in the debate on media responsibility. There is at least an implicit assumption, not necessarily devoid of validity, that popular culture is supposed to have an intimate link with commercialization. The argument that the media is doing great harm to the society and democracy and only serving the cause of hyper-commercialization by resorting to entertainment 24 × 7 is quite common. However, such argument is contested by the media on the ground that earning profit is essential for the survival of the media and as such it is not a “crime.” Of course the media barons would argue that entertainment is the order of the day and it constitutes a major chunk of popular culture, at least the forms created and disseminated in the media. They would also argue that those who criticize the media for being commercially oriented and entertainment-friendly are totally out of sync with the changing face of the world and that includes India. On our part we can point out that to some extent it is true that in the changing world and India the people no longer preoccupy themselves with the question “*why should media do business?*” Rather the question that occupies their mind is “*to what extent the media should indulge in business?*” The basic issue here is the fate of the “act of informing” which is the fundamental task of the media, and the related issue of the diversity of media representations. Does the media in the name of popular culture, and in providing a kind of lip service to popular culture, indulge in entertainment in such a way that the media’s foundational objective is lost? The question has assumed particular significance in the last decade or so—with the aggressive ascendance of the electronic media.

No media analyst worth her/his salt would argue that the mainstream media should do away with its profit motive. The media gasping for survival without any profit cannot effectively play the role of the “keeper of conscience.” On the other hand, nor would they support a situation in which the degree of entertainment reaches such height that it flourishes at the cost of the generation of information which is so critically important in shaping the perspectives and opinions of the media audience in their own terms. Today there is a substantial critical literature (Caprini 160–81; Sonwalkar 821–34; Thussu 593–611) which refers to “infotainment,” “Murdochization,” “CNNization”—all of which tend to explain how the critical faculty of the audience is sought to be minimized, if not totally undermined, by “popular” media representations.

It is somewhat paradoxical that while media is becoming more and more powerful the diversity in the media content is diminishing at a faster rate. Thus, when one particular television channel achieves higher TRP by producing a dance show many other channels follow the same path. Same would be the case with programs based on sports, music, travel, *Vastu/Feng Shui*, and so forth. The print media follows the same path with increasing thrust toward Page 3 culture, with pictures of celebrities and lesser known partygoers splashed. Even the news which is supposed to be objective and diverse is being overwhelmed by excessive doses of entertainment, thereby making it a “perfect” site for infotainment. It is not that the media itself is not aware of this trend. To refer to the film *Rann* again, the dilution of the objectivity of the news—propelled by cutthroat perverse competition among the television channels—is its special focus. But such self-critical mood of the media is rare inside the media house—electronic or print—in which the management and its profit calculation often gets better of the editorial autonomy.

The problem becomes graver when the critics of infotainment in their zeal to enforce media responsibility tend to invoke the “down with popular culture” slogan. The root of the problem does not lie in the promotion of popular culture nor does it lie in the entertainment-orientation of the media. In the preceding discussion we have referred to some successful instances of the mix of entertainment and sensitive representations by the mainstream Bollywood films as a clue to the constructive mode of popular culture. We would refer to some more in various forms of media in the subsequent discussion. The root of the problem lies in making entertainment a vehicle of commercialization in a manner that treats the media audience as passive, lethargic, and uncritical to the extent of devoid of critical thought. One cannot but in this context refer to the classic works of Neil Postman—*Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (1985)—in which Postman explains how the media contributes to the death of our critical faculty. In a similar vein one can refer to Douglas Kellner’s *Television and the Crisis of Democracy* (1990), Robert McChesney’s *Rich Media, Poor Democracy: Communication Politics in Dubious Times* (1999), Todd Gitlin’s *Media Unlimited: How the Torrent of Images and Sounds Overwhelms Our Lives* (2002). All these works have a common argument: that in order to cater to its commercial interest the media makes entertainment highly superficial and dangerous—as if it is a great crime to conceive entertainment in deeper and serious terms. In shirking its foundational responsibility—the act of informing—in the name of popular culture but effectively in search of excessive profit the mainstream media perhaps undermines its own power—the power to facilitate awareness generation among the people.

Even when it tries to act as the harbinger of popular culture the *mass* media must realize that its audience is not an amorphous mass, not is it a 'bundle', to be manipulated in whatever way the media likes.

In this background, the subsequent discussion would rest on three major grounds: first, insofar as the media's role vis-à-vis popular culture and the media power are concerned the *road ahead* lies in the broader reorientation in the media itself, which includes the foundational issue, the intersection of media culture and societal culture, of which the vital question of media responsibility is an important component. Simply put, it is not just the question of the media instantly taking up the issue of popular culture and trying to provide it social legitimacy. The foremost question is do we have adequate media responsibility to enunciate the popularization of popular culture, which requires in first place a judicious blend of the media's role as a facilitator of public interest and as a provider of entertainment. It is because the media is not expected to be a harbinger of mindless promotion of anything in the name of popular culture. The point assumes particular importance because there is a tendency in the mainstream media to do so on the vague and superficial logic that the "market demands it." Second, as a corollary to the first point, the idea of media responsibility includes the valuable attributes of accountability, transparency, and responsiveness—which interestingly enough the media itself demands from the governing establishment in the name of good governance. Third, it reveals, albeit briefly, the tussle between the Indian state and the mainstream media over the question of ensuring media responsibility through regulation or self-regulation, as the case may be.

## Media Responsibility: Elemental Form

The idea of media responsibility is not just a framework that is to be superimposed on the complex fabric of society for the common good. The idea encapsulates but goes beyond the legal dimension and the concept of media ethics to incorporate the sociological dimension. A reasonably acceptable definition of media responsibility would be:

Responsibility... (is) the obligation for proper custody, care and safekeeping of one's audience. More specifically, *social responsibility* entails the necessity for the media to keep society's interest as a top priority. This can also be seen as a collective responsibility or public interest responsibility (Middleton).

Though often used synonymously, there is a distinction between the concepts of accountability and responsibility. Consider this explanation:

“Whereas accountability often is referred to as the manifestation of claims to responsibility, the latter is the acknowledged obligation for action or behavior within frameworks of roles and morals” (Plaisance). Responsibility is in this sense the obligation for proper custody, care, and safekeeping of one’s audience. The very issue of media responsibility is an exceedingly complex political issue too. It is in the sense that the mainstream media shares a give-and-take relationship with the powers that be. On the one hand, while the mainstream media apparently acts as an intermediary between the rulers and the ruled in the process of operation it becomes part of the dominant power structure in terms of creating, generating, and sustaining a kind of knowledge and attitudes. This point has been repeatedly emphasized by the Marxists, the Feminists, and the advocates of alternative media, although from vastly differentiated vantage points. But when it comes to the “internal” contest of power between the corporate media and the state, the former is sought to be controlled by the latter. The state by virtue of having the legitimacy to promulgate laws seeks to “enforce” responsibility which the corporate media tends to resist by branding it as “threat to autonomy.” The Indian state has been quite active in this realm. Even in the days of market ascendance the state continues to carry out this task in the name of public interest. There are cases in which the state has rightly pulled up the media for irresponsible behavior and there are instances of the state seeking to gag the voice of the media unfairly. In the absence of any black and white “clear cut” scenario the issue of responsible media remains a most sensitive, provocative, contentious issue of great significance in the world’s largest democracy. The implication of such fluid state of affairs also makes us conscious that in the absence of an existing road and the presence of many roadblocks the *road ahead* has to be constructed as we negotiate with the vagaries and dilemmas of the contemporary era.

When one refers to media responsibly, can the invocation of public interest be far behind? Public interest has been at the center stage of the debate on responsible media throughout the world. Public interest in the media world has two elements (Moore 33). First, media is to act as a watchdog, holding the powerful to account, exposing fraud, deceit, corruption, mismanagement, and incompetence. Second, which is much less discussed but perhaps more important, concerns the media’s responsibility to inform, explain and analyse by finding, digesting, and distilling information that helps the public form views and make decisions. India is a volatile space as far as the scrutiny of public interest is concerned. We can refer back to the Supreme Court judgment of 1995 in which the airwaves and frequencies were freed on the ground of protecting public interest. Interestingly enough, public interest as a reference point has

great circulation in the debates on media regulation and responsibility. The corporate media in India in devising its operational strategies and modus operandi such as, the controversial Sting Operation—invokes public interest with as much vigor as the Indian state which invokes the same while exerting various controls over the media. But the matter becomes a bit more complicated when we find that in the dominant discourse of/on responsible media, couched in frequent references to public interest, the affix “public” is distinguished from “popular.” This has been so despite the fact that in the media world the line of demarcation between the two is quite blurred. The following remark seeks to explain why it is so by reiterating what we have mentioned in the chapter on *Indian Media in Transition: An Overview of Recent Past and Present*:

The idea of responsible media...has mainly been discussed with respect to their public dimension. The suggestion is all too often that “popular” is synonymous with political disinterest and wanton consumerism. At best popular culture is seen as a mere entertainment and irrelevant to society’s wider concerns. (Brants et al. 2)

In the pre-liberalization days of India the deliberations and debates on public interest and media responsibility used to have direct or at least latent reliance on the neat distinction between the “benevolent” “non profit-seeking” (if not loss making) state model and the “corporatist” “commercial” market model. The prevalent idea was that the public interest can be served only by the former as the profit-seeking motive of the latter is inherently antithetical to public interest. But the post-liberalization scenario changed many preconceived assumptions and long-held logics.

## **Indian Scenario: Bringing Public Back In**

In hindsight one realizes that the Indian state notwithstanding its claim to the contrary has not been much sincere in protecting public interest through the promotion of public service broadcasting which has in its Indian avatar nurtured paternalistic instincts without seeking to relate the content to public interest—the backbone of public service broadcasting. What is even more important, in the post-liberalization India public interest cannot be publicized as the exclusive preserve of any particular genre of media—be of the state or of the market—as there can be no single kind of responsible media. In contemporary India all kinds of media must value transparency, accountability, and responsiveness to earn credibility in the eyes of the people. Neither variety of the mainstream Indian media has provided an impressive performance in this

regard. If the corporate media has subverted it the state-oriented media has perverted it.

A major consequence of the tug-of-war between the two is that the *public* is reduced to the status of *phantom public*. In other words, the people in whose interest the whole issue of media responsibility is supposed to revolve do not necessarily have a direct participatory role in the making of the responsible media. Lot of instances to substantiate this contention can be cited from the post-colonial India.<sup>1</sup> But let us cite the most recent instance of the Broadcasting Bill, 2007 ([www.mib.nic.in/Bill200707.pdf](http://www.mib.nic.in/Bill200707.pdf)), and the Draft Content Code of Broadcasting ([www.mib.nic.in/Code200707.pdf](http://www.mib.nic.in/Code200707.pdf)) disseminated by the Union Ministry of Information and Broadcasting. They among other things seek to formulate new broadcast guidelines, including a new Content Code, and also provide for establishing a Broadcasting Regulatory Authority of India (BRAI). The Bill apparently emphasizes the role and importance of the broadcast media as a:

[P]owerful purveyor of ideas and values and plays a pivotal role in not only providing entertainment but also disseminating information, nurturing and cultivating diverse opinions, educating and empowering the people of India to be informed citizens so as to effectively participate in the democratic process; preserving, promoting and projecting the diversity of Indian culture.... (GoI)

But noting that it seeks to enforce control for control's sake a critic comments:

Unfortunately, although the draft legislation pays lip service to the public it marginalizes the public interest. In fact, several provisions in the Bill strongly suggest that its primary purpose is to enable the government to regain control over the broadcast sector—control eroded over the past decade and a half by the emergence of private broadcasters, both indigenous and international, on the media landscape. (Joseph)

The critical comment does not let go the other sides either. Lamenting the absence of an intense public debate on the crucial issues it has been further observed (Joseph) that even if the representatives of media industry have cited the need for a “genuine, country-wide public debate” in their effort to stall the legislation they after some initial moves “certainly did nothing to initiate such a process.” Indicting the civil society on the same ground it is also noted that it so far remained aloof from this issue, apparently unmindful of the importance and implications of media regulation in a democracy. In a timely and people-friendly move the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) had recommended

the creation of what it called a “citizen space” ideally on all channels—public as well as private—but at least through community televisions and local cable channels to enable the “common man” to utilize the medium for expressing his views and opinions. But the recommendation has gone into oblivion as the Government of India has ignored it completely. This provokes a commentator to remark, the “thing about TRAI’s recommendations is that, like Cassandra’s prophesies, their insight is obscured by incapacity” (Nandan). Not much civil society activism has been found to revive the TRAI recommendations either. The mainstream media has also remained silent about it for reasons too obvious.

What then is the way out to ensure media responsibility, especially if it is not to be “imposed” but organically constructed from a network of consensual rules and mechanisms among the stakeholders? While responsible media is an impending necessity, it would be too immature to argue, especially in the face of the sweeping changes marked by liberalization—privatization—deregulation that the Indian corporate media composed of so many independent media agencies and organizations would on its own make itself responsible. This is especially true in the face of break-neck competition and the insatiable urge to boost revenues. On the other hand, excessive control of the media by the state is neither feasible under the changed circumstances nor is it desirable from the point of view of democratic rights of the citizens. We would rather visualize a middle path, a more balanced approach by arguing that when it comes to infusing responsibility to media, some media regulations are a necessary but not sufficient condition. While the framing and monitoring of regulations can be entrusted to autonomous and independent agencies the sense of responsibility would ultimately emerge, to extend the depth and breadth of the concept of self-regulation, to a substantial degree from the *mutual checks and balances* between the state and the corporate media, and to a certain extent from among various corporate media organizations themselves. However, none of the paths is easy. While the Press Council of India, established in 1956 as an “autonomous, statutory, quasi judicial body ... to encourage the growth of sense of responsibility and public service” ([www.presscouncil.nic.in/right\\_main.htm](http://www.presscouncil.nic.in/right_main.htm)) among media professionals, has no teeth in the sense of lacking effective punitive power despite being able to indict media for irresponsible behavior in recent times things have taken an even more delicate, if not perverted, form. Here one can provide the instance of the dramatic exit of the Indian TV from the News Broadcasting Standards Disputes Redressal Authority<sup>2</sup> which had declared the channel guilty of bias and falsehood in a particular case. Perhaps the most important role in ensuring responsible media is that of the ordinary people—the media audience who are

supposedly the lifeblood of the Indian public domain. But the crucial question is how proactive the Indian public domain is—both “offline” and “online.” The question assumes greater importance because of their inextricable linkage with the citizens’ Right to Information and Freedom of Expression.

The transformation of the “people”—as-consumers-cum-audience of the media to *citizens* with the power to exercise critical faculty is not only an important determinant of the degree of democracy it is also important for determining the status of popular culture and its diverse manifestations, including the gender-related ones, in a society. The catalyst of such transformation is public communication, with a premier role of the media. Habermas (1989) through his classical formulation of the public sphere has made us aware of the importance of media—such as the newspapers and periodicals of the readers’ societies. But how does one specifically locate the communicative power of the citizens? One serious attempt (Andren 61), though visualized in the western context, shows that a person has communicative power to the extent that s/he has (a) consciously developed opinions and attitudes in adequate ways; (b) knows how to express her/his opinions and attitudes in adequate ways; (c) has access to media where s/he can express her/his opinions and attitudes; (d) by (c) can reach a large and/or influential audience or a particular audience which s/he wants to influence; (e) by (d) will, in fact, influence the opinions, attitudes, and behavior of other citizens in accordance with her/his own interests. This is a tall order indeed for the Indian society marked by lot of inequity and discrimination among people in terms of access to power, wealth, and of course media. India has a vibrant if unequal public communication scenario with the ordinary people having various conduits of exchanging information and as we shall identify later, varying forms of nonmainstream media. But the access of the ordinary people to the mainstream media is highly problematic as is the question of their representations in such media. Still the effort to strengthen and bring out the communicative power of the ordinary people and to nurture the active audience-cum-critical citizens are to be simultaneously pursued in two ways—“online” at the virtual level and “offline” at the grassroots level.

## **Internet and Web: Online Virtual Superhighway**

The Internet along with the World Wide Web have been perceived and described as the Information Superhighway all over the world. The Internet

revolution which has certainly gathered a great momentum in the last decade has also its impact on India. It has been frequently argued that emerging at the time of the weakening of the nation-state and the visioning of the so-called borderless world the Internet as a virtual, democratic, and decentralized space for disembedded interaction and rhizomatic texts—through numerous Web sites, bulletin boards, social networking sites, and so forth—would revolutionize the way we communicate. Today the Internet Protocol TV (IPTV) is promising a new look see-on-demand television viewing beyond the conventional “set” viewing pattern. With so much power at its disposal no wonder the Internet has been widely publicized as the harbinger of cyberdemocracy/teledemocracy and cyberspace as a liberating cultural phenomenon (Stratton 721–31). But when it comes to the Indian context the claims have to be processed through the lived experience.

The Internet has been publicly introduced in India—in the four metro cities—in 1995 through the Gateway Internet Access Service of Videsh Sanchar Nigam Limited (VSNL) though it had been in use in government offices and educational institutions since 1991. In 1998 the Internet in India was “liberated” as the government ended the VSNL’s monopoly over it. The use of the Internet in India is witnessing a steady rise since the new millennium by virtue of being the gateway to massive data, information, and knowledge. The search engines are active, surfing is frequent, and e-mail is an integral part of communication. Information gathering and e-mail have been the most frequent activity in the Internet in India but of late social networking and blogging are particularly emerging as important factors behind people going online. Of these chat, social networking, and blogging can be described as the *new wave* popular culture. A survey (*The Times of India* 16) covering 14,000 students in 12 cities of India reveals extensive use of home (percentage varying from 70 percent to 61 percent), cybercafe (from 41 percent to 26 percent), and even mobile phones (from 24 percent to 70 percent) for accessing the Internet. Kolkata, largely considered to be a “conservative” metropolis in comparison to Delhi and Mumbai, has 77 percent of the school kids—the *Generation Y*—accessing the Internet for information. It is also noted that the reading of blogs overwhelmingly concerns other conduits of popular culture like Hindi films and gossip about celebrities. In comparison political issues are provided much less importance. But there is a need to avoid the temptation of describing the Internet as “mass media” in India as yet because, as a report titled *Digital Market Overview India: Understanding the Scale of Change of Online Audiences and Digital Media in India* ([www.digitalstrategyconsulting.com/india](http://www.digitalstrategyconsulting.com/india)) suggests, the Internet is used at most by only 5 percent of the population in India and, thus, it is

largely confined to the upmarket demographics and professional classes that have access as part of their working lives, and to the twenty something groups who are graduating from college with Internet access part of their personal landscape. Then again these groups, as they are in the aforementioned survey, are mainly from the urban, English-educated, affluent background. In 2007–08 the broadband use has expanded by 67 percent with 5.05 million users but that still is a small percentage of the Indian population.

The fact that the Internet despite its low and selective access is establishing itself among the users as a popular media of India is proved by the fact that the users search for information on as varying themes as recruitment, investment, banking, education, travel, entertainment, and matrimony. But here again, the question of ensuring media responsibility remains elusive. There is no strong evidence yet to suggest, judging by the patterns of behavior of the Internet users in India, that it has become a viable media-agent for effecting media responsibility through some sort of sustained online activism like it is in some western countries. Notwithstanding the global publicity of teledemocracy the low access to the Internet in India keeps it away from being a space for articulation of protests and resistance by the majority of the people. To refer to the Internet link to popular culture, Gyanesh Kudaisiya in a provocatively titled article “India’s New Mantra: The Internet” (Kudaisiya 162–69) mentions the pioneering instance of the Kumbh Mela of 2001 going virtual “with the stunning images of the devotees and holy men in search of nirvana” (162). However, after asserting that the Internet has become “ubiquitous” in India he modifies his stand by adding that with so limited number of users the Internet is exposed to the charge of being “socially exclusive” and being “merely a window for the privileged and the affluent” (167).

There is, however, more to the emerging phenomenon of Internet than the issue of low access. India like other countries of the world also witnesses various cybercrimes—such as, hacking, credit card and investment frauds, online gambling, online marketing of illegal items, violation of Intellectual Property Rights including software piracy, copyright infringement, trademarks violations, theft of computer source code, patent violations, apart from the promotion of pornography and pedophilia—in which the Internet constitutes the main infrastructure and channel of dissemination. Considering the ever increasing incidents of such activities one can cryptically remark that the Internet has become a potent channel of a “new genre” of popular culture. The moot question is can the Internet be regulated to make it more responsible? The efforts to control the Internet so far throughout the world have been rather confined

to political censorship (as especially in China and in states in the Middle East) and moral and cultural censorship (to block specific sites with pornographic material, for instance) through various measures like security legislation, filtering software, electronic surveillance, and so forth. But such efforts are unable to control the seamless Web. In India the most organized endeavor to control the Web has been made through the enactment of a number of cyber laws in the Information Technology Act of 2000. The prime purpose of the Act, necessitated by the new issues and problems arising out of the advent of the Internet era, is to rationalize e-governance and e-commerce and prevent the new-technology-aided crimes and subversive activities that occur in and through the cyberspace. The Act has been critiqued on many grounds but what is most relevant in the context of the dialectics of change and continuity is the specific criticism that it is a product of a legislature which is skeptical of the power of the Internet yet aware of the need for an information technology law in the changed circumstances. What is even more revealing is the point that in seeking to rely heavily on the power of the executive the Act it fails to visualize the possibility of violation of civil rights (Chaganti 3587–95). Here again, the people remain at the receiving end. The paradox, however, lies elsewhere. Despite many safeguards being made part of the legal infrastructure for ensuring regulatory environment by the Act it is impossible to control in a totalistic way the content of the material that are uploaded and downloaded in the Web. In the days of globalization the Web remains as much an agent of dissemination of the “appropriate” items as of the “inappropriate” ones. The matter is even more complicated because in the contemporary times the idea of appropriateness has become blurred all the more. The controversy over the banning of porn cartoon Savita Bhabhi, as discussed earlier, is a pointer to the problem of imposing a line of demarcation on what is appropriate and what not.

The solution to the aforementioned problems and constraints vis-à-vis the Internet in India (or for that matter in any part of the world) does not lie in either trying to control the Internet or to dismiss its power and potential of the Internet. Rather than expecting an overnight boost in the number of Internet users from among the ordinary people in India or by trying to prevent them from accessing it the road might be lying in inducing various institutions, agencies, and groups in the civil society to act as facilitators by using the Internet for gathering relevant information and disseminating them at the local level though various mediated and extra-mediated face-to-face communication, and on the other hand, uploading relevant information for greater dissemination. Such information can be those which have a direct linkage with the livelihood of the

people and those which have sheer entertainment value. These kinds of efforts and their cumulative effect can perhaps one day broaden the mass base of the Internet and make cyberdemocracy in the real sense possible in India.

## **Alternative Media: Off-line Grassroots Level**

What is important to understand at this juncture is that the lack of balance in the Internet use in India is not just a consequence of a technological gap, the so-called digital divide, among the Indians. It is also a stout reflection of the social divide as well. In any case, the status of the Internet as emerging but yet-to-be-mass mediated agency calls for off-line activism of media reorientation at the grassroots level with a view to ensure media responsibility.

The most viable agency for such tasks, notwithstanding many roadblocks that it faces, is the nonmainstream media which incorporates alternative media, radical media, community media, and so forth. In our case we would use the term alternative media synonymously with the nonmainstream media, though keeping in mind that it is not a debate-free nomenclature and there are valid questions concerning the laterity of alternativeness. Amidst the increasing publicity of the democratic potential of the “new media” it is extremely important to identify and explore the potential of the small-scale, decentralized, noncommercial agencies of alternative media and the (popular) cultural context of decentralized media practices without falling into the trap of romanticization. India without any question has an astounding variety of alternative media—print, electronic, audiovisual, Web, performative, and so forth. The following clue is important in understanding the nature of alternative media:

(A)n alternative media institution (to the extent possible given its circumstances)...is structured to subvert society's defining hierarchical social relationships, and is structurally profoundly different from and as independent of other major social institutions, particularly corporations, as it can be. An alternative media institution sees itself as part of a project to establish new ways of organizing media and social activity and it is committed to furthering these as a whole, and not just its own preservation. ([www.zmag.org/zmag/viewArticle/12660](http://www.zmag.org/zmag/viewArticle/12660))

The same commentator specifically mentions warns against reinstating the gender bias in the structure and function of alternative media

because removal of such bias is one of the main objectives of such media.

To refer back to the Indian context one can think of a spectacular range of alternative media—participatory community radio, radical street theater and group theater, radical magazines, alternative cinema and docu-features, and so forth. Almost all of them are “on their own” functioning without any kind favor from the political establishment. Even the power of the Web is being used by various groups for enforcing media responsibility. The sites [www.indiatogether.com](http://www.indiatogether.com) and [www.infochangeindia.org](http://www.infochangeindia.org) are notable examples which regularly highlight and provide fillip to debate on various dimensions of media responsibility taking cue from the grassroots level happenings. The glorious tradition of the radical street theater as pioneered by the likes of Badal Sarkar and Safdar Hashmi is being followed with zest in different parts of India, often beyond the urban precincts as in the case of Budhan Theatre Group of Ahmedabad—an initiative of the de-notified tribes freed from the Criminal Tribes Act (1871). In Tamil Nadu a women’s theatre group, Voicing Silence is performing “Pacha Mannu” which deals with the sensitive issue of female infanticide/feticide to create awareness generation among the members of the communities who fall prey to it (Mangai 70–72). In West Bengal, as already discussed, the radical little magazines, with a tradition dating back to the second (arguably with Pramatha Chowdhury edited *Sabuj Patra*), and more vigorously from the third decade of the 20th century, are very much part of the protest-oriented popular culture even if the initial journey of the little magazines began as an effort to promote an antidote to the then prevailing popular taste. So is the most recent phenomenon of Bangla band which claims to be aggressively engaged in “rewriting” popular culture through reorienting the mainstream Bengali music by original scores and well as by having their own interpretation of existing folk songs. Incidentally, it was the Bangla band guru Gautam Chattopadhyay who introduced the concept of globalization in the realm of popular culture with his immortal lyric “When the World Shrinks in the Hands of Cable and Satellite to be Confined to the Idiot-box of the Drawing Room.” In more specific “gender bender” instances elsewhere, women-managed rural newsletters like *Khabar Lehariya*, *Purvaii*, *Bhinsaar*, *Dehriya*, and *Mahila Dakiya* are making their mark in highly patriarchal society in Uttar Pradesh by dealing with and contesting many of the prevailing cultural norms ([www.indiatogether.org/2005/jun/med-rurmedia.htm](http://www.indiatogether.org/2005/jun/med-rurmedia.htm)). To add, these instances also mark the vibrancy of small print media in an era in which many thought would the advent of electronic media would lead to the death of print media. What distinguishes community radio, which is in the takeoff stage in

different parts of India, is its exclusive focus on intense people's participation, both in management and in program production with the individual community members, especially women, being the principal sources of support for its origin, operation, and survival.

While the disjunction between the mainstream media and the alternative media remains intact in India there are some instances of the mainstream media taking cue from its alternative counterpart and being sensitized to the changing times. Let us refer to two instances. First, the Indian mainstream media, especially television, is encouraging citizen journalism in which the reporting of nonprofessional persons are encouraged. Second, in some select instances mainstream media agencies are replicating some features of the responsibility norms of the nonmainstream counterparts. Thus, one can mention the instance of Jharkhand's *Prabhat Khabar* which resting on the slogan, "Akhbar Nahin Andolan" (Not a Newspaper, but a Movement) seeks to be a people's paper by comprehensive depiction of everyday issues in the life of the ordinary people, obviously including the positive instances of women's struggle for equality.

The nonmainstream Indian media, despite inherent constraints and the variety in character and location directly and indirectly promote the cause of media responsibility at the grassroots level through various ways: (a) by generating dialectic dialogue based on critical reflection, understanding and active participation in lived experience; (b) by facilitating the articulation of shared experiences in creative space; (c) creating and sharpening the ability of the local inhabitants and contributing to the making of the community-level opinion leaders; and (d) identifying the positive and negative cultural traits in the process.

## Media Activism: Blind Spot

Beyond media reform which is based on efforts to change, both at the governmental and extra-governmental levels, the "structures and processes, media employment, the financing of media, content, media law, media ownership, access to media..." ("Editorial" 2) we need media activism. The most notable feature of media activism is that it does not provide a secondary importance to media as instrument for publicizing non-media messages. It directly addresses the modus operandi of the media, particularly the mainstream variety and in the process seeks to enhance the power of the alternative media. Media literacy is a key constituent of media activism. Media literacy provides a framework to access, analyse, evaluate, and also to create messages vis-à-vis variety of media—ranging from the print to the digital—in a variety of contexts

in order to build an understanding of the performance and role of media in society as well as to facilitate essential skills of inquiry and self-expression necessary for being critical citizens in a democracy (Livingstone). Media literacy, it is added, should be seen as social skills, as ways of interacting within a larger community, and not simply an individualized skill to be used for personal expression (Jenkins et al. 21). Justifying the importance of media literacy two veteran communication scholars argue (Lewis and Jhally 1) that it:

...should be about helping people to become sophisticated citizens rather than sophisticated consumers. The mass media, in other words, should be understood as more than a collection of texts to be deconstructed and analyzed so that we can distinguish or choose among them. They should be analyzed as sets of institutions with particular social and economic structures that are neither inevitable nor irreversible.

They further explain:

Media literacy, in short, is about more than the analysis of messages, it is about an awareness of why those messages are there. It is not enough to know that they are produced, or even how, in a technical sense, they are produced. To appreciate the significance of contemporary media, we need to know why they are produced, under what constraints and conditions, and by whom.

In our context, we would specifically note that the incorporation of media literacy within the ambit of “popular culture” is meant to develop critical insight and approach in order to remove *pseudo-participation* (nonparticipation of people in the name of participation) in public domain, transparency gap in media, and to promote self-actualization through articulation of interpretive skills and abilities across a stratified population, and last but not the least, cultural expression and aesthetic Ocreativity. Strongly advocating the prioritization of media literacy in a multimedia world that is increasingly being “constructed,” Thoman and Jolls write:

Helping people understand how media are put together—and what may have been left out—as well as how media shape what we know and understand about the world we live in is a critical first step in recognizing that media are not natural but constructed, just like a house is built or a car manufactured. Contrary to popular opinion, media are *not* windows on the world, nor are they even mirrors reflecting the real world. What they are, in truth, are carefully manufactured cultural products. (Thoman and Jolls 25)

Edutainment, the short form of the amalgamation of education and entertainment is an emerging area of theorization and activism among

those interested in utilizing the great media power as a communication strategy for “reinventing” popular culture. In a highly informative study *Pop Culture with a Purpose! Using Edutainment Media for Social Change* (Lacayo and Singhal) the authors provide a comprehensive account of how the power and credibility of the media can be harnessed to lend a new meaning to popular culture. Edutainment is defined as “the use of entertainment as a communicative practice crafted to strategically communicate about development issues in a manner and with a purpose that can range from the more narrowly defined social marketing of individual behavior to the liberating and citizen-driven articulation of social change” (Lacayo and Singhal 9). In the “Foreword” of the report it is rightly observed: “Edutainment strategies have an impressive record in modeling new collective social norms, mobilizing communities, changing the mindsets of individuals, influencing public discourse and setting political agendas. It opens the minds and hearts of people and encourages them to make positive changes in their lives.” At the very outset the authors make a clear visualization:

There’s a myth that educational TV and media for young people and adults have to be dull and serious, that it cannot be fun, engaging and entertaining. This publication questions this myth. We believe that one can address serious social issues through popular, entertainment media genres. Entertainment-Education (E-E or edutainment from now on) strategies for social change use traditional and nontraditional entertainment formats and the power of their narrative attributes, to engage mass audiences to question their existing realities and mobilize for social change. E-E strategies produce pop culture with a purpose. (Lacayo and Singhal 1)

Significantly, as a pioneering instance of media-centric edutainment they refer to a music video—*Mann ke Manjeere* (Rhythm of the Mind)—telecast widely, featuring a woman driving a truck! As they watched in amazement, they saw a typical housewife, with her lively young daughter, walk out of an abusive marriage, and abandon convention and norms in favor of an unusual female occupation. The music video not only became hugely popular, remaining at the top of the popular chart for six months, it also won the National Screen Award for Best Music Video and won nominations for Best Artist and Best Music Director. The endeavor also led to the formation of Breakthrough—with a new, unconventional, and bold vision for advancing human rights through the power of popular culture and mass media. What is no less important in the context of our discussion is that the music video, subtitled in English, Spanish, and French, reached an audience of approximately 100 million around the world, and continues to be used as an inspirational education tool

to challenge gender-based violence. On the other hand, functioning in India and the USA the Breakthrough's cutting-edge multimedia campaigns confront challenging issues like HIV infections in marriage (*What Kind of Man Are You?*), discrimination against women living with HIV/AIDS by their families (*Is This Justice?*), and the need for men and boys to take a stand against domestic violence—*Bell Bajao* (Ring the Bell). This instance proves the point that it is possible to view and utilize popular culture on a much wider scale with a much broader horizon. Television and radio soap operas, it is pointed out, are two of the most widespread formats of edutainment because they are supposed to have at least four advantages: First, audience popularity (if they're good!). Second, they provide effective emotional identification and role modeling. Third, they allow complex and layered treatment of multiple themes (like sexual abuse and machismo, or abortion and the emergency contraception pill) through intertwined and ongoing storylines. Fourth, they facilitate long-term, repeated exposure to different aspects of the same theme.

To refer to the notion of "blind spot" referred in the subheading of this section, it is indeed a paradox that despite India being a treasure-trove of various high profile and low profile social movements some kind of media activism—especially through the linkage of media literacy in the agenda of such movements—is totally absent. It is no less a paradox that in India despite much talk about the media regulatory environment, media literacy is relegated to the zone of silence. There is, however, a debate among the scholars on the point whether media reform movement should be integrated with social movement or whether it should be a freestanding movement. There is a strong opinion (Carroll and Hackett 83–104) in favor of the former but those who subscribe to the latter view also have their own take on why media reform movements should not be just an extension or a part of the social movements (Napoli). The main points for making media reform movement a freestanding one revolve round the following: first, the increasing prominence of media and communications technologies and the centrality of media and communication warrant a dedicated, freestanding media movement. Second, the emergence of the Information Society requires that media reform should be more capable of standing independently as a social movement worthy of the attention, support, and commitment of the citizenry, especially the younger segment. Third, if media reform is conceptualized as an integral component of other social movements the media issues would be in all probability subordinate to non-media issues. It may be the case that foregrounding media reform as a mechanism or strategy for facilitating the development of other social movements may lack appeal

to these movements due to the fact that such a strategy may be perceived as too long term or indirect in its orientation at a time when most organizations involved in social movements lack the “luxury” of adopting such strategic approaches. Moreover, a wide range of media policy issues that may have dramatic implications for the public good, but that may not have implications that necessarily resonate with broader umbrella social movements. There are, as Napoli states, the globalization of the media reform movements appears to be particularly hampered by a focus on intertwining media reform with other social movements, given the diversity of social conditions and variations in the strength, intensity, and resonance of different social movements around the globe. This would seem to be a highly complex and challenging environment for the media reform movement to effectively navigate. Fourth, Napoli argues that a mainstream media environment more conducive to the coverage of social movements may not be as important to social movements today as in years past. The existence of other communication channels, such as the Internet, undermines the extent to which other social movements are likely to see media reform as central to their needs. At the same time, these communication channels enhance the extent to which media reform can cultivate the necessary constituency to function as a freestanding social movement without significant mainstream media coverage.

Yet, all said and done a strong media literacy movement, in whichever way it is possible, would not only keep a watch on the practice and content of the mainstream dominant media but would also be able to pressurize the government for positive media policies and reforms with due importance to people’s participation in the process of formulation and implementation of such policies and reforms. In order to reverse the unequal relations that exist between the ordinary people and the mainstream media in India media activism and particularly media literacy needs to be taken into account by the social movement activists. There is sufficient evidence of the capacity of the people to go beyond the apparent and understand the “real” that lies underneath the media representations. Thus, for instance, in a study (Mankekar) it has been argued with substantial evidence that even when the Indians watch epics like *Ramayana* on television they are able to decipher the nationalist propaganda that lies hidden in them through a deeper reading. But in order to put media activism and media literacy on the agenda of the social movements and civil society activism there is the need to realize that democratic public communication is a very vital component and conduit of popular culture. This of course brings in the no less sensitive question of having a more tolerant view of popular culture.

## Conclusion

The preceding discussion reveals a few relevant points about the multi-perspectivist idea and practice of media responsibility in India. First, there is foundational ambivalence, ambiguity, and fair degree of fluidity about the ways media responsibility can be put to practice. Second, on a broader scale the very important point that emerges from the experience of the media-popular culture interface in postcolonial India is that however hard some of us try it is not possible to exert totalistic control over the forces of change. The point holds true both in the case of the governmental initiatives and in the case of corporate media efforts. Third, in order to have responsible media the *road ahead* has to be constructed slowly but steadily through people-centric socially mediated initiatives, and not by resorting to top-down measures adopted superficially in the name of the people. Some of the “grand successes” of the Indian media—as in “reviving” the Jessica Lal and Priyadarshini Mattoo murder cases and somewhat belatedly in the Ruchika Girhotra molestation case—the media has been activated by the high-pitch protests in the arena of the civil society. Fourth, the reliance on the “superhighway,” namely, the Web and the Internet, before the construction of such socially negotiated road is not only like putting the cart before the horse, it is no solution to the problematic issue of media responsibility. Fifth, when it comes to the specific question of addressing the gender bias in media neither strict official surveillance nor scattered reforms would be the answer; reversing the gender bias in media has to be part and parcel of the overall media reforms initiative. Last but not the least, the reconfiguring of popular culture both as an idea and as practice is part and parcel of the process of churning and reorientation that India is going through, including the changing taste of decency. In this process many of us are also changing, perhaps without realizing it. Did not someone remark, *popular culture? It is in the mind, stupid.*

## Notes

1. In the specific context of Broadcasting in liberalized India, attempts have been made by the government also in 1997 and 2001 to regulate it.
2. It is part of the National Broadcasting Association (NBA), established in 2008 to ensure principles of self-regulation for the media.

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