

# Exploring the Potential of Soap Operas for Gender Equality and Sustainable Development

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**Abstract:** Contemporary soap operas have a large but persistent viewership, especially among the women in India. This paper examines the Entertainment-Education (E-E) paradigm in communication, its theoretical underpinnings and applications of these theories for bringing about a social change. Literature on social impact generated by soaps in India and in other countries including the US has been reviewed. The case study of *Balika Vadhu*, a revolutionary soap themed on child marriage, is also presented. The research identifies prime time soap operas as an untapped pool of talent with potential of becoming an agent of mass education. The research also advocates for constituting national level awards for TV soaps which focus on E-E.

**Keywords:** *Balika Vadhu*, entertainment, education, gender equality, soap operas.

## 1. Introduction

Soap operas are popularly known for being shallow and addictive, and not really for bringing about social change. On the contrary, around the world this genre has succeeded in providing 'educational entertainment' - a blend of public service messages and melodrama that has enraptured millions of viewers. Entertainment-Education (E-E) is not merely a theory of communication. It is a communications approach that embeds an educational narrative message into a popular entertainment format (Singhal and Rogers, 1999). The content of E-E soaps is educational in nature but the form is that of a soap. Soaps are so named because such serials were originally sponsored back in the 1930s in the US by soap and detergent manufacturers (Allen, 1985). The defining characteristics of soaps are drama, long storylines and delivery mode (periodic episodes of 20-60 mins. with commercial breaks). The individual episodes are not

independent but are pieces in a large narrative of the events in the lives of the lead characters of that soap.

In India, TV soaps began to be telecasted since 1984. One of the first soaps was *Hum Log*, telecasted on *Doordarshan*. *Hum Log* was a 156 episode long Education-Entertainment soap, featuring the events in the life of a middleclass family in the Hindi speaking belt of India. Each episode had over 50 million viewers hooked to their TV sets with conventional antennas. Inspired by the Mexican development communication programmes, *Hum Log*, unlike most American and English soaps before it, was a 'pro-development' soap opera. Such serials are broadcasted in order to entertain and to convey subtly an educational theme that promotes development. *Miguel Sabido*, the inspiration for *Hum Log*, pioneered the dissemination of educational messages through broadcasts of serialized novellas, a format analogous to Indian soap operas but usually less long-running. This approach has come to be known as Entertainment-Education (Singhal and Rogers, 1999). A critical distinguishing point about the E-E soaps from other televised educational programmes (especially state funded programmes) is that they are generally supported by commercial advertisements.

It is important here to steer clear of a common misconception between Infotainment programmes and E-E soaps. The *Crocodile Hunter* (1997-2004, Discovery Network) ran 4 seasons and was a trendsetter that picked on children's curiosity about the natural world in an entertaining way. However, the mode of delivery of information/ knowledge in this programme was not through drama but through creative description. E-E soaps like *Hum Log* have all qualities of a soap and the transmission of knowledge is implicit, not overt. This genre or this specific art form is meant primarily for entertainment. It grew as an industry with primary focus on housewives as target audience and soaps were aired

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during daytime when the men were considered to be at work. The very history of soaps distinguish it from infotainment shows. This is not to say that infotainment shows have not contributed to social change and sustainable development. *Satyamev Jayate* is an outstanding example of how an infotainment - weekend talk show can transform social mindset and initiate discussion on hitherto neglected issues. The focus of this paper is on soaps, especially on a class of soaps very peculiar to the Indian media industry - 'Mega serials', the longest of which has run for 9 years and continues to be on air (*Yeh Rishta Kya Kehlata Hai*, 2009 - Present, Star Plus). Though soap operas are usually defined as daytime serials, this paper also includes primetime TV serials as soap operas.

## 2. Theoretical Underpinning

The E-E paradigm in communication has its theoretical underpinning in Psychology and Sociology. Bandura's social learning theory emphasises the role of observation of behaviour of others and the consequences they face, as a vital part of the process of learning (Bandura, 1977; Grusec 1992). This learning is essentially towards enhancing self-efficiency. Bentley's Dramatic Theory can be used to explain the effect of the genre of 'melodrama' used in soaps, in making them popular and persistent. Recent studies have provided evidence for the precedence of narratives involving melodrama over non-narrative forms of intervention (Borrayo et al., 2016).

Bandura's social learning theory has quite profoundly reflected the social learning procedure, especially behaviour learning by imitation. These constructs imply that it is necessary to build a conducive environment to enable learning from observation in the social milieu (Bandura, 1977). The television provides that kind of environment. One can easily imagine the living room of any house when a family or an individual is watching television. It creates an apt environment for education along with entertainment.

## 3. Soap Operas and Social Reformation

TV serials have in many instances had 'dramatic' impact on the social mind set thereby inducing multi-level behavioural changes in individuals, groups and communities. The impact of soaps in health awareness, about issues like HIV-AIDS and family planning, has been researched and is well documented. The role that Hum Log played in educating larger population of the country on issues like gender equality and freedom of choice for women is notable (Singhal and Rogers, 1988; Brown, 1990). Many countries have experimented with E-E soaps both on TV and on Radio. For instance, radio

soaps in Tanzania had a phenomenal impact on family planning behaviours (Rogers et al., 1999).

## 4. Indian Scenario

With the inception of television in the 1930s (Jacobs, 2000) soap operas soon became an integral part of the television experience around the world, as it did in India. However, their educational quality has always been underrated especially in India. There are considerable evidences of soap operas being a game changer in the field of television filming and also the volume of impact they have created with respect to respective social issue addressed by them. Besides, these E-E serials have managed to transcend generations and continue to educate masses even today, like in the case of *Ramanad Sagar's Ramayana* (1987-88, DD).

The *Ramayana* (and its translations to other Indian languages) was the most watched show anywhere in the world when it was telecasted (Awaasti, 2016). It became legendary especially because of its educational aspect. It brought to the common man deep knowledge of the epic and all the intermingled narratives and episodes in it. Moreover, it is legendary because of the kind of social congregation that it brought about. People travelled long distances to catch the Sunday morning show on a Panchayat TV (since many did not own a TV set back in the late 1980s). This brought about not only a social cognition but in fact a social construction and reconstruction that translated into social messages. There are many such legendary serials that have had a timeless impact on how individuals imagine the legendary Rama and Sita.

In relation to school education, the E-E medium has great accessibility and popularity especially among the students in India. National Viewership survey shows that only 8% students watch television for educational purpose whereas about 50% of students watch TV simultaneously for the following three factors: education, entertainment and information (CEC, 2010).

## 5. Gendered Themes in Soaps

*Ramayana* changed the way one thinks about Rama. Similarly there have been several soaps that brought eddies in the zeitgeist, many of which are still on-air. A case study of *Balika Vadhu* is presented below which is a soap which has educated masses on the need for gender equality, and the debate around it. *Balika Vadhu* became a trendsetter in Indian television and culminated the supremacy of *Saas-Bahu* style of soap operas. The latter is based on the conflict between the bride and her female in-laws or the vice-versa.

### 5.1 Case Study - *Balika Vadhu*

*Balika Vadhu* is a classic Indian soap opera and an ideal example of education-entertainment (E-E) segment. It is a Hindi programme, being aired on a Hindi multi-commercial TV channel, Colors TV. The plot began with showcasing child marriage in the forefront in the backdrop of a Rajasthani family. It began airing on Colors TV from 21 July 2008 and its final episode was aired on 31 July 2016 spanning an eight years long saga on Indian television. The plot, which is set in rural Rajasthan, traces the arduous journey of a child bride from the brink of childhood to womanhood. The first season of this soap focuses on the life journey of Anandi (played by Avika Gor) and Jagdish (played by Avinash Mukherjee), who were married in their childhood. The second season reflected the life of Anandi's daughter Dr. Nandini (played by Mahhi Vij) who was also a child bride. *Balika Vadhu* very sensitively portrays the plight of children who are unwittingly forced into marriage, in the name of tradition, and have to bear the repercussions for the rest of their lives. It also showcased the dominance of the elders in her new home, and the expectation of a child to take on the responsibilities of a woman. It has been credited as the first Indian fiction show to complete 2,000 episodes. *Balika Vadhu* has become the second longest Hindi serial after *Yeh Rishta Kya Kehlata Hai*.

*Balika Vadhu* was able to throw open some critical social messages to the audience through a strong storyline and plot (Chug, 2012). It had a huge impact on many spheres of the society and could highlight some prominent issues such as child marriage and atrocities related to it. It was able to create a wholesome awareness on this very issue. By the end of 2008, the series won 'Best Programme with a Social Message' award at the 8<sup>th</sup> Indian Telly Awards. The Times of India mentioned *Balika Vadhu* as a serial that 'broke stereotypes and educated India' (Arora, 2015). As per TAM Media Research data, *Balika Vadhu*, launched on July 21, 2008, managed to reach a TVR of 6.8 by September of the same year, making it the number one TV serial. The GRP contribution of *Balika Vadhu* was at an average of 14% in the latter half of 2008, and it continued to be in the top 5 or top 10 soap operas (Mulki, 2015). The popularity of this soap opera is an indicator of the reception of the concerns of child marriage it grapples with. *Balika Vadhu* was able to bring to light various hidden issues regarding the very practice of child marriage. Apart from the numbers, due to its popularity it will not be wrong to call it a trendsetter in Indian Television just like Ekta Kapoor had been with the *Saas-Bahu* operas. *Balika Vadhu* also led to the creation of a plethora of TV soap operas on women centric issues. Some of these are *Na Aana Is Des Laado* (highlighting

female foeticide), *Agle Janam Mohe Bitiya Hi Keejo* (highlighting dowry related issues) and *Yeh Rishta Kya Kehlata Hai* (discussing the various issues faced by a girl in India in her journey to becoming a woman). Being a trendsetter, *Balika Vadhu* has been a huge topic of research in Indian television from varied perspectives be it marketing, psychosocial changes, etc. It has also not failed to attract researchers from the academia (Chug, 2012).

### 6. Discussion

The available literature and the case study establishes the significant position that soap operas and private media houses have secured in the living rooms of millions of Indians. Soaps and mega-serials, airing on privately run TV networks have a very wide viewership. Using this media for Education-Entertainment can have far reaching implications for education, social and environmental awareness and sustainable development. Indian soap operas do share all the necessary elements of what makes an activity an educational activity. That said, the literature and case studies provide evidence on how soaps have in fact been disseminating knowledge and inducing positive changes in behaviours and attitudes of the society at large. General Entertainment Channels (GECs) happen to have the most viewed soaps. Private GECs and their soaps have been running successfully and their soaps have more viewership among the urban poor than state run channels do. They form a part of the routine of the viewers, thereby animating the living room (or the only room in the house). Soaps are watched for long periods and retained for longer periods, thanks to the continued narrative, periodic repetition (daily in case of most Indian soaps), and emotional engagement of the character with the receiver (against epistemic engagement in school classrooms). This specific aspect of soaps make them a very effective method of transmitting knowledge, awareness and inducing positive or negative attitudes in individuals and within communities as a whole towards the issue being raised. The narrative form that it takes was found to have more impact on behavioural intentions than non-narrative TV programmes (Borrayo et al., 2016). What we have here is a window right into the houses of millions. The economic costs of this form of enter-educate programmes, through E-E soaps, can be almost negligible against paid advertisements and door-to-door campaigns.

A good example that can be cited here is that of AIDS awareness spread through a sub-plot on *The Bold and the Beautiful* in the USA (Kennedy, 2004). In collaboration with Centre for Disease Control (CDC) and University of Southern California, *The Bold and Beautiful*, a daytime soap, introduced a sub-plot about HIV lasting five

episodes and a spike was noted in the number of calls received on the hotline number depicted in the episodes (Kennedy, 2004). With less than a hundred thousand dollar expense, more than 4.4 million households were reached and thousands of them in fact rang up the hotline seeking more information about HIV and preventive measures. The power that remains concealed in the plot and sub-plots, the characters and episodes of highly watched soap operas is a huge resource that must be tapped into so as to enable cost effective education and sensitisation of the masses about social issues.

## 7. Conclusion

With the opportunity and its scope established, the question remains as to how can we capitalize on the E-E opportunity? Again we turn to the Centre of Disease Control (CDC). CDC works in partnership with the University of Southern California to engage producers and writers of soap operas by means of regularly providing health-related resource materials and in-person consultation for discussing potential storylines for health education of masses. CDC also runs an award-winning programme called 'The Sentinel for Health Award for Daytime Drama' for shows with the best storyline that informs viewers and motivates them to make healthy choices (Kennedy et al., 2004; Wilson and Beck, 2004). CDC is reaching out to the entertainment industry and is changing the way we think about health education. Through E-E soaps and E-E themed episodes within mainstream soaps, CDC has educated a large number of targeted audience of that soap about HIV-AIDS. A replication of sorts in the field of gender equality is not just possible, but as inferred from the case study, is also very probable. Moving away from the *Saas-Bahu* cliché and exploring new themes and uncharted territories is one step forward. What can be a strong motivational force for inculcating E-E sub-plot in existing prime time soaps and in production of more E-E soaps is the recognition of such work through national awards for TV soaps. The US media industry has Oscar and Emmy Awards for movies and soaps, respectively. In India, despite introducing private television networks almost three decades back, there are no nationally recognised awards that encourage quality work in this field.

The argument for considering TV shows for national awards alongside feature and documentary films is worth considering in its own right. Soaps are indeed an art form, one that directly reaches more than 61% of the population (Jensen and Oster, 2009). However, in the context of soaps, there is a dire need to encourage experiments outside the cliché plots and also to pick up strong educational themes either in the main plot or in sub-plots.

National awards for best E-E soap operas and their characters and actors can make a huge difference. Soap operas can act as efficient media for education and transmitting information/ knowledge, inducing healthy attitudes and thereby behavioural changes that may ultimately lead to gender equality.

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