

# Gender, Television and Society: A Case Study

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It is by now a well recognized fact that the process of understanding the culture of a people includes the understanding of society as well. The media, in its various forms, functions as one of the major strategies through which cultural communication is achieved and social images built up. Through the media, whether of the print mode or the radio, the television or the film, it is possible to reach out to the vast majority of the population of a country with the minimum of effort. And this possibility of reaching out to the vast majority of the population of a country with the minimum of effort makes this mode even more critical as well as significant in social formation and discourse. Hence, it is in the study of the consequences of the communication that takes place on such grounds that the genuine researcher finds his/her access towards an understanding of society and societal relationships.

The Television or TV, as it is popularly known in India, is one medium of mass communication that is of extreme interest and consequence to women, in particular. The area of its influence and reach is of course not only widespread in the exterior sense but also within the family. This source of mass communication partakes of the private and the personal space of the home, which is conventionally regarded as the domain of women. As literacy or specialized understanding of the visual discourse is not a prerequisite for the viewer, it is easily accessible for the woman viewer, whether householder or student or the woman working outside the home. Here economic compulsions, social norms and communal or gender bias do not enter to hinder the viewers in any way. As a form of entertainment or education, this medium provides greatest access to women.

Taking into account these factors, advertisers and the producers of the popular soaps (called serials or mega-serials in the terminology of the Indian television world) target women as their consumers. They design their advertisements and programmes to attract the women viewers. But how are the women themselves being depicted in these programmes? And how do they respond to their projection in these television shows? What are the socio-cultural factors that go into the making of these programmes? These questions make interesting source points for the study of the culture of a people. I present here a study of the depiction of women in the television channels of Kerala. I also record the findings of a survey of the women viewers of differing age groups and their responses to the television programmes. This survey was conducted under the aegis of the Kerala Research Project on Local Level Development (KRPLLD) at the Centre for Development Studies (CDS), Trivandrum, Kerala.

## II

The television is, in fact a boon to the women in Kerala, who like their counterparts in other parts of India and elsewhere, have little scope for entertainment outside their homes. It has, in a sense, opened out a new world of entertainment and information for them, without much financial output or the need for dependency on others. In fact, it has created a revolution from within their homes, bringing in a wider perspective of the world outside without the physical need to move out. Yet the question that arises here is: how broad is the perspective that is supplied by the television, or to frame it differently, how limited is the perspective? The enormous reach of the television is a well-established fact. But how it has affected the lifestyles in Kerala and to what extent it has influenced the culture and thinking of the people here, especially the women in a relatively conservative society, is what this paper hopes to explore. I would like to discuss briefly the significance of television in the life of the Malayali women who are undoubtedly its main avid viewers. My argument centers round gender-specific relationships as seen on the small screen, particularly through its prime time programmes.

Let us take a look at the physical as well as the societal dimensions of television in Kerala through a simple incident

experienced by this research.

It was 7.30 pm when we finally managed to pay a visit to our friendly neighbour. She opened the door to us with a smile and invited us in, but for some reason the welcome seemed a little reluctant compared to her usual warmth and exuberance. We were rather puzzled at the lukewarm reception, for her invitation had seemed quite genuine at the time. So what was wrong now? The reasons were not far to seek. We were led inside to the living room, where we found the rest of the family seated in varying postures with their attention focused on the television, placed prominently in one corner of the room. The conversation that ensued, moved forward only in fits and starts, for the major source of attraction was the television box and the drama that unfolded onscreen, despite the fact that neither the characters nor the situation of the programme—which incidentally was one of the primetime serials—had any relevance to any of the people present in reality. As the serial paused for the advertisement-break, the mother of my host turned to me and broke into our conversation with the remark, 'Was it not mean of Hari to do that?' I racked my mind to remember which Hari she was talking about, but could remember none. Seeing my look of puzzled discomfiture, her daughter came to my rescue by explaining that Hari was one of the major characters in the serial. Though everyone laughed off the matter, it struck me then that this revealed but the tip of a serious social issue. The viewer had empathized so much with the story and the characters in the serial that Hari was as much a member of her close family circle and friends as the real people. And his actions as well as the story were so important to her existence that she identified completely with the situation. This led me to think seriously not only about the depiction of women on television, but also about the responses and the influence of the programmes on the women in question (the socio-cultural dimension)—particularly in the popular programmes professedly targeting the women viewers, but which are usually visualized by men and hence often take a male-centric position in production and casting. Even when women worked for these programmes or helped in their production, they were usually unwilling to stray from the usual male-centric position for fear of being dubbed 'feminist' and becoming marginalized in their working environment.

The working environment of the production crew in itself is

a very important starting point for this study in gender status. In the production area of the major television studios, very few women are seen in action. A random sample of the staff list of Surya TV, which includes the full-time as well as part-time workers on the channel's rolls would prove my point. Among the full fledged staff on the rolls there, women are a minimal per cent, and even then those in the managerial cadre exerting influence on the type and quality of programmes to be broadcast are few, or to be more precise, non-existing. Even the two women producers on the rolls are limited to producing typical women's programmes such as cookery, fashion or tailoring, or pre-designed film-based shoots or the film song programmes. In the case of casual hands, the number of women employees is more in the position of announcers or pre-planned presentations or even telephone attendants for song requests, where it is deemed that the women's physical appearance and gentle manners are more important than professionalism or ability in public management. It is the commonly accepted view that women are better at handling the public—gentler and more polite. They also provide greater visual appeal. But when it comes to on the road shows and live theatricals, young men or teenage boys are preferred. On the other hand, over 60 per cent of news-readers are women. Their work ethics in terms of reliability and their capacity as well as willingness to put in longer hours of work in the studio is hardly mentioned. What is pertinent is the fact that their personal opinions or views are not discussed on the television. Their job is only to deliver the script already written and given to them, and not to comment on them. Even the women experts appearing on the small screen are few in number, for women are usually invited only to speak on women's issues. For universal issues, particularly on matters of a general nature, all three channels prefer to interview men as experts. Perhaps the general consensus is that the women's viewpoint on matters of general interests cannot be taken seriously.

'Women's literature is in a sense the literature of the colonized', wrote Christine Rochfort, noted Feminist critic, referring to the marginalisation of the woman's voice and the exploitation of her body by the mainstream cultural orthodoxy. This statement aptly defines the role of the woman in television in general—the television is an arena of interior colonization, and consequently it has brought in a received visual awareness as well



as an aesthetic conceived in male terms. The woman does occupy an enviably prominent position on the small screen in this publicity-hungry age, however, in the power equation her image is controlled and manipulated by the implicit dominant patriarchal frames. Hence the questions to be explored here, particularly when we view them from a woman-centric perspective, are:

1. How much of this exposure is warranted? Is the woman in question receiving the kind of recognition that is due to her for her actions or achievements? Or is this a kind of exploitation merely for male-centered visual gratification?
2. What is the woman's active role in the decision making process with regard to her position on the television? Does the Woman—any woman—have an opinion on how women are represented on the small screen as elsewhere?
3. Is the woman viewer aware of her subjective position and the influence of the powerful medium on her thinking?

Any gender issue would perforce have to begin with the notions of sex and of gender as opposed to each other. Much of the prevalent stereotypes of woman arise out of the confusion with regard to terminology and usage—the term 'sex' being used in place of 'gender'. All the socio-cultural factors that go into the making of the woman as accepted by the popular, such as dress code, patterns of social behaviour, even management of space and time, are treated as merely biological factors, and stereotypes of the female are reiterated through the socio-cultural milieu/pursuits. It is assumed that a woman has to appear, act, or talk in a particular way, if she were to be socially acceptable. Likewise there are particular dress codes and prescribed patterns of behaviour as well as a common female space allotted to women. In dressing and wearing the latest designer wear costumes, the Malayali woman is much slower than her counterparts in the other states. As anywhere else in the world, socially acceptable codes of conduct were prescribed for women and they had to work within that basic framework. The following table, which is indicative of sex role stereotypes prevalent in America in the early seventies, may not be out of place here for it gives a clear inkling of gender-stereotyping in society:

Table of Masculine and Feminine Qualities Taken from an  
Appraisal of sex-role Stereotypes Conducted in 1972

Feminine Pole in More Desirable

<i>Feminine</i>	<i>Masculine</i>
Doesn't use harsh language at all	Uses very harsh language
Very talkative	Not at all talkative
Very tactful	Very blunt
Very gentle	Very rough
Very aware of feelings of others	Not at all aware of feelings of others
Very religious	Not at all religious
Very interested in own appearance	Not at all interested in own appearance
Very neat in habits	Very sloppy in habits
Very quiet	Very loud
Very strong need for security	Very little need for security
Enjoys art and literature	Does not enjoy art and literature at all
Easily expresses tender feelings	Does not express tender feelings at all

Masculine Pole is More Desirable

<i>Feminine</i>	<i>Masculine</i>
Not at all aggressive	Very aggressive
Not at all independent	Very independent
Very emotional	Not at all emotional
Does not hide emotions at all	Almost always hides emotions
Very subjective	Very objective
Very easily influenced	Not at all easily influenced
Very submissive	Very dominant
Dislikes Maths and Science very much	Likes Maths and Science very much
Very excitable in a minor crisis	Not at all excitable in a minor crisis
Very passive	Very active
Not at all competitive	Very Competitive
Very illogical	Very logical
Very home-oriented	Very worldly

<i>Feminine</i>	<i>Masculine</i>
Not at all skilled in business	Very skilled in business
Very sneaky	Very direct
Does not know the way of the world	Knows the way of the world
Feelings easily hurt	Feelings not easily hurt
Not at all adventurous	Very adventurous
Has difficulty making decisions	Can make decisions easily
Cries very easily	Never cries
Almost never acts as a leader	Almost always acts as a leader
Not at all self-confident	Very self-confident
Very uncomfortable about being aggressive	Not at all uncomfortable about being aggressive
Not at all ambitious	Very ambitious
Unable to separate feelings from ideas	Easily able to separate feelings from ideas
Very dependent	Not at all dependent
Very conceited about appearance	Never conceited about appearance
Thinks women are always superior to men	Thinks men are always superior to women

Source: Glen Jordan and Chris Weedon, *Cultural Politics: Class, Gender, Race and the Postmodern World*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford and Massachusetts, 1995, pp. 180-1.

Though this table is indicative of studies conducted in the sixties in the United States, much of the gender stereotyping suggested by the table is relevant to us here in Kerala. And the television of Kerala is perhaps one of the best indicators of the popular trends here.

Although feminism as a political movement gained prominence in the early part of the century, popular prejudice regarding gender continued in both men as well as women's minds as evidenced from the above table. Such popular notions of the woman as the 'other' as quite different from the normal male who was the standard, whereas she was the deviant, existed even among the so-called educated and intellectual elite. And these notions have been illustrated by the soap operas, popularly called the serials in all the Indian television channels. The women portrayed in these sitcoms follows many of these stereotypes. The typed roles of the wife, the sister, the daughter and the mother in particular are rarely deviated from.

Even today, few people, either male or female, comprehend that women, like all other creatures, are individuals, acting, reacting and responding independently and individually, not en masse like a herd of migrating wild beast. In her detailed study of the biological/culture-based critique of the woman as the 'other', *The Second Sex* (1949) of Simone de Beauvoir, the French thinker, speaks vehemently about such gender role stereotyping:

She is simply what man decrees; thus she is called 'the sex', by which is meant that she appears essentially to the male as a sexual being. For him she is sex—absolute sex no less. She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute—she is the Other (p. 16).

Hence the gender stereotyping of women—in their roles as dutiful daughters, wives, mothers, housewives, nurses and unpaid domestics—always expected to be caring, suffering, passive, and hardworking, but never looking for reward of any sort. They have an existence only with relation to man, in the popular imagination. They are seen and see themselves in the role of the protagonist in the poem 'the Angel in the House' by the British poet, Coventry Patmore, which the British novelist Virginia Woolf finds self-defeating. Woolf's account of her is very revealing due to her lateral thinking:

She was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily .... In short she was so constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others. Above all ... she was pure. Her purity was supposed to be her chief beauty—her blushes, her great grace.

In fact, she becomes the epitome of the good woman as we popularly see her in literature, in film, on the theatre and especially on the television—in short too good to be true.

Such gender stereotypes are common to much of Western literature and its visual adaptations on film and television. The characters of popular American fiction and cinema are usually either variations of Eve or Pandora as sources of evil, and demonic projections or Delilah and Circe as temptresses. The women in the famed Westerns, (film or literature) for instance, are mere foils,



fitting into the male requirements. They are either harlots and sirens or mere appendages to the male lead figure. They are never treated as individuals but are mere types—either, very good, morally virtuous and puritanical, or totally bad, the epitome of meanness, evil and immorality. Society as such seems arranged to suit a patriarchal order. The male protagonists of these tales also fit into a typical pattern—that of the modern day macho hero/anti-hero—Oedipus, Ulysses, Hamlet, Captain Ahab, Huckleberry Finn, or the inordinately evil villain with his motiveless malignity. These figures are very easily translated and adapted into the cultural context of the Malayalam story as well. In fact, when the question of adaptation for the Malayalam screen of some of these so-called classics came up, a reputed filmmaker was overheard commenting, 'Why translate and bother about copyright and permission? Let us simply absorb them into Malayalam'. Given the contexts, this was not obviously difficult. The problem as seen in the context of the Malayalam film can also be applied to the Malayalam television. The close parallels are seen not only in the matter of story or content, but even in the choice of heroine. For many of the actors and actresses on the Malayalam screen as in the case of the television are former theatre persons. The primary difference between the two being in the absence of dance sequences on the small screen as well as in the greater number of close up and indoor scenes, in contrast to the wider frame of the cinema. In the power as well as the range of women characters there is close similarity between the film and the serials on television in Kerala. They follow the typical wife, mother, daughter, sister and female villain (either an in-law or greedy aunt or the other woman). This is more true of the Malayalam film of the 1990s and the present in comparison to those of the sixties and the seventies, many of which had more individualistic and powerful women characters, capable of thinking for themselves and acting on their own initiative, unlike their more recent counterparts who seem to function merely as extensions of the male characters or simply exist to decorate the screen and provide visual pleasure for the so-called male imagination or fantasy. They are used to provide some visual gratification for the masses (what in ordinary speech is referred to as mass appeal). In fact, most well known actresses acting in the present Malayalam cinema complain about the lack of powerful roles in contemporary Malayalam cinema, particularly the popular film, which would give them an opportunity to display their acting prowess. Once again

the wide-spread insistence on qualities such as virtuousness, purity, patience, tolerance and obedience in popular women's characters are indicative of the subservience of women's initiatives in their popular socio-cultural role as well. The actresses are type cast in roles such as the loving and dedicated mother, the dutiful wife, the suffering sister, the obedient daughter and so on. On the other side there are the figures of the mean mother-in-law, the errant daughter-in-law, the selfish daughter, sister, usually married off by demanding their dues.

Studies regarding the gendered power structuring of societies and their consequences have thrown much light on this problem. Kate Millett, the American sociologist, has, in her book *Sexual Politics* (1969) analyzed such gendered power-structuring of society with great clarity and perception. Elaine Showalter, the British critic, is another person who perceptively tries to identify gender stereotypes in the British literature of the nineteenth century to exemplify the obvious. In her book, *A Literature of their Own* (1977), she identifies the three phases of the British women's writing thus:

1. Feminine (1840-80)—imitative of the masculine tradition. In this phase, there was little difference between the woman's writing and that of the male writer in terms of perception. For example when the British writer Mary Anne Evans wrote under the pen name of George Eliot, no one realized the difference in gender, for there was not much difference in perception in her writing from that of the mainstream male writers of the period. All the accepted stereotypes of woman could be seen in her writing.
2. Feminist (1880-1920—the protest phase. During this phase, the woman's voice took on a more aggressive tone, defying the hitherto accepted stereotypical roles of the woman. Woman began to consciously and exaggeratedly dress and behave like the men, and thereby hoped to achieve some measure of equality with the male.
3. Female (1920 to the present)—In this phase, of exploring her female identity, she seems to have tried to come to terms with her self as it is. This involves a deeper study into her own uniqueness, rather than an acceptance of her treatment as the other—in purely male-centric terms.

All this is from the writer or creator's point of view. But it identifies and highlights prevailing studies that identified gender

stereotyping, and points to the possibility and the need for a genuine woman's voice. Various other studies from the woman's point of view dwelt upon the phallogentric nature of language and its masculine power structures. The derogatory depiction of woman in commonplace parlance, such as colloquial usages and proverbs, as well as its impact on the unsophisticated mindset is quite evident in these studies. Hence the clichéd images of woman persist in the perception and parlance of popular culture, regardless of whether the storyline is situated in the West or in India, or even in the so-called educationally elite and socially conscious state of Kerala.

### III

Television audiences in Kerala, as well as in the broader framework of India and the production staff of television programmes, both off and on screen, on the whole, seem to be totally ignorant of basic differences between the ideas of sex and gender. They do not appear to discriminate between sex as a biological fact and gender as a social construct, and thereby tend to operate within the prevailing gender stereotypes. To them, the woman is usually a mere body—attractive or otherwise. She is, as in casual parlance, a 'sex-object'. She is not expected to act or think for herself. She is, just expected to adorn and obey and fit into the popular male-centric notions of what a woman should be. Therefore the average woman becomes the epitome of patience, love, sympathy, tolerance, suffering and self-sacrifice. As in the sitcoms, she is faithful to her partner even when he tortures and torments her or totally neglects her. If she expresses a different opinion or vouchsafes a newer approach, she is instantly marginalized and seen as a danger to society. Her adherence to the phallogentric norms is important for her continual subjugation and the furtherance of male-centered socio-cultural preoccupations. Survey statistics reveal that 90 per cent of the women hold that an ideal wife/mother/sister/daughter-in-law/daughter is one who is obedient and prepared to fit in with the conventional notions of woman. This image of woman is accepted and projected in the main by both the commercially oriented mainstream cinema as well as the art film, except in the case of individualistic film makers; the argument usually being that the image projected on screen was simply a concretization of what the viewers demanded of the film maker. Even the woman filmmaker and/or director quite often adhered to this picture,

perhaps out of fear of societal censure or simply lack of individualistic vision.

In the visual medium, unlike the film the woman's presence is more pervasive. They feature as presenters, newsreaders, actresses and models. In fact, in many of these cases, women seem to be preferred to men. They are seen constantly on the screen in different roles. But the genuine question seems to be: are they? Are their authentic thoughts and feelings ever taken into consideration or are the merely cardboard figures brought forth from male-centered imagination? Do they have a specifically woman-centric point of view or do they merely echo their master(s)? Is there any justification for typecasting their uniqueness and limiting their individuality to a few stereotypes? The women on television, it may be maintained, are usually merely 'voices' or 'figures' for voicing other people's opinions or viewpoints.

There are basically two aspects to women and television:

- i) their visual presence on the television—the women on the screen, and
- ii) they also form the bulk and essence of the viewership—the women as consumers or viewers.

The question that comes up here for discussion is, how much of the image of the woman on television is real or, by extension, how much of the real individual is modeled on the hero on the tube? This study attempts to analyze the problem from these angles in their various aspects.

Woman presence in the visual medial has been undoubtedly ubiquitous—the only question seems to be whether it is active or passive. Women appear as faces on the television, or as bodies, but only rarely as thinkers or experts. They are employed as presenters, hostesses, scorers, actors, dancers, singers and even occupy an important position as part of the audience viewed during a programme, yet they are rarely called upon to voice their opinion on serious matters such as politics, current affairs, economic policy unless directly concerned with women's issues. In fact most women experts complain that they are rarely asked to give their opinion unless it is on a woman-centered issue. The women presenters are usually there because they have a pleasant face, voice or personality and will be able to make the matter they render seem appealing to the masses. They almost never voice their opinions. They are given a script, which they learn by heart and render as required by the



director. In fact, most interviewers, male or female are specifically instructed to keep their personal opinions or views out of the discussions they participate in, in the name of objectivity. They are, in actuality enacting a role, faithfully, another male-directed role, with little intellectual or emotional participation in it. They are even given instructions, sometimes explicitly regarding their dress for the role. In fact, sari was a first considered imperative for most woman presenters on screen, specifically in Kerala. Other dresses were strictly taboo. This rule seems to be upheld even today by the news-readers, the most conservatively dressed of the presenters. Now that other dresses have become socially acceptable, they are allowed on small screen as well.

The Malayalam television channels, like the other channels within India and abroad, are full of portraits of stereotypical images of woman, and these appear to echo the socio-cultural ethos. Despite Kerala's matrilineal heritage and her people's claims to better literacy and greater educational standards for both the women and men, there is very little evidence of better social position for the women living there. In fact, the practice of dowry, which was once lesser known to the formerly predominantly matrilineal Kerala society is now a popular socially accepted practice. The widespread use of purdah on the streets and the limiting of certain spaces to women or men alone, in social gatherings and particularly in places of worship, with such fanatical severity, is a comparatively recent phenomenon. The woman is given little respect (as evidenced even from the language used for women in popular television), commensurate with her better educational level and income-earning capacity. On the screen as elsewhere in society, she is treated as a mere sex object or a glorified unpaid and unrecognized servant, even within the family and few of her other less stereotypical virtues are even noticed, leave alone highlighted. Very often she is treated on par with an infant, and often attributed the intelligence of the child, even though a little overgrown. Her maturity and sophistication are usually ignored and her worldly wisdom treated as non-existent. Sometimes she is given a slightly better position than that of her child—although she may be educated and working outside the home as a wage earner, sometimes the sole breadwinner in a family. If she is intelligent and beautiful, she usually underplays her brains, beauty and other achievements with extreme guile, in order to achieve even her most simple and obvious ends. Otherwise she is visualized as being a

threat to society due to her greater abilities. This is the popular image of woman seen in Kerala's television channels and in particular the Malayalam television channels, even to this day. What is surprising is the fact that greater literacy and educational standards as well as economic progress seem to have made little difference to the woman's place in the socio-cultural realm. In fact, though the educational levels of women and their proven capacity in the intellectual fields (for example, the rank holders in most exams are usually women) they usually bow down to family and societal pressures often rejecting transfers and promotions in the interests of the family which takes their sacrifice for granted and rarely achieve the targets they are capable of. Close content analyses of film and in particular television programmes reiterate the self-sacrificing image of the woman, who places her family ahead of her, and forgoes her career promotion either for fear of the male ego or sexual exploitation or even insinuation. The television therefore, by providing the role models and reaching them inside their homes has thereby a prime role in perpetrating the subservient image of the good woman. In fact, survey results point to the fact that many women strive to be obedient and self-effacing in order to fit into the frame of the ideal, whether mother, daughter, sister, wife or in-law. Thus it is possible to clearly point to the role of the television sitcom in Kerala in the suppression of the woman's position in the state. This seems to be in contrast to the projected image of the modern woman in either Tamil Nadu or Karnataka, both urban and rural, who displays a certain inherent vitality and independence quite alien to the Kerala woman. This is quite evident from the serials that are re-runs of the other language counterpart. An example in point would be the serial *Manga* from Tamil, whose protagonist, even while fitting into the mould displays some initiative and decisive power in word as well as deed. She leaves her husband and takes an independent step forward on her own when called upon by her husband and his family to abandon the children she has adopted. She prefers to stand by her independent convictions, even when ranged against society in the form of her husband and his family. The protagonist of *Sthree*, the wholly Malayalam serial, on the contrary, is so self-effacing that she gives away even her beloved child for the selfish pleasure of her former husband and his second wife. Her totally subjective position has evoked a wide range of responses from women viewers ranging from revulsion to admiration of her capacity to suffer. Enjoying

unprecedented popularity as the first megaserial in Malayalam, this phenomenon broke all previous records, and made public the true position of women in the Malayali psyche.

The television came to Kerala in 1985 when the Doordarshan Kendra Trivandrum was commissioned. But it was only in 1994 that the regional language satellite channel was introduced and Malayalam programmes came to be produced. Much of the early programmes depended on translations from English or Hindi, and it took some time for the Kerala culture to be viewed from the Malayali point of view. Asianet the first private channel began transmission in the early 1990s. This created a major socio-cultural revolution in the pattern of Kerala society for it introduced Kerala culture and the fast-changing developments in its tradition quite blatantly. Despite the obvious and overt influence of the neighbouring Tamil and Hindi channel programmes, it was, in a sense the first popular wholly Malayalam TV channel. It found a competitor in the Surya TV channel, launched forth in 1998 by the Sun TV network. Much of the programmes of both these television networks are film-based, particularly with regard to the popular, formula film (the dream machine that churns out impossible dreams to bring solace to the over-worked average person), which often has little to do with the practicalities of daily living. Yet the channels manage to reflect the changing trends in contemporary Kerala society. The newest channel to transmit Malayalam programmes is the Kairali channel which started telecasting in Malayalam since August 2000.

The television has since entered the Kerala household on a large scale and its influence on the Malayali psyche has assumed unimaginable proportions. A large majority of Malayali households possess televisions or almost all people have some access to it. Age, gender, class, caste or level of education is no hindrance to television viewing. Watching TV, talking about its various programmes, and often substituting its world for the real has become almost a way of life. Lifestyles have changed to incorporate TV schedules. Patterns of socializing, religious devotion, and outdoor activities among Keralites (men, women or children) have changed considerably. In fact, social visits, religious rituals, and even study timetables are decided after viewing the daily/weekly television schedules. The daily timetables for students prescribed by the school authorities allot a specific timeslot daily for television viewing. Cinematic dance, dress parades and such entertainment rituals, clearly influenced

by the television, are now part of the stage performance of every school. The television and its schedule often extend beyond their professed domain and occupy not only leisure time but take up study time and enter the working environment through discussions. Television programmes, their story content, the depiction of the tale, the portrayal of news by various channels, even the appearance (the dress, the accessories or the hair styles) of the presenter are discussed, not only in the homes, but also in the work place.

Surveys reflect that even the busiest of individuals devote at least some part of their hectic schedule to television viewing. Patterns of television viewing differ from individual to individual. While news and current affairs programmes are regarded as educational, other programmes such as serials and film songs as well as the Sunday movies are considered as mere entertainment and thereby relaxing. The various Quiz programmes, including the music competitions, and the live campus or road shows are both informative and entertaining, and hence popular. Each of these programmes has its own exclusive and hence captive viewership. While the men in a household claim to prefer to watch news and political coverage as well as sports, the women, on the whole fall into the stereotypical pattern of viewing the serials and the films as well as film-based programmes. Of course none of these assumptions are final, for there are several men who regularly view the serials as well as the film based programmes, and many women who prefer news, politics or current affairs to mere song and dance, or catching up on the soaps. Yet the survey statistics point to the stereotypical viewership pattern.

The Quiz shows and their dramatic popularity on the tube is indeed a recent phenomenon. As they are supposed to provide both information and entertainment, they are encouraged by most families, even the conservative ones, that normally ban television viewing for children. They also allow the viewers a certain degree of participation, almost by proxy, even if not very active participation. One of the most popular programmes, almost phenomenal in its success, is, of course *Kaun Banega Crorepati* anchored by Amitabh Bachan, popular on primetime Star TV on most weekdays. Though not conceived or produced in Malayalam, it has captivated Malayali audiences, as much as audiences anywhere else in India. The typical *American Dream* of getting rich quickly, without much effort or even intelligence by answering simple questions that do not even test the brains or memory of an average



individual, brings the possibility of immense wealth closer to the average person. In this programme, gender, class, caste, educational level or upbringing seems to matter little in the common man's race for riches. On the Malayalam Asianet channel, the FTQ or Family TeleQuiz, provided a much watered down version of this. This programme completed its 100th telecast recently. The stakes here are hardly a match for the KBC ones, but what attracts the viewer is the fact that they do not have to be physically present for the quiz. As the participants phone in and answer questions, there is a partial degree of anonymity, and even the shy can participate. This is perhaps one reason why a large number of housewives and others, usually shying away from publicity participate unhesitatingly in the show. The presence of a woman on the other side as interrogator without a severely critical tone or a harsh attitude could be another of the reasons for the popularity of the programme. Of late there have been newer entrants to the Malayalam television scene, such as the programme *Kodeswaran* on Surya TV. Anchored by the Malayalam film actor, Mukesh, it seems to be gradually gaining ground in the popular Malayali psyche. Though the setting and tone are very much like the Hindi one, the questions are more localized.

Another much touted programme on the Malayalam small screen is the talk show. Here the most popular show seems to be the one called *Nammal Thammil* anchored by Srikantan Nair on Asianet which recently completed its 300th programme. In this show, prominent individuals discuss their views on specific topics and respond to an invited audience. The show is meant to be contemporary and controversial in its approach. But the question of whether it achieves its aims is debatable. In the 300th episode, for instance, the topic under discussion was the reduction of importance of women on the Malayalam screen. The topic at the outset seemed gender sensitive, but the discussion followed the usual pattern, with men lined up on one side away from the women. The final comment from the anchor lying the blame on the female audience, rather than the film makers (who were all male), for the neglect of the strong woman character on screen, revealed a gender insensitivity verging on the ridiculous.

Almost all discussions on gender issues on the television follow this general pattern with the men lining up against the women, unashamedly making ignorant sexist statements in a forthright manner. A typical example would be that women incite rape by

wearing provocative clothes, disregarding the fact that the rape victim is often a school child, oblivious of her sex. Here the tendency is to remove sympathy and guilt from the public position and replace it with blame so that the violence against women can be continuously perpetrated by the ignorant masses with a clean conscience. Even in the women's programmes, the same pattern is reiterated, with the women's voices, often including that of the female anchor, being shouted down by the authoritarian and even silly but predictable male responses.

Unlike cinema, which was one of the most important sources of entertainment until then, television did not require additional investment or transport for the viewer. In the case of the cinema or theatre, the ardent viewer would have to at first procure a ticket, requiring investment of money, time and energy. Then, she would need to go to the theatre investing more money, time and energy, and then the same procedure on the return. Sometimes, especially if the viewer were a woman, the whole procedure would require prior planning of schedules, perhaps the permission of people in authority and even require a set of willing and acceptable companions. All this effort, time and money could be saved upon when television brought in the entertainment. Unlike the cinema, which required that she venture into public space (and therefore male escort or other companionship) and required financial commitment (for the tickets, for transport), as well as social sanction, here she could be totally self-reliant apparently, watching her favourite programmes from within the confines of her home, of which she was supposedly in charge.

But even here, studies show that time management proved to be a very big problem for her. Her time was clearly not her own, for she had to wait till she met with the demands of the rest of her family (the husband, her children or the other elders in the family), on her as well as her own socio-cultural or other commitments. Often the woman had to wait her turn till the other members of her family had finished with watching the programmes of their choice. Even then the woman, in particular the housewife, often felt acutely guilty about spending her leisure time viewing television, rather than being gainfully employed elsewhere. In fact, giving in to popular demand, particularly from women, the Asianet channel, had slotted one of its most popular serials *Sthree* for a rerun at 23.30 hours so that those (the viewers being mainly women) who could not view the programme at the prime time of 19.30-20.00

hours need not be denied their pleasure!

The soaps, popularly termed the serials also project a similar picture of the woman. Almost all the Malayalam serials, and in particular the more popular ones are clearly directed at the female viewer. The titles, the title songs as well as the thematic content reveal this prevalent bias. They all include words like *Sthree*, and *Pennui* (woman and girl respectively) and are full of projections of the typical female stereotypes of literature and cinema alike. In the serial *Sthree* telecast by Asianet for instance, the protagonist Indu marries Hari against socio-familial norms, but she wins over the people in the family who matter in the family power structure very soon through her goodness of heart, polite and docile behaviour and servile nature. But when Indu is separated from Hari by some mischance, they make haste to marry him off to another girl. Hari himself goes ahead with the marriage after an initial show of unwillingness. On her return, when appraised of the situation, Indu opts to keep out of Hari's ken and relinquish her legal and conjugal rights to the man and his property out of certain mistakenly emotional notions of sacrifice and female obligation. She stays single and devoted to the man throughout his misadventures in the serial. It was concluded in June 2000 after a record 390 episodes. Though initially supposed to conclude by 260 episodes, the serial dragged on moving from plot to subplot due to its widespread mass appeal. The heroine became the epitome of the Malayali woman, with her soft-spoken, ever submissive manner and restrained deportment, always dressed formally in a sari or clothes that were correct and 'decent' as opposed to the tomboyish or unbecoming clothes of the female anti-hero. In short she was the typical male ideal of a perfect wife, helpful, but not interfering, present but not intrusive. This accounts for the record revenue brought in by the advertisements alone for this serial for the channel and the rise in expected revenue. To quote a report from *The Hindu*:

Asianet says it had jacked up the advertisement rates from the initial Rs. 8,000 to Rs. 12,000 for 10 seconds. Advertisements have been filling up at least seven minutes of each 30 minute episode. And according to the quoted rates, the channel has been earning more than Rs. 5 lakhs a day and Rs. 1 crore a month (sources, however say the revenue has been much higher).

All these reasons prompted the channel to launch a sequel to the

programme. From an epitome of suffering and silent forbearing, the protagonist of *Sthree* and her equally smart girlfriends progressed into independent, self-reliant young women, a 'jwala', fire burning with hope and enthusiasm for mankind in general. The three friends, professedly orphans, brought up by an apparently socially committed person, are modern in dress, outlook, and career options. They take controversial and significant professional decisions on their own. Yet when questions of their personal life come up, they are quite helpless and dependant on male emotional assistance. Their decisions are often sympathetic to women in helpless and dependant situations. But they never display their independence or smart demeanor in the presence of figures of male authority in their own personal lives. Recent surveys point to a reduction of interest in the new version of the serial. The number of advertisements has also gone down considerably clearly revealing the decline in public interest.

Apart from the prototypical pure woman, there is also the figure of the villainous female, who is independent in thought and deed, and dresses often in tomboyish clothes (read unfeminine, and thereby unacceptable), is harsh or rash in her speech and mannerisms. She usually ends up being punished for her harshness and is usually betrayed by her men (husband, father or son) and regrets her unseemly behaviour towards the end of the story, sometimes turning over a new leaf and regretting her actions or making amends for them in some way.

By deflecting responsibility from men, the woman is placed in the role of 'gatekeeper', as in the case with Indu, the prototypical *Sthree* taking up responsibility for both her own and her man's (here partner's) sexual behaviour. As in popular cinema, women characters are seen as 'the icing on the cake—upholding traditional virtue' of virginity, religious devoutness, and sincerity and reliability whether to god or family or service to man (M. Pendakur 'New Cultural Technologies and the Fading Glitter of Indian Cinema', *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, 1989, vol. 11, pp. 69-78).

Another interesting sociological factor that emerges from this study is the fact that almost all the popular Malayalam serials are placed in the Nair or more often the Namboodri setting, revealing the feudal historical background. The sympathy is more often with the former upper class figures and their downfall, with the brunt of the suffering falling on the female characters who are



made to suffer for the former evil deeds of their menfolk. There is a certain underlying camaraderie between the women regardless of class or caste. Representatives of the three major religious groups feature in almost all the serials and the cosy picture of religious amity even in adversity broken up by complications arising out of close intermingling and misunderstandings leading to caste wars, form some of the major themes in the serials. Family forms the core of these stories. Here, the presence of the women with their distinctive dress styles, codes of conduct as well as partaking off external space is very significant in establishing the context. So, regardless of whether the background and setting of the serial is a disintegrating *tharavad* of a feudal past or a modern nuclear family in the urban setting, the woman's position remains more or less the same.

In the serial *Charulatha* telecast by Surya TV at primetime, efforts were made to portray the modern woman, efficient and independent in her thinking. Though the serial earned a great deal of popularity initially, and earned for the lead actress a permanent niche in the world of the teleserial, its success decreased after a period. Most viewers felt that the character was too independent to be real and hence the fallout. They preferred the stereotypical figure of the woman to such freethinking individuals.

As far back as 1934, the well-known aesthetician, John Dewey, in his book *Art as Experience* (1934) pointed out the transient nature of popular culture. In his own words:

Some aesthetic products have an immediate vogue; they are the 'best sellers' of their day. They are 'easy' and thus make a quick appeal; their popularity calls out imitators, and they set the fashion in plays or novels or songs for a time. But their very ready assimilation into experience exhausts them quickly; no new stimulus is derived from them. They have their day and only a day (p. 167).

Popular television with its instant appeal to an appreciative and gullible viewership has a very wide reach. The social consequences of the messages carried across are also immediate. There is no question of the viewer having to bring into use his/her own intelligence or critical/discerning capacity. Hence the danger of false images or stereotypes being perpetrated is much worse in this medium. The immediate impact, the widespread appeal, and the direct visual allure can have both positive and negative consequences, if not consciously curbed by the persons concerned.

Sometimes, the impressions carried forward are widespread and long lasting, even though created thoughtlessly or impetuously. This is true of the Malayalam television channels as well. Despite the claims to greater intellectuality and higher literacy, the Malayali remains as ignorant of the issues of gender discrimination, and for the most, gender-insensitive as any other average television viewer, producer or presenter.

#### IV

Kerala's large workforce of women working outside the home, made it possible for women to have a greater economic freedom, financial stability, and power of choice. The more recent phenomenon of the smaller *nuclear* family unit gave the housewife greater control over income and expenditure. She developed ways of either assisting the earning partner or finding new sources of additional income. Consequently the standard of living of the family improved. The possession of a television became within the reach of the average Malayali with the mass production of televisions and the greater affordability of a set for the masses became possible with the lowering of costs as well as the invasion of financial institutions offering various types of loans. So the access to a television set became easier for a larger number of people.

Realising the economic potential of women, as well as their interest in the well being of their family, commercial companies targeted the woman in their advertising campaigns. With the onset of the widespread commercialization of Doordarshan and the perpetration of private television channels, prime time programmes were often sponsored by the advertisers and their products. Advertising and the title song took up almost one third of the serial time, in the most popular ones, according to my study, conducted under a project sponsored by the KRPLLD. The actual story telling and action of the serial took up only 17 to 18 minutes of the allotted 30 minutes (which included the updates of the story), while the rest of the time was taken up by advertisements at intervals during the programme and the title song.

Here is a sample break up of the time allotment during *Charulatha*, rated as one of the most popular serials on Surya television. The programme goes on air during the 21.35 and 22.05 timeslot:

Advertisement	: 9 seconds
Title song	: 2 minutes
Serial	: 4 minutes 51 seconds
Advt.	: 3 minutes 27 seconds (10 nos.)
Serial	: 7 minutes 15 seconds
Advt.	: 2 minutes 54 seconds (11 nos.)
Serial	: 6 minutes 6 seconds
Title song	: 2 minutes

Total Time taken:

Advt.	: 6 minutes 21 seconds
Title song	: 4 minutes
Serial	: 18 minutes 12 seconds

In short the actual serial took up only a little over half the time allotted to it, the rest of the time being concerned with commercials and credits. This is a good indicator of the importance of commercial values in the creation as well as marketing of a serial. In fact, advertisements can be described as almost perfect specimens of the short film, for their sheer powers of expression and capacity to communicate to much in such a little time. As women form much of the target audience for the advertisements, their portrayal on screen in the advertisements is clearly of prime significance.

In the advertisements, there are two, sometimes contr-adiictory pictures of the woman that gained representation. In the first, she is the sex object pandering to the male ego, either as hapless victim or helpless female or servile but adoring and considerate assistant. The unnecessary use of the woman's body in advertisements has been the topic of discussion at most intelligent gatherings. Many advertisements use the voyeuristic interest in the female body to draw attention to their products. The female form is unclothed and projected ad nauseam as in the advertisement for a bike where each part of the bike is equated to some part of the woman's body, to be ridden by the conquering male. The women herself is often seen as a mysterious identity to be won over by special scents and perfumes, or even certain male underwear. Or she takes on the roles of the dutiful daughter, loving wife or adoring mother subordinating herself continually and giving up her personal pleasures for the greater social needs of her family. Almost all the Wheel soap powder advertisements where the use of the right soap

powder by the wife brings in promotion for the husband, or the advertisement for Ujjala where the child comes in for ridicule on account of the wrong choice of blue by the housewife come under this category. The housewife, in these advertisements, identifies herself and her choices completely with the other members of her family. She was also presented as source of expenditure for the husband or the father in some of the advertisements either due to the childishness of her choices or is seen as someone to be pampered or fussed over. The gold and jewellery advertisements as well as the textile advertisements fall within this category. But the first category where she was projected as the alluring but mysterious sex symbol who could entice anyone with her hidden wiles was definitely the most popular. Her presence in advertisements for male clothing, after shave or even exclusive male underwear was considered, not merely welcome but imperative. In all these advertisements, the notion of the woman as the 'other', as an unknown but mysterious identity yet appreciative of the male assistance, particularly of the 'macho' type, was reiterated. The third portrait was that of the so-called emancipated modern woman—with her quick shrewd and efficient actions and decisions. This woman was always seen as smart, well-dressed, smiling, outgoing and efficient unlike the helpless and hapless counterpart of the past. Here she was the individual in control of the household finances, capable of choice and selection. Even when not the wage-earner, she was a shrewd operator, choosing well in the interests of the family. Here also she was seen as an epitome of sacrifice and service to the family.

For the Malayali, such large scale pampering of the woman as householder gave her a greater sense of importance and well being. Identifying with the projections of woman on TV, she saw herself as an efficient and confident householder. As consumer, the women viewers approximated more towards the ideal on the television, smarter in apparel and appearance, and shrewd and efficient with regard to time or money management. She was seen both within the household as well as outside it. She moved with dignity and was treated with greater respect by the retailer. On television she saw herself as the rest of the world saw her—often in terms of the male-centered society. She was the viewer who observed projections of her ideal self and often strove towards the idealized approxi-



ations. Yet the ideals on the advertisements gave her greater confidence while moving around the outer spaces. The Kerala woman who was once seen only in the household, the temple or the festival ground, now went shopping, drove her own vehicle and managed her child's education. Her confidence even whilest moving outside the traditional areas grew manifold.

The television, in Kerala in particular, often took over the role of the older-woman of the former joint family setting, often acting as advisor, comforter and mentor. The cooking classes meant particularly for women as well as the women's programmes with health and beauty advice and instructions for improving the household or tips on handling relationships fall within this category. And since mothers and grandparents had very little time for story telling, the television took over this task as well, telling tales, particularly enlarging upon the exploits of the mythological heroes. These stories, very popular from the outset, are handed down from one lingo to the other, with a mere change in the language. The story bias is understandably male-centered with its perpetration of the stereotypical figures of the female. In our survey, a large number of women quoted Parvathi, the wife of the Lord Shiva as their favourite or ideal character. They liked her simply because she was the epitome of the goddess, beautiful and dutiful, and submissive even when powerful. The notion of Ardhanariswara where the god and the goddess were equal in power and spiritual ability was completely lost to them, for to them the wife was to be always at least a step below the man, constantly looking up to him and obedient to his wishes, whether spoken or unspoken.

In conclusion, one could state that on the Malayalam small screen on the whole, the woman is seen quite a lot but her own voice is not heard much. Though educated in the three R's in the conventional sense at school, she is well trained in the social requirements of silence and submissiveness. On the screen as well as beyond it she gets little opportunity to even form her views, leave alone air them. Her role off screen as well as on it is passive and undefined. The tragic fact remains that in her insecurity, inhibition and social repression, she often overlooks the fact that she could have an opinion of her own to voice—in public or in private. She becomes as passive as her model on the television, and just as ineffectual and helpless.

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