

Media and Religious Identity in Contemporary India

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Introduction:

We live in an era of what I choose to call intense globalization. Events as they happen are beamed into our living rooms at breathtaking speed. We, all of us, have become spectators and participants at once in events happening in the far reaches of the globe, across time zones and beyond our own immediate concerns. The pace of reporting of these events and the seeming urgency in the way they are brought to us make us more than spectators; we become perhaps, involved spectators. The attack on the twin towers was viewed in horrified disbelief from within the comfort of our living rooms; the war on terror and the hunt for bin Laden played out in high definition clarity over the following years as did the attacks on the Indian Parliament, the Gujarat riots, the Mumbai attacks and other defining moments of the 21st century. Our access to the world and the events that affect us directly or indirectly has increased manifold until quite literally, the world is just a click away. The events that define us as a nation are no longer just the events that define us as a nation but the events that define each of us as humans and the way we relate to one another. The media, in its many forms, is perhaps playing a role in this redefinition and in very real ways informing our opinions of the world as is presented to us.

A quick look at any news website or TV news channel shows one a number of “opinion polls” or “SMS polls” being conducted on any given day regarding the big news or the news makers featured on that particular day with the results to be announced every hour. One could then perhaps assume that whatever opinion is formed, if any, is based on the sound bite that was delivered in that hour by that particular news channel.

Under these circumstances what is the nature of political and societal discourse formed? How do we analyze the representation and the perception of minority communities? What role does the media play in defining what it means to be a good citizen? How are the images that are being projected by the media informing the discourse on belonging to the Indian nation or to a religious community? How are the State’s negotiations of secularism, however defined, as represented in the media contributing to the self-perceptions of religious and national identity among the citizens? If the media is the fourth estate of democracy, then surely, it seems obvious to conclude that there is some contribution by the media to notions of identity-both religious and national or perhaps even a religious identity subsumed under a national one.

These are some of the questions that I would like to address in this paper. I will be looking at television news channels and channels that have programmes of a specifically religious nature. I will then suggest that we do not have adequate empirical material in the Indian context to analyze these questions in a comprehensive manner. My conclusion is that further research is needed to assess the contribution of the media to conceptual dilemmas regarding secularism and perceptions of religious identity.

The puzzle of the Secular Fabric:

The Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) in 2008 issued a recommendation to the government of India to ban or phase out over the next 3-4 years those television channels that have affiliations to religious or political groups¹. The reason given was that such channels tend to harm the secular fabric of the country. They further went on to qualify the statement saying that such a ban would not mean that expressions of religion or religious programming would not be allowed on other channels. Several studies have indicated an increase in the number of channels that are religious in nature. Studies have also shown that the TRP ratings of these channels have been steadily growing². The increase in advertising on these channels has often been cited as an indicator of their popularity. A brief debate regarding the influence of these channels seems to have ensued when public figures such as Amjad Ali Khan, made statements saying that such channels should be banned as they create tensions between communities.

These events raise the larger question of just how influential is the media that it could help create and perhaps even sustain such tensions. Poornima Mankekar in her study on television in the era of Doordarshan found that often viewers' interpretations are profoundly influenced by the broader social discourses in which they are interpellated

¹ <http://in.reuters.com/article/topNews/idINIndia-36487420081113>. The government has since rejected the recommendation to ban channels owned by political parties (<http://news.outlookindia.com/item.aspx?667624>). A decision on the religious channels is pending.

² According to televisionpoint.com, in 2006, they formed 1% of the total viewership . By 2007, they were forming 2.8% of the total viewership, while music channels formed 2-2.5% .

and that they are shaped by events in the viewers' lives and by the relationships in which those viewers define themselves (1993). This argument is also reflected in Aravind Rajagopal's work when he compares electronic media to other media and says that with electronic media the institutionalized production and circulation of images and symbols over distances transforms the boundaries of the political sphere and reshapes the flow of information society depends on (p6,2001).

This, then, leads to further questions of methods used by the State to promote a secular, nationalist ethos. Does the gagging of a few TV channels help maintain the said ethos? If the TRAI recommendation is based solely on the threat to the secular fabric of the country, would the State then have to proceed to place a blanket ban on all public displays of religion such as sermons in places of worship? Are we then headed toward a laicete as in Germany and France as described by Katherine Ewing (2000)?

The concern with the effect of television on the Indian political landscape was perhaps first articulated in Aravind Rajagopal's work on the influence of the Ramayana serial on the Rama Janmabhoomi movement (2001). Rajagopal's book questions the decision to air a religious serial on state-sponsored TV and what that decision said about the State's commitment to secularism. Rajagopal points out that the serial's religiosity was in fact the often-cited explanation for its popularity raising questions of the political import of such a broadcast. As Rajagopal says, the audience's enthusiasm seems to have raised the apprehensions of the intelligentsia and minorities about a wave of state-sponsored Hindu chauvinism and their possible repercussions on minorities. And so in this case two distinct views on the coverage can be seen: those that viewed the inclusion

of religion or traditional culture in a state sponsored programme as violating the principle of a secular modern society and those that resisted an inclusion on more pragmatic political considerations (p136,2001). One sees reflections of this debate in the current debate on the religious channels. According to Rajagopal what his study shows in the larger context is how the effects of a watched broadcast takes on an entirely naturalized presence , articulating with existing concerns and familiar symbols , similar to Mankekar's argument regarding the effects of television broadcasts in her study.

Raymond Williams talks about technology and social change and the needs which led to the development of a new technology of social communications. Writing about the development of the press, he describes how the invention of the press was a response to the development of an extended social, economic and political system and the response to crisis within that system. The centralization of political power, he says, led to a need for messages from that center along other than official lines. Unlike all previous communications technologies, radio and television were systems primarily devised for transmission and reception as an abstract process, with little or no definition of preceding content (p25, 1974). The media then is perhaps assumed to play an important role in framing the discursive space among the citizenry and in the construction of a notion of 'Indianness' or a unified Indian identity.

In the era of Doordarshan this took on a specific trajectory with programmes specifically related to the nation and serials based on episodes from history. There was an attempt at building, what could almost be called an origin myth, and educating the citizens on how they could better contribute to the nation-state and become better

members of the same (Mankekar, 1993). However, with the advent of satellite television and the entry of several national and international players into the domain of broadcasting there began a re-definition of these ideas of the nation state and what it means to be Indian. This was also a time of great upheavals within the polity and relations between the Indian state and its citizens as well as it must be added, between India and the rest of the world.

News channels:

Ever since the advent of satellite television, there has been a proliferation of news channels. NDTV, Star News, Times Now , Headline News are some of the channels that deliver a twenty four hour news service on the hour every hour seven days a week. It seems intuitive, then, to assume that the presentation of news would have some effect on the direction of political and societal discourse.

Schroder & Phillips speak of the binary focus that most studies on media and political power have i.e. is it the politicians who steer the media representation of social and political reality ,or whether it is the media that impose their own definitions of political events , actors and institutions on the public agenda (2007). “The implication of this binary focus”, they say, “is that whoever succeeds in overruling the definitional efforts of the other -media or politicians-will control public opinion.” They question then is, if it is possible, that the citizens themselves, the smallest unit of democratic societies, have no power of their own over the public agenda, apart from the power to construct

their own agenda of socially relevant topics by selecting from the agenda offered by the media. They further question if the citizens do in any way have any power over the discursive framing of social issues into public meanings and values or do they merely have a responsive, reactive role in relation to the menus and diets set up by the media. Their study was conducted in Danish society and is a model that could perhaps be emulated to some extent in studying the influence of news media (television or otherwise) in the Indian social context.

How do we then go about analyzing the effect that mainstream news media (in this case television news channels) have in affecting the direction for political and societal discourse? Following Schroder and Phillips' model, we can perhaps conclude that rather than any direct or immediate impact that media have in determining who the people vote for in a parliamentary election for example, the impact of media is in fact much more complex. As their own study indicates it is far from clear what role media play with regard to the democratic literacy and civic engagement of the citizenry. According to Schroder and Phillips, their view of mediatization suggests that media discourses set boundaries for what is understood as 'politics' in society, as the media represent a central source of knowledge and experience. But, at the same time, media discourses are saturated by the ways in which citizens talk about politics, since journalists and media sources draw on discourses that circulate in society (2007). This is a view corroborated in the work of Gamson et al (1992).

We are then perhaps led to conclude within the limits of research conducted that the influence of media is a two way process. But even if the journalists and others draw on

the discourse within society itself , the end product , with the emphasis on reducing everything to a two-minute sound byte and broadcasting only the most sensational part of a story, diminishes everything into a two -dimensional version of events that are in fact far more complex.

Let us look at the example of the coverage of the Sri Rama Sene's attack on the women in a pub in Mangalore, Karnataka in early 2009. Most media coverage of this event repeatedly showed images of the girls being physically assaulted while being driven out of the pub. The incident was portrayed as an out of the ordinary event carried out by right-wing fringe groups. In the days and weeks that followed there were numerous incidents reported of similar groups assaulting women and carrying out what was described as 'moral policing' of the population in the city. This was juxtaposed against the statements made by feminist activists and various politicians. The phrase "Hindu Taliban" began to circulate, thereby conflating the fringe elements within the majority as a part of the minority "other". The aim of the perpetrators by their own admission was to use the media as a means of getting their message across and getting the women to follow through on what they considered the "proper place" for women in society.

However, their purpose seems to have been defeated when large scale protests erupted across the country against the violence. Once again the media was called into play when these protests were televised and reported extensively in the mainstream media. There were some voices of protest against network news sensationalizing the initial incident and thus, giving importance to what would otherwise have been an

incident that would have been largely ignored³. On the other hand it was precisely this naming and shaming of the incident that eventually brought the situation under control. In many ways the coverage of the attacks also contributed to further explorations of the tensions between communities in the region. However, the reporting of these deeper tensions in the mainstream media was scarce as opposed to the non-mainstream media such as Tehelka and others. According to Gamson et al it is the fleeting ephemeral images that stay with the audience. The compression of time leads to a preoccupation with immediacy of surface meaning and absence of depth (1992).

This could then perhaps lead to a discursive “public sphere” that becomes a staging ground for debates that lack a certain analytical depth. But it is my belief that we lack enough empirical data to validate this speculation. Rita Manchanda’s report on militant Hindutva (2002) which draws on Rajagopal’s analysis while doing commendable work in analyzing “split publics” is in my view incomplete in that it lacks the complexity of analysis that Abu-Lughod’s work, for example, tries to incorporate. Padmaja Shaw analyzing the coverage of “Hindu terrorism” and “Muslim terrorism” by the media wonders if the presence of a free media can protect the polity from a rabid communalism⁴. It is my assertion once again that it is impossible within the scope of current research to be able to answer this question with any kind of certainty.

³ <http://www.thehoot.org/web/home/searchdetail.php?sid=3664&bg=1>

⁴ <http://www.thehoot.org/web/home/searchdetail.php?sid=3334&bg=1>

Markets and audience autonomy:

In analyzing the sensationalism involved in broadcasting news stories one must not dismiss the ever present market imperative. In the era of globalization and what Benjamin Barber called “McWorld” (1992) with the ever increasing number of channels competing for viewers it would have to be the catchiest sound byte that gets the most number of viewers. However, what effect does this have on the delivery of news and its subsequent reception by the audience? One would have to assume that not all viewers are the sort to go back and conduct an in depth research into news that they ingest with their coffee each morning.

Williams has suggested that the ‘commercial’ character of television had to be seen at several levels: as the making of programmes for profit in a known market; as a channel for advertising; and as a cultural and political form directly shaped by and dependent on the norm of a capitalist society, selling both consumer goods and a ‘way of life’ based on them, in an ethos that is at once locally generated, by domestic capitalist interests and authorities, and internationally organized, as a political project, by the dominant capitalist power (p41,1974). He was of course referring to the era of the Cold War and a time when television broadcasting was starting out and gaining popularity. However, this analysis could easily be extrapolated on to a current day scenario.

Let us take the representation of the minority Muslim community in India. This might seem an obvious example but it is also a timely one. The events of 9/11 have passed into history as a major turning point in the course of world politics. In terms of television broadcasting this is an era that has seen the evolution of the “embedded” war

reporter, the frame by frame reporting from “hot” war zones, the hanging of dictators and other such sensational pieces of world history. This is also, unfortunately, the era when more than ever there has been the image of the crazed Muslim bomber, the turbaned oppressor of women enveloped in the all consuming cover of the *burqa* and other such stock images of the Muslim have been beamed into our living rooms and from there passed into popular imagination almost over night. Essentially then, a difference is manufactured by the media through its use of images of a certain kind. The image of the terrorist becomes a stock image. Terms such as “Hindu Taliban” then seemingly begin to be the most marketable headline.

The Muslim becomes the “other”. An aura of mystery and violence comes to surround individuals of a community that may be living out their lives much like everyone else. Added to the general sense of insecurity, the fear of the unknown, the rhetoric of the Hindu right , the prevailing tensions between communities , the only purpose these images on the network news channels serve seems to add to the paranoia. But the fear and the paranoia that occurs from creating these binaries appears to sell better than what can be construed as a tedious exploration of contexts and complexities. In 1938, the radio broadcast of an Orson Wells play caused panic among an estimated one million people of the six million who listened to it. The play, improbably, was one about a Martian invasion of earth. An analysis of the event at the time, led the author to speculate that this was the year when the population had already had a scare about a possible war breaking out; it was also a time when the economy had not yet recovered from the depression. In other words, it was a time of insecurity and uncertainty. Into this

atmosphere of paranoia was broadcast a play about a Martian invasion and this led to unprecedented scenes of panic and chaos (Cantril ,1954).

This, in my view, is perhaps in some ways comparable to the effects of the post-9/11 images and their effects on people. But now, it isn't merely a verbal broadcast but images too-images of an "enemy" that isn't an alien life form but an "enemy" that lives among them. Of course, this is a simplistic reading. The problematization of the reading occurs when one puts in the perpetual fear that people lived under anyway with the onslaught of right-wing Hindutva rhetoric, economic instability, paucity of opportunities, the periodic outbreaks of communal violence and an increasingly unstable neighbour in the form of Pakistan. However, this then raises the question of individual autonomy in interpretations of news broadcasts and other programmes on television. I would suggest though that more empirical evidence needs to be gathered to corroborate this analysis. Entman argues that members of the audience do not autonomously form and maintain the orientations they use to process information. He argues that rather than thinking of the media as controlling the structure of publicly available information that shapes the way people can and do think politically, it might be more useful to think of the media *contributing* to it. Members of the audience are after all not free of the influences of social interactions with others who would contribute equally to their ideological leanings (1989). But clearly more research needs to be done to determine the empirical truth of these claims at least in the Indian context. Here, again, the aim is not necessarily to determine what sets off an episode of violence, but how the media coverage of certain events eventually, if at all, leads to self-perceptions of religious and /or national identity.

The Missing Link:

Peter Golding suggests that television news lacks two crucial dimensions as an account of the world around us. These are power and process. By making social power and social process invisible, television news creates a particular view of the world which is incomplete, not by design or intent, but by its very nature (p255,1981). There is, according to Golding, a fragmentation of social process. He refers to industrial relations and their portrayal on the news. The fragmentation he refers to is what he calls an evacuation of history. Thus, in the case of industrial relations, instead of showing an evolving conflict of interest, what is shown is a sporadic eruption of inexplicable anger and revolt. He ascribes this dimension of television news coverage not to shortcomings in the television journalists but to the limitations of production. This is an analysis that I think would be applicable to the reporting of violence of a religious nature in the television news in India. There is no real analysis of the news events as they take place. No real attempt seems to be made to connect various fragments of events no matter how interconnected they maybe. Instead, what we are left with, are various events of a “communal” nature. How does the audience then receive this information for example in the case of the Mangalore pub attacks, the Gujarat riots, the Malegaon attacks or the massacre of Christians in Orissa?

Subarno Chatterji’s paper on the media representations of the Kargil War and the Gujarat riots refers to precisely this missing link in the media analysis of events. “The point here is not that The Times of India or Star News have been inconsistent in their opposition to war or riots, but that they make *no analytical connections between the two*

events. A long history of communal violence, the hate speech spewed against Muslims , the contempt for the secular fabric of Indian polity and institutions are all predicated on the hatred of the ‘other’, whether within the country or outside. The demonizing of the ‘other’ allowed for patriotic consolidation during the Kargil War. The identification of the perpetrators of Godhra as ISI agents generated the ‘action-reaction’ rhetoric and revenge model that fuelled the communal violence. In Kargil, the jingoism related to India, the motherland threatened by a devious and evil enemy, and large sections of the media were pro-government. In Gujarat, there is a mythic construction of wronged Hindu majorities now wreaking vengeance to reverse centuries of Muslim barbarism and atrocity, and the media is shocked at government complicity. The two events are arguably different, but they conflate a recently dominant rhetoric of long-suffering tolerant Hinduism now striking back, whether in war or in riot. This connection seems to be missing in dominant media reports, editorials and *commentaries*,” (emphasis added) (2004).

I would also like to pose the question of a differentiation possibly in how people in various regions and from a variety of different educational and class backgrounds receive these reports. Common sense dictates that there would be a variation in the reception of news. How does this then effect, if indeed it does, perceptions of belonging to either the nation or particular religious groups?

Religious Channels:

Now, I would like to turn to the curious case of the religious channels. The question of the religious channels poses quite a few conceptual problems regarding notions of

secularism and religion itself. It has emerged from several studies that the channels are proliferating and that they are also attracting a loyal following. There has been a steady growth in the number of viewers. According to studies by the TAM media research group, a 100% of the viewers of GOD TV belong in the 35+ age group and 46% of Aastha's were below 35; while 53% of QTV viewers were below the age of 35.

Many of the channels advertise themselves as lifestyle or spiritual channels. Aastha, the first in the genre, advertises itself as India's "number one spiritual cultural channel". Sanskar advertises itself as a cultural channel. However, there is no denying that these channels have a variety of programmes, all of which are of a religious nature ranging from sermons and lectures by various religious figures to question and answer shows where everything from problems of interpretation of scripture to questions related to daily life are addressed. Aastha for example has live telecasts of *Bhagwat Katha* readings, *bhajans* and discourses by such "experts" as Sadhvi Ritambhara , a figure who has long been associated with the right-wing Hindutva groups.

According to Indiantelevision.com, GOD TV claims to "...offer a new breed of international Christian programming, including cutting-edge conferences, in depth interviews and youth and music shows, featuring prominent Christian leaders and artists from around the world." Quran TV or QTV catering to the Muslims among the populace claims to produce programmes based on the "Ahl e Sunnat Wal Jama'at school of thought in Islam". Channels such as Aastha, Sanskar, GOD TV, MiracleNet, Islamic Channel, Q TV and others form the daily viewing experience of many. As Pradip Ninan Thomas says, "The marketing of Paradise is big business today. God sells."(p x, 2008)

Rajagopal's main concern was that a programme of an overtly religious nature was being broadcast on State sponsored television. On the surface of it, the problem seems clear enough in that if a State claims to be secular how does it then sponsor such public displays of religion. This once again poses the problem of how secularism is perceived by the Indian State. If secularism in the Indian context means that the State is equidistant from all religious groups, then surely there is no problem posed. But in this post-Doordarshan era, this concern would then become irrelevant perhaps. In the era of globalization and privatization of television channels, it is not feasible or advisable for the State to gag private enterprise. The Cable Television Networks Act of 1995 makes it clear that no programmes that could create tensions between communities are to be broadcast. I would like to submit here that perhaps it would be difficult to determine just what such programming would entail unless the programmes themselves are explicit in their content which is rarely, if ever, the case. Even more problematic is I think that in any circumstance it would be difficult to assess just what factors trigger an outbreak of violence.

As such then, any attempt at banning or "phasing out" channels as per the TRAI recommendation could then perhaps be construed as an infringement on the freedom of expression of the various religious groups and individuals. Taken in the larger context of the latest trend in decisions to ban religious dress in educational institutions, the question that we are once again faced with is that of secularism and its various policy implications in the Indian context. Perhaps as Jakob de Roover suggests this also takes one through the murkiness in defining notions of secularism or as he suggests further, the very notion of religion itself as they are understood in India (2002).

Lily Kong in her article on religion and technology suggests that if technology is understood as socialized, then it is manifestly in this context an invitation to religious strife. She was dealing specifically with the question of computer mediated communication and how that space is used by some to express their views in a hostile manner. I agree with her when she goes on to say that in countries where inter religious sensitivities are tense, the political space provided by technology compounded by the fact of anonymity poses a threat to the fabric of society. She was once again referring to the internet. In other words, she says, specific geographies are a crucial part of the analysis of how technologies facilitate religious discourses (2001). Could this theory be applied to television in India? How much facilitation of religious discourse can take place through a medium that is essentially one-sided, unlike the internet for example where communities are formed and re-defined and discussions take place albeit in a “virtual” manner? I believe this would be a research question that needs to be looked into especially in light of current debates and the recommendation by the TRAI.

Kong writing about television refers to ‘living room rituals’ that lead to a sense of community among people separated by distance through the use of technology , in this case television, which then allows them to participate in what is an essential part of the religious experience (at least in the Durkheimian sense) i.e. the rituals. As she suggests, it would require more empirical research to determine whether this is in fact what occurs with the viewers of the programmes on these channels (2001). Aravind Rajagopal’s study of the Ramayana serial and its effects seems to corroborate Kong’s analysis. However can we then extrapolate this analysis to the effects of channels devoted to religious programming?

Pradip Ninan Thomas finds that religious fundamentalists often have a political agenda and the media are used to further this agenda. The meticulous, systematic use of the media by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) , as much as by Pat Robertson and others of his ilk in the USA backed by the technologies of marketing , have played a key role in their ascendance in the public domain. Hindu fundamentalist leaders in India such as Sadhvi Rithambara are what they are today because of their cassette ministries- a tradition perfected by the late Ayatollah Khomeini , whose popularity was boosted by his sermons delivered via audio cassettes.(pp xi -xii, 2008). The Sadhvi as mentioned elsewhere in this paper now gets regular airtime on Aastha.

Stewart Hoover in his book on religion and the media finds that many of the people who took part in his ethnography in the United States, found little use in the specifically religious programming on American television. He seems to have set out with the hypothesis that individuals from highly religious backgrounds would find these programmes attractive or useful. Instead he found that they found very little of value in such programming. If such an ethnographic study were to be conducted in the Indian context it would be useful to see how people in actual fact respond to these channels that seem to have caused apprehension in certain sections of society. In the end, can we ever completely divorce the autonomy of the individual and their decoding of the messages they hear on a broadcast when examining the effects of television programmes on individuals and their subsequent participation in social and political discourse? I suggest that further ethnographic and empirical studies are needed to determine this.

As Abu-lughod suggests the key to such a study would be to place television viewing in the richer social and cultural contexts of viewers' lives. After all as she goes on to say one can never really separate such a study from the complexities of individual lives and experiences (1997). Poornima Mankekar seems to have followed such a model in her study, thus making it a more complex analysis than mere media studies would entail. Such an approach would also be relevant in light of the fact that in an Indian context at least, common sense dictates that it cannot be television alone that would lead to a production of certain attitudes or discourses among the vast majority of its citizens. This maybe true of the middle classes but let us not forget that this is also a country with large economic and social disparities. Perhaps it would help to keep in mind while doing these studies what Barthes said about the whole bourgeois culture being made to appear to 'normal' and 'universal' in the cultural mythologies conveyed in media programming and advertising (1973).

Pradip Ninan Thomas' studies of Christian communities living in Chennai seems to present a rather mixed picture and is useful in emphasizing the complexity of the task of studying the audience responses to these channels. He, like Hooper, finds that the viewers are selective in what they watch. Nevertheless, he finds a tendency among the viewers exposed to some programmes on channels like GOD TV to reiterate stereotypical, dominant views of Muslims, accept the rightness of the war in Iraq, affirm the rightness of the Zionist Israeli nation, critique idol worshipping Hindus and acknowledge that God has especially blessed the USA to lead other nations to Christ (p94, 2008).

Taken in the light of this analysis and that of Rajagopal's on the influence of the Ramayana serials, the TRAI recommendation and other concerns regarding the proliferation of religious channels becomes slightly clearer.

Conclusion:

From the current data it becomes clear that there isn't enough empirical evidence to support a clear analysis about the influence of television programming on the audience in India and the direction of political and societal discourse and what effect this might have on forming notions of identity -religious or national. Further, it is far from clear how a concept such as secularism is perceived by the audience in an Indian context. If the aim of the State is to promote itself as a secular entity, then there seems to be no clarity currently on just what this entails. This, I would suggest, raises the further question that if in its actions the State is unclear as to the question of secularism, then how do the citizens themselves perceive it?

The ongoing debate concerning religious programming feeds directly into these debates on secularism. The very fact that there is a proliferation of programming of an overtly religious nature, even if they are packaged under a seemingly secular sounding spiritual label, feeds into global debates on the revitalization of religion and the by now familiar concern about the failure of the secularization thesis. As Pradip Ninan Thomas points out, "Satellite and cable channels are critically involved in the mediation of globalization and globalized religion" (p 84, 2008) He goes on to say that, "While these channels certainly inform and educate audiences on aspects related to religion, draw the faithful together and offer them an opportunity to reinforce belief, they have also

provided the space for negotiating religion as national identity” (ibid.). I would suggest then that further research into the audience reception of such programming would be useful in determining the role played by the media in shaping notions of identity, religious or otherwise.

Similarly, in the event that audience discourses on the political and the social are clearly formed by a variety of different inputs, it would be useful to examine empirically perhaps, what role network news channels have in steering the direction of the discourse. I would suggest that we need to perhaps look at these trends in terms of communities and what they derive from viewing these channels much like Thomas’s work. The data would then have to be collected from people of different religious affiliations who are regular viewers of both possibly. It would perhaps be interesting to see if there is a subset of audience that belongs to both categories -the ones who view the news channels and the religious channels. Of course it is entirely possible that people who watch the religious channels might get their news through means other than television. In which case is there a difference in notions of religious identity from those who get these concepts from television or is it the same across the board? These are some of the questions that would need to be explored to fully understand the effects of television media in determining religious and other identity questions.

It is my view that these would give further insights into our concerns about pluralism. In many ways television reflects an India that is changing and not merely in terms of consumer power or the often cited economic boom. Perhaps in many ways, through sixty odd years of independence India as a nation is evolving- be it the polity or

perceptions of what ‘ Indianess’ means at a given moment in time. The pluralities that are emerging within the nation-state as originally assumed at independence strive to make themselves heard in a hundred different ways within the nation and the medium of television has increasingly become an important one in this assertion of multiple identities, be they class, caste, linguistic or religious identities. Clearly then there are implications for pluralism as we understand that notion. Why would the debates for example revolve solely around the questions of religious programming or proliferation of certain religious symbols especially since there has also been a proliferation of various linguistic channels and programmes? These are questions that need to be explored further. I will conclude with the words of Ninan Thomas “ The heterogeneity of television in India offers spaces for celebrating the essentialized ‘ nation’ (flags, *Vande Mataram* , cricket matches) as well as its obverse , the multiple identification of a heterogeneous population differentiated along class, caste, gender , language , religion and other markers of identity. Television acts like a prism, refracting the multiple stories that make up the epistemic story of globalization and India’s future within the real and imagined embrace of globalization ...” (pp85-86, 2008). Thus, it becomes an almost imperative scholarly effort to explore these “multiple stories” through the prism of television as one way of beginning to understand the lived pluralities of people’s lives.

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