

Television and the Formation of Urban Middle-Class Identities

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ABSTRACT

The Indian middle class has been a powerful force in the sphere of consumption culture since the formal advent of economic liberalization in 1991. With the advent of television, the Indian society has been witnessing changes in class identities. The role of Indian television shows has been instrumental in shaping urban middle-class identities within the Indian society. These shows have been effective in creating a desired lifestyle and everyday practices which are symbolic of urban middle-class practices. The objective of this paper is to reflect upon how these shows portray a way of common and relatable practices of the Indian middle class and explore the representation of the middle-class lifestyle. The idea of new modes of consumption reflects itself as a way of economic coercion that the capitalist world is trying to propagate with the practice of mass consumption. Thus, the concept of culture industry attempts to argue how commodification and the consumption of capitalist goods act as a way of manipulation in order to preserve the reigning capitalistic order. Through the lens of Birmingham school, this paper attempts to understand the process of Indian middle-class formation within the sphere of Television programs. The messages and values deciphered by the content of the television shows are in various ways interpreted by their audience. This study will be based on qualitative data that aims to use several secondary sources such as academic journals, articles, and online blogs to analyze the ideas that are put forward in understanding the very idea of consumption culture and middle-class formation. The investigation is also based on content analysis which will include a thorough analysis of the television show 'Yeh Meri Family' and its portrayal of consumerist practice within its specific context. This brings us to the fundamental idea of the paper of examining 'television' as a significant household gadget symbolic to middle-class families and also understanding the content put forward by television shows encouraging consumerist behaviours.

Keywords: Television, Middle-Class Identities, Consumerism, Commodities, Modernity, Desires

1. INTRODUCTION

The period of the 1980s was considered as the 'time of television' in India. Television became a powerful tool that was introducing several socio-cultural changes among the people, especially the urban life in India. It became symbolic of new emerging middle-class identities and eventually represented as an important cultural commodity. Doordarshan as a state-run broadcasting network could come up with programs such as Ramayana, Mahabharata, Byomkesh Bakshi, Janki Jasoos, etc. that were distinct and specifically programmed for the emerging urban middle-class population. Many scholars and authors have done exceptional studies including Mankekar (1999) and Rajagopal (2004) on the cultural significance of television and its broadcasted programs.

However, with the advent of economic liberalization around 1991, the television landscape shifted from the idea of one state-run channel to an ever-expanding mass-market of satellite channels which is catering to a variety of audiences characterized by language, region, age, and so-on. After the years of Emergency (1975-1977), broadcast television was quite instrumental in shaping ties between the state, mass-media market and the urban middle classes. Rajagopal (2011) argued that in the post-emergency period with the shift from consent to coercion as a major form of governance, the mass media played a key role in shaping the formation of a new middle class that was characterised primarily through a cultural and consumerist form of identity. Since the beginning of the economic liberalisation and developmental policies, India as a country is not confined to the economic sphere alone. This has also led to some fundamental changes in the social structure of Indian society. As a consequence, new social groups and categories of people have been emerging. Over the last few decades with the combination of the economic development and democratic governance, there has been transformation of the structures of social stratification in India. Though the case of caste hierarchy continues to hold significance till date, new kind of power structures have emerged. This new set of power elite that has emerged in India signifies new social categories and occupational groupings of people. Rajagopal's (1993) analysis of Doordarshan's embrace of sponsored programmes and broadcast of Hindu mythological programmes (2001), and work of Mankekar (1999) on television viewers in a New Delhi neighbourhood remain significant studies that portrays how television through attempt in representing middle-class identities and lifestyles and endorsement of consumerist desires and commodities have reconciled relationships with the state and the urban middle class (Punathambekar & Sundar, 2017).

Marx's model of class is characterised as a dichotomous one. He explains the exploitation of proletariat classes by the dominant one through the concept of class. According to him, every society is predominantly composed of two crucial classes. The first one is the minority of non-producers who own and control the means of production and the majority of producers who are exploited by the former. Moreover, in Marx's model of class, economic domination is tied to political dominance which meant that means of production were linked to political control too. Locating middle-class in this Marxian model of class is quite interesting as here the position of middle-class meant to be transitional in nature. However, Marx didn't pay much heed to this middle-class as it was meant to disappear as the capitalist regime developed (Marx & Engels, 1848). However, Weber's idea of class provides wider scope to understand the middle-class situation. He does not treat all non-property-owning classes as proletariat. The class situation of the non-property-owning class is different in terms of their skills. Those who possess skills that have a 'market value' tend to have different class situations from the unskilled ones. Thus, through Weberian understanding, it is this class that constitutes the middle class (Weber, 1922).

This article attempts to understand the formation of middle-class identities through the role of television in disseminating the urban middle-class lifestyle and values, as such creating a class that is immersed in the cultural goods consumption and consumer culture. This understanding will be supported by the theoretical framework of the Birmingham school of cultural studies which will focus on how the messages and values propagated by broadcast Television are interpreted by the consumer or receiver of these messages which is the emerging middle class. Stuart Hall (1973) in his work on 'Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse' talks about this very idea of how messages are produced and disseminated referring specifically to Television. He talks about a four-stage theory of communication: production,

circulation, use (distribution or consumption) and reproduction. Hall argues that messages have a “complex structure of dominance” because at each stage it is controlled and marked by institutional power relations. In this way, the communication circuit is also a sphere which reproduces a pattern of dominance. Moreover, if no meaning is taken, there would be no consumption. If the meaning is not articulated in practice or manifested, it has no effect. Thus, with the framework of Birmingham School, the paper tries to engage in analysing the ways middle-class values and lifestyles are interpreted and consumed by the viewers.

Since the beginning of this article, the reason to emphasise on this period is simply because this period was the beginning of the new era of television. As the motive of this paper is to analyse the role of television, the focus is to understand the consumerist intentions of the television programs and also how do the general viewers consume those content. Here, the paper tries to look into the role of television through two significant dimensions. First, one needs to understand how television in itself as a ‘cultural commodity’ is beginning to gain significance among the middle-class population. This can be understood through the way television began to symbolise one’s status and mark as an important household gadget. Secondly, how the content and shows disseminated through television is creating an influence over this new kind of class in urban India. This influence has been a major weapon in transforming class identities from a traditional lifestyle to a comparatively modern and urban lifestyle.

The main objective of this article is to find out in what ways Television has become a culturally symbolic household gadget and how the content and shows broadcasted on television channels have influenced the consumption pattern of urban middle-class goods and values among the masses. Apart from understanding the existing literature, this article tries to explore the web series named ‘Yeh Meri Family’ as an empirical ground of analysis, and find the objective of this paper, streamed in one of the most popular OTT platforms Amazon miniTV. Thus, situating these questions and analyzing them from an existing popular show within the broader arena of popular culture is the fundamental idea behind this paper.

2. TELEVISION AS A SYMBOLIC HOUSEHOLD GADGET

Television since liberalization quickly became a prominent consumer durable among the working and lower middle classes in India. Along with other household durables such as refrigerators, Television became a negotiating product in marriage transactions where dowry was given. The increasing demand for Television and other durables can be observed as owning a television set was seen as a cultural or more precisely a status symbol for middle-class families.

In urban India the ‘middle-class’ has been portrayed as a powerful social and political agent particularly after the period of economic liberalization in 1991(Dickey, 2012). It is argued that the Indian middle-class have been in explored in a lot of public discussions yet we know little about how the middle classes perceive themselves and how they experience their lives. Mankekar (1999) mentions that one of the crucial policy and ideological shifts that occurred in the early 1980s was the introduction of laissez-faire economy and consequently freeing the markets in response to the pressures of the global economy. Changes in the economic policies at the state level led to the expansion of the demography of the middle classes in India. Mankekar mentions that being an upper middle-class herself, she knows middle-class is anything but homogenous. While conducting her research, the people she got to know in the lower-middle class

neighbourhoods were quite poor, while others were relatively comfortable and could make their ends meet. Many might slide back to poverty anytime soon. Those who barely fell into the category of middle-class aspired to attain the status of middle class through acquisition of consumer durables and by ways in which they were socialized or disciplined their family members (Mankekar, 1999). Thus, consumer goods and durables became a crucial point of observation in understanding the emergence of middle-class identities. With the introduction of television and broadcasting of new shows which accelerated the adoption of modern lifestyles, Television quickly became an aspirational consumer good that every middle-class household aspired to possess. From routinely watching Doordarshan's sponsored Hindu mythologies such as Ramayana to emerging Tv shows viewers show how Television through its depiction of middle-class lifestyles and cultural identities paved the way for consumerist desires and practices. As a key consumer durable during marriage transactions, in Kanpur, electronics goods dealers reported a ten-fold rise in sales during the marriage season (Rajagopal, 2004). The ownership of a television set and more specifically a colored one was considered one of the indexes of middle-classness (Spiegel, 1992). Similarly, ownership of other household commodities such as the amount of furniture, kitchen appliances, and other goods became a crucial indicator of their position in upward mobility. Thus, the acquisition of household gadgets primarily Television became symbolic of their idea of becoming middle-class.

3. LOCATING MIDDLE-CLASS PRACTICES THROUGH TELEVISION SHOWS

As an empirical ground of analysis, this paper aims to examine the details of the web series 'Yeh Meri Family', which is one of the most loved web series of recent times. This TV series was directed by Sameer Saxena and starring Vishesh Bansal, Mona Singh, and Akarsh Khurana. Set in the summer of 1998, the series is a story of a middle-class family where a 12-year-old boy is shown with conflicting emotions towards his family. The series is pure bliss in terms of understanding the nuanced middle-class identities and practices in the small town of Jaipur, India. The story revolves around the middle child, Harshu (Vishesh Bansal) of the Gupta family struggling with his coming-of-age problems in a middle-class household. The plot starts with a mother (Mona Singh) getting the house painted for the summer, a brother preparing for his entrance examinations, and a father who heads for his job every morning and returns in the evening. The series shows an Indian mother who often tries to hold the family with her strict values like being busy arranging holiday tuition for her children, making them drink milk and get a shower but still manages to instill the mother's love in between her scoldings. The series is an accurate reflection of an Indian urban middle-class family with a lot of realistic everyday ordinariness of middle-class identities.

This paper examines that the idea of middle-classness rests within the ordinariness and uneventfulness as such the series 'Yeh Meri Family' explores this very ordinariness throughout its storyline. This paper attempts to bring out this middle-class characteristic within this given web series. We understand that AC and coolers have been symbolic household gadgets for middle-class families, and this was evidently depicted as Harshu narrating the start of summer vacation with the importance of the cooler. Moreover, the significance of mutual funds and mindful investment of money was presented through a small scene with Harshu's father and his colleagues. Another instance one can notice in the series is the concept of going out with the family for dinner. These practices of dining out with family members reinforce middle-class behaviors of viewing family with the idea of togetherness. From this point of argument, we can also mention about Doordarshan's first dramatic serial 'Hum Log' (We people), which shows the story of a lower-middle-class family struggling to attain upward mobility and become middle-class.

4. MIDDLECLASSNESS, ADVERTISEMENTS AND CONSUMERIST DESIRES

Despite the assumption that luxury goods give consumers with a better life is quite debatable, television was instrumental in spreading consumerism among the Indian middle classes. It was argued that the shift in state policy from investments in capital goods to consumer goods production was based particularly on the grounds that India could potentially become a 'modern' nation when its citizens achieve middle-class lifestyles through the acquisition of consumer products. The 1980s saw the rise of the middle-class population while the actual size still vary. The new middle-class consists of professionals, salaried employees of state bureaucracies, small-scale entrepreneurs, traders, and well-to-do farmers who possessed an annual income of about \$400 to \$1867. This figure was provided in the 'Far Eastern Economic Review' in January 1993. The emerging middle-class families were eventually captured by the television as the target audience for the televised programs and also for the goods advertised in the commercials. The new economic policies allowed the growing middle class to obtain consumer goods that were earlier considered as luxury items but were now perceived as crucial indicators for upward mobility such as household gadgets, packaged food, and other consumer products. The increased incomes of the new middle-class families began spending their income of consumer goods and thus began to be seen as a huge market for advertising companies. This expansion of the reach of television programs and commercials attracted consumers to a wide range of goods that could potentially make their lives more exciting, modern, and more middle-class (Mankekar, 1999). 'Yeh Meri Family' as a middle-class-oriented popular web series reveals a great deal about the class character of the target audience. The struggles of an Indian middle-class mother with her three children of different age group is quite beautifully depicted in the narrative. Although not explicitly, several consumer goods such as the children's health drink 'Bournvita', packaged ordered food, and coolers could be seen in between the scenes used by the characters. The upwardly mobile working class and lower-middle-class women argued that television offered a convenient source of entertainment that had earlier been denied to them. This was particularly observed among women who spend their time doing household work as well as those who worked outside the home. They could hardly get any time or opportunity to socialize. Their preferences varied according to class situations since lower-middle-class families won't relate to serials based on business-class families (Mankekar, 1999).

Different television programs and advertisements are targeted at different sections of the middle-class population. The desires and consumption capacities of these different sections vary from one another. Mankekar (1999) mentioned that while the English advertisements were evidently targeted at upper-middle-class viewers, the fact that many advertisements for expensive products were in Hindi suggests the expansion of the middle-class to include viewers comparatively less fluent in English. Besides that, the advertisements related to home appliances featured middle-class housewives which naturalized the gendered division of labor within the middle-class family and normalised the relationship of modern urban middle-class households with the consumption of these products. Moreover, although some advertisements were focused on personal comfort, glamour, etc., for the most part, they emphasize the lifestyles of the families rather than individuals. Thus, these instances assert how families were viewed as units of consumption.

Television surpasses the boundaries of local, translocal, and transnational by drawing its viewers into the larger sphere of consumption and desires. This important construction was the creation of desires for

different forms of modernity. The post-colonial state's initiative to modernize the nation was based on the fact that modernity would have to be "Indianized", thus agreeing upon the intersection between modernity and nationalism. After the mid-1980s, as liberalization paved the way for the transnational flow of capital, information, and capitalist desires, postcolonial modernity increasingly began to be articulated in terms of consumerism. In television discourses, modernity was often equated with the consumerist desires and aspirations of the viewers; as such consumerism became a significant indicator of modernity. Television played a critical role in forming the cultural constitution of middle-classness through consumerism (Mankekar, 1999). As mentioned before, middle-classness is not entirely based on aspiring to follow that upward mobility through consumerist behaviors but, it is also about understanding the nuanced or regular and ordinary life of middle-class households. While some viewers are enticed by the modern consumerist reflections of the television programs, leading them to behave in a similar manner while others are more comfortable in watching the relatable and ordinary middle-class depictions on television programs. For example, many viewers believed that acquiring the goods advertised on Doordarshan was important to their ascendance to middle-class status. While some households were more convinced by watching the non-business class-related narratives on television and connected more strongly with such content. Thus, while analyzing the problems and practices of middle-class identities, it becomes very much imperative in taking into account the hierarchy within the middle-class communities, the varying aspirations, and desires.

5. CONCLUSION

It can be noted that the audiences of mass media and television do not exist a priori. These audiences are created through meticulous programming strategies and marketing decisions and also the transnational flow of capital, commodities, and information and in many cases the agendas of the state. On that note, throughout this article, I observed an important point which is, the makers of television programs, the advertising companies are constantly in the process of either creating the particular audience base or targeting an existing group of audience to market their products. The urban middle-class was the key audience for redefining the idea of modernity. The program schedules were crafted carefully to work in sync with the school schedules that defined the everyday life of urban middle-class households. For example, television programming began after the school day when children are back from home and also around 8 to 10 p.m.- the "prime time" which was considered as the ideal time for middle-class leisure. (Punathambekar & Sundar, 2016). Mankekar, a cultural and social anthropologist tries to understand the influence of television through a political and cultural perspective and has successfully put forward her arguments as an ethnographic account. Her account was based on observations, interviews, and an examination on several works of literature and TV content. Her research was carried out between 1990-1992 and her informants were primarily and not exclusively middle-class women in India. On the other hand, Rajagopal's work "Politics after Television" is a densely researched and meticulously argued analysis of interactions on electronic and print media and the beginning of the Hindutva ideologies in the 1980s and 1990s. From the theoretical perspective of Birmingham school, my paper however tries to analyze the existing literature and more to understand the historical context and the gradual influence of television throughout the middle-class households of India. This analysis is further enhanced by the review of the popular web series "Yeh Meri Family" and locating the consumerist as well as everyday middle-class practices of Indian families.

As an important site of discussion, the term “middle-class” is not a straightforward description term and does not provide a specific definition that covers neatly the aspects of income, occupation, education, and other socioeconomic variables. To define “middle-class” in one definite description is quite complex in nature and needs critical attention while analyzing it. A wide range of cultural and political factors including language, religion, region, and, caste mediate claims and experiences of the emergence of the middle class (Beteille, 2001). In this article, I tried to focus on the web series “Yeh Meri Family”, a story of a young boy simple urban middle-class household in the city of Jaipur. Like a lot of television programs that primarily focus on the lives of middle-class households, “Yeh Meri Family” attempts to bring about the subtle details of an urban middle-class family while sticking to its core narrative. From everyday problems to day-to-day lifestyles, the Gupta Family appears as a perfect example of an urban middle-class household trying to make its way through everyday family dynamics. From popular television sitcoms such as “Yeh Jo Hain Zindagi”, “Wagle”, to one of the recent ones “Yeh Meri Family” evidently portrays that it was the urban middle-class’s presence that mattered the most as they were more focused on dealing with the ordinary, everyday aspect of the life of urban India. As such it is in this ordinariness that the growing middle-class interests and desires were presented as quite natural. These interests stem from the market-driven idea of modernity and progress where commodities were no longer scarce but rather could be quickly desired and attained in order to live an urban and modern middle-class lifestyle (Punathambekar & Sundar, 2017). Moreover, Arguing that media message is a distinct form of commodity, Hall points out that it is produced within a shared context of social understandings by broadcasters, consumed by the viewers, and reproduced as a part of a collective pool of ideas and meanings (Hall, 1980). From the Birmingham school’s perspective, the messages disseminated by these broadcasters are on different levels reinterpreted by the viewers according to the relatability of the content. Thus, acknowledging such layered meanings becomes imperative to our understanding of television content.

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