Professions of faith: Hindu nationalism, television and the avatars of capital.
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6 Ghostly Pasts, Global Futures: Democracy, Television and the Modern Nation

The ambiguous and contradictory nature of the modern nation is the same as that of vampires and other living dead: they are wrongly perceived as "leftovers from the past"; their place is constituted by the very break of modernity.¹

Who cares for the quality? The Number is the name of the game.²

As the Indian nation is ushered into the light of modernity and the globalised financial media landscape, a necessary detour toward legitimising this development is through the invocation and delegitimation of a past. The ghostly shadow of a planned state economy, Kafkaesque bureaucracies, the devaluation of "democracy" outside the hands of the "people", all function as alibis for legitimating the present, and discarding the past. To conjure up such pasts now might seem a polemical move, a harking back to some long-forgotten tradition where people were infants and the state was their benevolent parent. My review of Indian economic history in a previous chapter should put such concerns to rest, as I have argued that either to view that period of mixed economy as genuinely socialist, or view present liberalisation as the necessary outcome of that failed model would be simplistic at best.

Below I will look specifically at how shifts in TV ownership, control and programming are related to the ahistorical discourse of the "development through consumption" discourse that animates media today. In the process I will argue that through an interested conjuring of the past, the present development of TV can be studied in terms of discourses such as modernity, development and freedom. If modernity, and the modern nation are to be understood as a break with the traditional discourse of modernisation through planning, then Žižek's warning is particularly instructive. The ghost of the former haunts our contemporary concerns, and the modern nation is "constituted by the very break of modernity." Not a break with modernity, but the break of modernity. Within contemporary discourses of postmodernism, the present is sometimes seen as a clear break from modern forms of governance, aesthetic styles, cultural discourses and the like. Žižek's singular provocation to this doxa is an insistence that modernity is itself divided, and the present schizophrenic discourse of the "people" and "democracy" evidences this break of modernity, by simultaneously appealing to democratic participation, the populism of the "people" and a global economic dynamic that is withdrawn from such popular control. His reading of the modern nation echoes Partha Chatterjee's reminder which opened the previous chapter that the divided character of modernity is integral to its universalist discourse, rather than the result of "outside", particularist exigencies.

One instance of this divided logic of freedom and unfreedom, the local and the global, culture and concern, that is classically modern can be witnessed in the quote below, a review article castigating the BJP government for seeking a restrictive policy

¹ Slavoj Žižek, Tarrying With the Negative: Kant, Hegel and the Critique of Ideology, Verso London 1994, p. 222. Emphasis added.
toward foreign television networks. Will the government attitude, the article asks "uphold our fundamental right of expression, or hinder it? Take, for example, that bit about protect(ing) Indian interests. By this they surely mean Indian culture and tradition. The point that is often missed is that 'culture' is not static but dynamic... To state that the Indian television industry is massively ailing would be a gross understatement. What it needs is a massive influx of capital... that Indian entrepreneurs have had difficulty finding and investing. Moreover, the pragmatic question to ask is what's wrong in allowing 100 per cent foreign holding in a television channel? The STAR TV network has done far more for Indian culture in five years than Doordarshan, the I&B ministry and the External Affairs ministry have over the past three decades."

This approach to questions of globalization, TV, culture and economics is particularly prevalent among media professionals, government ministers (like Information Minister Pramod Mahajan we encountered in the last chapter) and middle-class viewers. Those ghostly apparitions of ministerial appointees and Mandi house mandarins, who stalked the airwaves of pre-liberalisation India proved quite unable to invigorate or protect "Indian culture." Paradoxically, it was foreigners who helped do that. Further, they did that because, not inspite of their being foreigners. This logic however is not based on some unexamined global culturalism, but the sheer fact that they have the monies to fund such programming. Their non-paternalistic outlook to programming however, is not because they have got the picture of Indian culture right, but because they are not hampered by an earlier top-down logic of "educating the masses." Rather, given their disposable income in terms of investment funds, and their ability to fine-tune programming based on niche-market needs, the picture of Indian culture is much more diffuse, yet popular under contemporary programming. The assumption that STAR TV fulfills the needs of Indian culture on closer examination reveal that it is precisely the culture of the middle class that is being attended to. However, this is what one could call a repetition with a difference, since DD in its pre-1991 period was hardly a "voice of the people." Whereas earlier DD programming catered to the middle-class, the present situation shows that in the latter case it is highly popular and economically lucrative. Part of its popularity and economic viability can only be understood in the context of globalization in its cultural and economic forms as a kind of sublation of the past policies of a state-centred media economy. By both cancelling and preserving the previous discourse, present day talk of development, television and globalization brings back the spectral presence of another modernity while revaluing it in radically different fashion.

Before I go into the actual implications of globalization of the media for democratic participation, it might be worth pausing briefly to see how the movements of capital and populations radically reconfigures who is allowed to speak for culture, and in what terms. In an almost inverted situation from the one above, where foreign TV like STAR TV is said to strengthen Indian culture, recently we were treated to the ruminations of VS. Naipaul, now Sir Vidia Naipaul accusing the Tony Blair government in Britain of "introducing a plebian culture." "We now have a full socialist revolution and the bizarre thing is that it does not mean high culture becomes available to everybody. It is terrible, this very plebian culture, an aggressively plebian culture that celebrates itself for being plebian. It means the plebian culture is imposed on the country...I am depressed by their dreadful use of rhetoric, the misuse of language," says Mr. Naipaul. The recently knighted Naipaul, our contemporary version of the babu moshay, escon-

3 "Prasar Bharati: Boon or Bane?", op cit., p. 42.
seed in his residence in England pontificates on the “dreadful” descent into a common culture at the hands of a “full socialist revolution!” One wonders what analytical somersaults and historical amnesia is needed to term Blair’s New Labour the culmination of a socialist revolution but the connection between this putative socialism and a “plebian culture” is not insignificant. In some ways, it mirrors the criticisms of India’s earlier “socialist experiments” in the economy and media planning, while inverting the cultural form it took. More importantly, Naipaul goes on “This is no small thing. Creating a cultural void will have a long-term effect on the economy. Despite being so anti-elitist, the Prime Minister talks about the great geniuses of this country, as if somehow there is something going on (creatively). There is nothing going on. It is over.”

His remarks, their location and the connections they make eloquently illustrate the ways in which under contemporary forms of globalization, the directions in which culture talk, intellectuals and economic/cultural discourses move in increasingly complex ways, with Indian analysts praising foreign networks for invigorating Indian culture (a very popular, what Naipaul would call “plebian culture) while in the former “mother country” a knighted former colonial subject defends the supposedly lost high culture of his adopted home and warns of catastrophic consequences for the economy. My point in bringing up this example is to point out that the discourses and connections made between culture, capitalism and globalization are diffuse all over the world, and not some particularly “Indian” discourse. Further, it shows the ways in which the proponents of cultural nationalism do not necessarily have to couch their argument in a discourse of the “sons of the soil” (either Naipaul or STAR TV), while they happily conjure up the ghostly presence of a socialism that never was to make their arguments for “high culture.”

Having framed the discussion that follows below, I will now look specifically at the discourse of democratic participation, the supposed plurality of viewpoints and the greater choice of information and entertainment in the present globalised media scenario. Like the examples quoted above, culture talk is not far behind in such considerations. When Rupert Murdoch was first thinking of bringing his NewsCorp. channel, STAR TV to India, it is worth recalling that he fended off criticism of cultural invasions by claiming that India had already withstood hundreds of years of British and Muslim rule and his “small screen” was no threat. The traditional discourse of free-market globalization in terms of mass media, in particular television, has always underwritten its legitimacy through a discourse of “free flow” of information, and the deepening of democratic rights. Edward A. Comor has convincingly shown how in this supposed era of the decline of the nation-state, some nations like the U.S. have played a vigorous role in pressuring “less-developed countries” (LDCs) to open their media markets and informations sectors. This discourse was closely linked to the saturation of the media markets of the West on the one hand, and the increasingly protectionist policies of the newly-decolonized countries where media were seen as crucial tools for development, not in terms of free trade but national responsibility toward all. Not surprisingly, the “free flow/ free trade” discourse which was articulated by western countries, in particular the US, is now repeated in India as we have seen above, where the fundamental right to freedom of expression is linked to a devolving, free-

market media landscape. Such an about-turn makes sense only when one recognizes that it was the profound debt crisis of the Indian economy and the inevitable turn that it had to make to international capitalist agencies which laid the ground for the suffusion of a free-market discourse in media circles.

The paradigm shift being analyzed here then, is similar to the divided logic of modernity with which this chapter began. The announced aims of the present media professional scenes are the same - "development", "democracy", "fundamental freedoms" and the like. However, the modes through which they are supposed to be institutionalised have radically changed - from a state-centred, mainly paternalist, "high brow" mode of address to the populist, "give the consumer what he wants", jamboree of a multitude of styles, cultures and languages. It might be worth reminding at this point, that the aim of this chapter is not to glorify some nostalgic past, where "plebian culture" did not exist anyway, but to map out how that "traditional" discourse of modernity (rational, state-planned development) is now reworked in its contemporary predicament.

PLURALISM, MEDIA SOURCES AND PROGRAMMING

Access to information constitutes one of the bedrocks of the media's role as a social institution responsible for deepening democratic participation. Not surprisingly then, Indian broadcasting from its inception placed news bulletins closely within the confines and control of the I&B ministry, while as has been noted earlier, other genres of programming slowly became commercialised. However, even though the ministry took on itself the role of the "representative" of the people, news programmes were closely controlled by those governments in power which saw it as a crucial outlet for the dissemination of what can be accurately termed "government propaganda". The news bulletins on Doordarshan, in English, Hindi and the regional languages broadcast at state level were closely organised and arranged so that any plurality of views were shut out. This functioned mainly through endless news reports, particularly during the Indira Gandhi era, of the launching of so-called "people-centred" schemes, such as the Garibi Hatao campaign and the erasure of oppositional viewpoints from the TV screen.

Given that the structure of news programming was controlled at the central level in New Delhi in terms of national news, there was understandable dissent from different state governments which did not have power at the centre. At the Information Minister's Conference held in 1983, the Communist West Bengal government launched a scathing attack on the government misuse of radio and TV: "The two most important tools of opinion formation are AIR and Doordarshan. Both are controlled by the central government...We, in West Bengal have felt on occasions that there was a serious misconception regarding the priorities of items in the all-India news telecast. There have been occasions when the State Government's news, including policy announcements by the Chief Minister, did not receive the attention due to them on issues where the opposition standpoint got elaborate coverage."

The possibility of a greater diversity of views was tentatively explored, when in October 1985, DD-commisioned a private software producer to provide a current affairs programme. M.J. Akbar started hosting Newsline, which explored scandals of both the Congress (I) party and its opponents. Doordarshan's own Sach ki Parchain...
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(Shadows of Truth) started airing at the same time. However, rumours of political pressure used significantly via the sponsors of the programmes put paid to their success and both were taken off air. To explore this market-government nexus a bit further, it is worth looking at the highly popular serial Rajani, which was telecast in the second half of the 1980s, starring the charismatic Priya Tendulkar who exposed corruption and revealed the social abuses of power that the "common man" experienced daily. Significantly, most of the people caught for corruption were those at the bottom-end of the ladder, while the higher-ups and those wielding substantial power got off scot-free. Chatterji concludes his reading of the serial: "Everything ended happily: a character representing the government told us such things would not happen again! All this is not surprising when one realises that Rajani was a programme sponsored by a big business house."

The examples of Newsline on the one hand, and Rajani on the other are instructive on two levels: Firstly, they do show that the situation in terms of news and social programming was not as one-sided and state-controlled as one would be tempted to conclude, given that commercial sponsors and private software producers were involved in such programming. However, the form through which this supposed diversity was effected cautions against any easy conclusions. In the case of Newsline, market pressures from the sponsor (whose interests precluded it from supporting anti-government investigative reports) resulted in the disappearance of the programme. In the case of Rajani, on the other hand, it was precisely market pressure that ensured its success only as long as the format of the program reached its denouement through a government promising to safeguard the common man while the latter was simultaneously blamed for the evils of corruption and those in power remained invisible. The sometime overlapping, sometime contradictory nexus between freedom of information, state media control and the market prerogative is, I would argue, the most productive way of casting the pre-history of Doordarshan's role as a state media outlet, rather than in terms of socialism", or simplistic "propaganda" or a "resistance to commercialization", all of which fail to capture the actual complexity of that situation in terms of access to information and a plural democratic functioning of media. To the extent that the ghostly presence of a socialist, pre-modern state media are invoked in the present legitimation of global media, a critical analysis would lay bare that the discourse of a clear break with the past does not hold – the same configurations of power, in terms of state control, privatised broadcasting and genre formats continue now in radically reformulated form with similar and different effects.

The slowly devolving role of news on state TV can be traced to one particular programme, The World This Week, hosted by Prannoy Roy, which was produced by New Delhi TV (NDTV) for Doordarshan. Suddenly, the country was exposed to a national news/current affairs programme that had replaced the staid, insipid DD-produced news broadcasts with slick editing, fast-paced dialogue and greater concentration of clippings from international news agencies. The appeal of the programme, hosted in English, was particularly confined to urban, educated audiences who had been starved of news that was in an attractive format and with a global view. Local video libraries often carried copies of past broadcasts, and in a period without satellite TV and the Internet, they were popular rentals for news-hungry urban clientele.

In the post-1991 scenario, with the availability of a vast number of news channels and news broadcasts, the situation has changed dramatically. However, tracking the

7 Ibid., p.115.
precise contours of this change are of particular importance given the liberatory dis-
course of fundamental freedoms and democratic participation. As pointed out earlier,
DD had three-tiered news broadcasts, in terms of language spread out over Hindi,
English and the state language. At present, channels including STAR TV and ZEE TV
have special channels focussing only on news such as STAR News and Zee India, as
well as TVI, what are termed NCA (News and Current Affairs) channels. Further, BBC
India and CNN also have news tailored to the local market, and the news sources range
from own reporters to feeds from international agencies such as Vis News, Reuters and
the like.

The case of NDTV and its present offering on STAR News after it was sacked from
DD is a case in point. From the initial euphoria of its success, present programmes are
marked by an unending inanity, that manifests itself in the kinds of questions asked
and the quality of the hosts. NDTV has a policy of only hiring hosts who have a degree
from abroad, but as one commentator pointed out “The problem .is that they come
across as smart alecs, the I-know-it-all types.” The interviews solicit the same infor-
mation that has just been covered in the preceding report, while the in-depth cover-
age is superficial yet well-shot. The trend that NDTV set is one where aesthetics, look-
ing and sounding like a full-fledged global citizen has taken over from a commitment
to in-depth reporting.

With the burgeoning of channel options, news programming got diversified further
not just in terms of different networks producing their own news, but the state broad-
caster continuing the trend of NewsLine and The World This Week and commissioning
other shows, such as Aaj Tak, whose brief was to produce current affairs broadcasts.
This show, which was quite popular in terms of news ratings, came under attack by the
I&B minister of the BJP, Mahajan, whose “open skies” policy we encountered ear-
erlier with regard to DTH seemed to leave him when it came to genuinely plural news
programming. The programme, produced by software producer TV Today came under
attack by Mahajan for “deviating” from its contract with DD. “The contract was for
producing a current affairs programme, but what they have done is produce a news
programme”, he argued, expressing the view that “widely differing news bulletins”
could not be afforded. This refusal to grant a diversity of news programming by the
state in commissioning private software producers, is further sustained by claiming
that the diversity of news outlets absolves the government from being responsible for
representing a variety of viewpoints on the state channel, DD. At a meeting of the con-
sultative committee of the I&B ministry, Shiv Sena ally and upper house MP Pritish
Nandy argued that the concept of Prasar Bharati was relevant in 1990, before satellite
TV appeared and when DD was the only channel. Now with more than 30 channels
airing different viewpoints, autonomy for DD was irrelevant. As one analyst discov-
ered “this view found favour with some MPs, who suggested that Doordarshan should
be used to project the government’s views.”

The above scenario illustrates a development which is contradictory yet easily
explainable. The plurality of news outlets paradoxically results in a narrowing of view-
points in news programming, at least in the case of state television. The logical out-
come would be a flourishing of controversy, alternative opinions and in-depth inves-
tigative reporting on the private channels. It is undoubtedly true that this expansion

8 “Not Trendy, NDTV!!”, Sunday Mid-day, February 28, 1999, p.17.
9 “I&B Ministry seeks uniform news policy on DD, may not grant extension to Aaj Tak”, Screen, February 5, 1999, p.1.
of TV control outside the government's hands has resulted in a proliferation of viewpoints. Yet this same expansion of information sources, not always very efficiently executed, is used as an alibi for making the government news broadcasts, which have the widest viewership in the country, propaganda tools for the party in power. Further the diversity of news programming must be situated within the particular logic of the field of television. As the example of NDTV shows, a great deal of effort goes into producing snazzy, young hosts with global credentials, yet the quality of the reporting and interviews remains shallow and ineffective. That such shows nevertheless resonate with an audience starved for alternatives to DD is without doubt. The question becomes how precisely such proliferation of news programmes deepens democratic participation and information access as the votaries of globalisation claim. The BBC for example, does have excellent shows which highlight local issues, and have programming on mainly diasporic Indians who have made their name abroad. The appeal of these shows is however limited to a small, urban-based English speaking elite, and after the Kargill-fiasco when the BBC accidentally showed clippings of the Balkan crisis instead of Kargill, international broadcasters have become wary of stepping on national sentiments, whether at the state-level or within the general public. Other shows on BBC include Style! which feature upcoming fashion designers and models and is clearly targeting the sort of youth segment that MTV covets. The point is that besides even news programming, most global news networks target non-news shows in terms of lifestyle and consumption issues that are particularly attractive for advertisers and middle-class consumers, rather than a greater variety of current affairs programming which explores contemporary political and social concerns in depth.

With regard to the forthcoming Broadcasting Bill, foreign broadcasters are intensely lobbying their governments for putting pressure on the Indian state to lift restrictions. American channels such as ESPN, CNN, STAR TV, Discovery, CNBC and NBC have set up their own informal committee to draft their own alternative to the proposed Broadcasting Bill, the main issue of contention being the mandatory uplinking of programming from India (which effectively makes them controllable by the government satellite uplinking system, VSNL). Further, the American Broadcasting Council (ABC) has also formed a sub-committee to press for a bill that would suit US-based broadcasters. These examples make clear that however broad the spectrum of broadcasting outlets has become, it is still negotiated at a state-level, and that foreign broadcasters, particularly news broadcasters can gain or lose in their relationship with the Indian government. Thus, to assume that however restrictive DD is, foreign broadcasters are outside the Indian state's control and thus free to air what they want is inaccurate.

Besides the telling case of NDTV's decreasing popularity, some other shows illustrate the problems associated with thinking "democratic plurality" and the role of the media in an ahistorical or non-relational way. TVI, for example, which has established a reputation for itself as a primarily in-depth, intellectually oriented news and current affairs channel is now foundering in the midst of lack of funding from sponsors and increasing government pressure. In an interview with Gauhar Raza who hosted a discussion between M. S. Aiyar of the Congress (I) and Tarun Vijay, the editor of Panchjaye, I was told that within hours of the broadcast of the TVI debate on January 30, 1999, he received a call from the I&B Ministry ordering him to stop any repeat telecast of the discussion which focussed on the recent attacks on Christians in the country.11 He had no choice but to obey, given that TVI had to uplink its programmes from

11 Interview, February 16, 1999, New Delhi.
the government's VSNL satellite station. While this situation is not representative of the whole news scene (Awaaz on STAR Plus sometimes providing scathing critiques of government policies), it does inject some sobriety into the claims being made for greater plurality as an automatic guarantor of democratic participation.

Besides these sort of strong-arm tactics by the government on private channels, the pressures of the market also affect the effectiveness of information programming. I was struck for example, by a long in-depth investigative report on the high rate of male suicide in a small village in Bihar because of extreme poverty. The report, on STAR News' Living on the Edge programme was telecast in the mid-afternoon. When I queried Raveena Kohli, the programming director of rival network SONY TV, she reminded me that the ratings for the show were "zilch" and that such programming has become a fairly inexpensive yet convenient strategy for private and especially foreign TV networks to flash their "commitment to 'social justice' credentials." As she argued, that job is the responsibility of DD while channels like Zee TV, SONY TV and STAR TV focus primarily on middle-class audiences who advertisers wish to reach.12

One other branch of shows which has blossomed with the proliferation of channels is talk-shows with an in-house audience featuring political personalities. This is indeed a far-cry from the days of DD where such discussion was largely absent. The importance of multinational manufacturers in sponsoring programmes must give one pause for thought when one ahistorically assumes a plurality of news outlets automatically means greater freedom of information. Like in the US, where such tie-ups between news coverage and sponsors have drawn increasing flak, the same arrangements persist in India. DD 2's business and news program, Crossfire, for example is sponsored by the U.S. electric giant General Electric, whose opening commercial features a mother dressing up her daughter in a lavish saree and putting on her make-up. This "nativization" of address is followed by Subhashis Gangopadhyay hosting a discussion on the recently announced price-hike of essential items by the government. As the discussion ensues, the host shifts the focus of attention from the question of "populist measures" such as price hikes and price reductions during election time, to the "basic question" of whether subsidies should be reduced. The discourse of free-market, private enterprise as the regulator of such basic items as fertilisers and urea is pushed centre-stage and frames the resulting conversation. One might ask, in this case, how the plurality of programming actually manifests itself. If indeed there is any dissension from the government, it seems to manifest itself most vigorously in the promotion of liberalisation and the deepening of the power of big corporations. This example is one part of a broader picture where political and economic issues are taken up and their "oppositional" stance is underwritten by a wholehearted appeal to privatisation. Both the market and the government, sometimes in tandem and at other times at odds, function here as ambiguous yet powerful constricting forces in the diversification of programming.

Further, the specific genre of TV political talk shows is in many ways conditioned by its more popular counterparts, and as a result discussion can either be stultifying or the kind of firework display between political leaders which generate more smoke rather than clear issues. Talk shows such as Current Session on STAR and In Focus on Home TV, whose claim to get into "deeper policies" more often than not result in theatrical performances between politicians and a lack of engagement with the issues at hand. Karan Thapar, the host of Current Session remarks that often such politicians put

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12 Interview, January 29, 1999, Bombay.
an “act on for the camera...what you get is theatrics put on for the camera...ok, there is entertainment but where is the analysis?”

A viewing of BBC World’s Question Time (Feb 5, 1999) hosted by Prannoy Roy reveals a similar lack of engagement with the pertinent issues that audience members bring up. When an audience member questions U.K. based film actor Saeed Jaffrey on how he saw the role of culture in promoting a “culture of peace” in the midst of increasing religious strife (preceding discussion covered the murder of George Staines and his sons, the massacre of Dalits in Bihar), Jaffrey reminds the audience that he is not familiar with the Indian film industry having tired of their clichéd roles, and as he continues to “engage” with the question, Roy interrupts him to ask “But those are interesting roles. Why would you reject them?” The inane chatter continues, spurred by a newscaster whose made his reputation on his “investigative” reporting. The show hits dirt bottom when Roy asks Jaffrey to comment on the trajectory of the BJP and the Congress. A clearly confused Jaffrey stares into space in embarrassed silence and shrugs his shoulders as the audience bursts into laughter. Whether it is the exigencies of time, a distaste for “boring” complexities or the theatrical demands of turning political discussion into “entertainment”, a viewing of most political news programming and discussion reveals both a startling array of opinion and its simultaneous superficiality. Clearly this need not necessitate a call for returning to state-controlled, monological news programming. However, it must register that the demands of the medium, the generally abysmal quality of “top” TV hosts and the clout of the sponsors militates against any sustained deepening of the democratic potential of media that globalization promises.

**RECASTING SOCIAL VALUES: HUMAN INTEREST, PLURALISM AND TELEVISION**

One of the curious features that strikes particularly western observers of programming today is the prevalence of certain topics that were considered too risqué in the staid era of Doordarshan’s monopoly on programming. Extra-marital affairs, homosexuality, “modern women” in their saucy clothes, wife-swapping, sex chatlines on MTV India and the like have all found their way onto private channels now, in a variety of genres but specifically on soap operas and talk-shows. The Jerry Springer-like quality of such programming was naturally a major eye-turner, and one is tempted to see this proliferation of social taboos on display as representation of the plurality of everyday life. As has been called attention to in the previous chapter on the discourse of “Indian culture” in relation to programming and advertising however, it becomes increasingly apparent that such topics either reflect certain situations of the urban middle-class, or afford them a window on a world they have not yet experienced. The former reading would have to be nuanced given the earlier discussion that social norms and cultural values do not necessarily mimic an increasing openness to the world, and the seeming contradiction between western lifestyles and deeply held religious and social beliefs must be recognized in any temptation to ascribe what one watches on shock-TV to the actual reality of most audiences. The latter reading, a sort of escapism through TV consumption, is a more common one, and yet it too might fail to grasp that for the lives of a certain small group in urban middle-class circles such programming does indeed connect with their everyday experience. One would thus need to negotiate between

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the scylla of TV as reflection and the charybdis of TV as escapism to register the complexity of such changes in programming.

To the extent then that social norms and cultural values are increasingly being reworked and rethought under the contemporary television landscape, they are also subject to the particular formal logic of television in terms of aesthetics, and the market pressures which ground television production. The increasingly sophisticated technological tools of editing and camera lenses have spiced up such programming yet the proliferation of shows on the same themes has resulted in viewer boredom, which becomes apparent when one considers how the shows peaked in popularity but sharply plummeted in the ratings a year later. Further, the rush to cash in on certain themes has resulted in a glut of similar shows such as *Amaanat* on Zee TV, *Saans* and *Kora Kagaz* on Star Plus and *Heena* on Sony, all dealing with marital tensions. In terms of talk-shows, scandalous themes such as partner-swapping and homosexuality have a greater appeal to the youth segment while Oprah Winfrey is watched more by older audiences. In any case, the popularity of such shows has stabilised much below their initial ratings success. Perhaps this has something to do with what Vanita Kohli identifies as one of the “bedrocks” of middle-class urban Indian values: “However, the core of our culture is... quite stable... At least among that broad group of people defined by their desire for upward mobility; the middle class. Concern for family, respect for elders, monogamous sexual relationships, investing in children’s future and, of course, wanting to ascend the socio-economic order are all fairly deep-rooted.”

While the generality of her argument might be questioned, it is nevertheless true that even among the most affluent and westernised middle-classes in a city like Bombay for example, the trappings of a western lifestyle and the consumption of such “scandalous” programming has more to do with the symbolic function of consumption in marking distinctions, particularly since the upward mobility in economic terms of diverse groups tend to socially flatten out distinctions in terms of dress, consumption patterns and lifestyle. Further, to make the leap from consumption patterns and lifestyle to a sea-change in moral and cultural values, such as marrying across class/caste lines, indulging in socially unacceptable sexual behaviour and the like in any diagnosis of the urban middle-class would be to disregard some of the enduring pressures and social protections that close-knit families, participation in religious rituals and respect for the elderly provide. The sudden vogue and equally precipitous fall of scandalous programming needs to be understood in this light, embedded in a historically-evolving yet also resilient social ethos where the markers of modernity cannot be easily seen as signs of a wholesale collapse of the moral order.

Paradoxically then, the expansion in the sorts of socially-sanctioned topics available on screen has not resulted in a sea-change in the topical landscape of television, but a replication of the same themes, resulting in an increasingly indifferent viewership that channel surfs rather than faithfully follows a single issue or programme. In an article entitled “Dull serials send viewers channel-surfing”, Saloni Meghany and Lina Choudhury argue that “there is a dearth of original concepts, well worked out plots and engaging scripts.”

The expansion of broadcasting time has lead to a broadening of topics that can be addressed in terms of social values and a simultaneous shrinkage in their quality and thematic exploration. This simultaneous movement is captured well by Ms. Monteiro, a regular TV watcher who spends more time channel-surfing than watching a favourite show: “The proliferation of channels has led to cut-

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14 “Reality Gaps”, op cit., p. 38.

15 *TOI*, p.5. February 24, 1999, p. 5.
throat competition. The market imposes its own censorship and encourages only a certain kind of programming. Thus, the space for alternative perspectives keep shrinking... Successful formulae are cloned till they stop working. This is flattening out the diversity of programmes."  

Further, the themes explored do not fit in easily with the kind of "democratic pluralism" that champions of the global media economy have articulated. The focus is resolutely on the urban middle-class. Zarina Mehta, creative director of United Television (UTV) comments on the middle-class focus of TV serials thus: "There are only few serials where the middle class is not portrayed. But many channels are attempting to out-glamourise each other in a battle for ratings." As Meghani and Choudhury point out, "almost all serials are shot in palatial houses and involve characters who belong to the upper classes. For instance, business wars are woven into the scripts time and again." The thematic contraction of such "social value" programming, and the focus on lifestyles that are not representative of either the rural audiences or their urban middle-class counterparts thus reveals, that almost in inverted fashion, present day programming remains as removed from the everyday concerns of most audiences as earlier state-controlled television did in its "high culture", paternalist mode.

The increasing fatigue with which audiences are responding to such kinds of news programming is also locateable in the realm of talk shows where, for example, Purukshetra, on El TV, made a name for itself by discussing topics such as extra-marital affairs and homosexuality. Yet, after some time, the ratings peaked and started falling so that once again the most economical programming, film-based shows, music countdown shows and mythologicals gained the upper-hand in terms of TRPs. As for the initial promise of talk shows to bring intelligent conversation into the home through interviews with public figures and intellectuals, it never materialised since advertisers were refusing to touch such shows. Further, if talk shows attempted to discuss any controversial political issue, the dictates of the market, particularly the aversion of advertisers to be connected to sensitive issues has effectively wiped out such a possibility. Karuna Samtani, former VP for Zee TV says "advertisers will be reluctant to endorse a show that deals with controversial topics...and if it has anything to do with politics the advertiser wont touch the show."

When the function of media outside the sphere of news and entertainment, in the radical questioning of social norms and values needs to be identified, it becomes apparent firstly, that the surge in programming aimed at socially "scandalous" topics has fallen in terms of ratings. Further, while there has been a proliferation of shows, they have tended to mimic each other in terms of themes rather than broaden the horizon of what is worth debating on television. The market pressures exerted on show themes, particularly through advertisers has further diluted the range of options available for discussion as well as the depth of involvement with controversial issues. Lastly, expansion of social themes and their simultaneous contraction in terms of viewing, needs to be located outside the sphere of television proper, and in the context of the social and cultural shifts and stases which mark the present conjuncture. While there have been important changes in how the sexes interact, in what can be talked about on television in terms of fidelity, sexuality and the like, these need to represent a widely-held reality in society at large. Time and again, in talking to people who

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16 Ibid.
17 Ibid.
18 Ibid.
20 Ibid., p. 39.
watched such shows, for example, I was struck by how they viewed this programming as a kind of window into how “the others live, those “modern” people in foreign cars and fancy clothes.”

One particular incident stands out in my memory on my visit to India in 1999. I was at my aunt’s house, for a big family dinner with her daughter and grandson and grand-daughter. After the grandson, Harshad demonstrated some wrestling holds learnt from his incessant watching of the World Wrestling Foundation (WWF) on television, my aunt, an active member of her local church, got my niece to stand in front of us and sing a few songs. After a somber rendition of the common hymn “Wide wide as the Ocean”, learnt by most children in convent schools was over, my aunt encouraged singing “Barbie!”, and my niece burst into the hit single “Barbie Girl” by Danish group Aqua. To the enthusiastic clapping of my aunt and her daughter, Sneha sang “I’m a Barbie girl, In a Barbie World, Life is Plastic, Its fantastic, You can brush my hair, Undress me anywhere, Imagination, Life is Your Creation!” While I stood there, open-mouthed, I realize how my loss for words was a symptom of my own inability to understand how certain signifiers of “being modern” in the West function quite differently in different settings. For my aunt and her granddaughter, the song was a catchy number that had capitalized on the flood of barbies on store shelves, while the Christian songs were part of her everyday life. I am not making an alterist argument that in “India things are different”, but merely registering that my dumbfoundedness, as my six-year old niece followed a hymn to the “Saviour’s love” by a paen to a sexually suggestive heterosexual male fantasy of blonde girls, was an allegory of the incomprehension which marks our inability to comprehend the stark contrasts without contradiction among a middle-class that dons the mantle of tradition and the mini-skirt at the same time, and walks through our field of vision confounding our temptation of rushing to conclusions on first-sight. The signifiers of modernity come to mean quite differently, or sometimes not at all, when transplanted across time and space, and the incident was a welcome reminder that for all our fascination with the kinds of “scandalous” programming on Indian TV, one need not automatically assume that they represent a sea-change in the social norms of the nation’s differentiated socius.

To summarize the broad parameters of the present relationship between satellite broadcasting and democratic possibilities: Within the context of the trans-nationalization of TV networks, a national economy increasingly integrated into the circuits of a global economy and the culturalist discourse of “freedom” by the Hindu Right, a look at the democratic potential of TV under the free-market reveals a mixed picture. On the one hand, the proliferation of news channels and sources, the commissioning of private news software outside the I&B ministry and the greater discussion of oppositional points of view does augur well for a plurality of information sources. A number of caveats are needed here: firstly, the present scenario need not be framed in terms of a clean break with the past, since even prior to 1991, the Indian state had commissioned private companies to produce NCA programming; secondly, the crackdown on the resulting oppositional viewpoints then is not necessarily absent at present, and even foreign broadcasters have to be sensitive to the state at times, given new legislation which would directly affect their profitability in the Indian market; thirdly, the new slick forms of informational programming betray a startling lack of sustained engagement with the issues they purport to explore “in-depth”, partly because they are couched often in superficial terms, or require huge doses of theatrical performance rather than a serious commitment to exploring issues; and lastly, the expansion of
alternative themes in terms of social values that are making it to the airwaves in genres like soap opera, and tele-serials have resulted in a simultaneous contraction in the themes explored, while the popularity of the shows has waned dramatically from their initial success.

Within this latter realm of entertainment-oriented popular culture, surely there can be no denying that such forms of programming do have an important part to play in the broadening of views on cultural values and social norms. Further, such active exploration of these issues can be said to function as an important mode for questioning some of the inherited assumptions of what constitutes socially-sanctioned behaviour. However, as TV professionals themselves testify, the need to satisfy advertisers limits the scope of the programming. The scenario with regard to TV, democracy and globalization, described above is the outcome of the final victory of the countries of the North, which have at least since the 1970s, vigorously opposed the autonomous development of national communication policies by the countries of the South. Their discourse, legitimated in terms of the “free flow of ideas” has resulted, at least in terms of the situation in India, in a greater consumerist, middle-class and politically superficial focus. If there has indeed been a free-flow, it has been that of capital, advertising revenue and programming rather than free access for all to the airwaves. In an interview with N. Bhaskara Rao, the director of the Centre for Media Studies I was struck by how his sympathy for developmental goals in television was marked by a simultaneous faith in the greater technological integration of the Indian television market into the global scene.21 While surely one can hardly ignore the spectacular developments in technological aspects of television broadcasting, the assumption that technology necessarily functions toward the reduction of inequality in society betrays a lack of understanding of the political and economic pressures which determine its eventual use. In a discussion organised by the Centre on the forthcoming Broadcasting Bill, and featuring top TV professionals (many from global networks), senior bureaucrats and intellectuals, the prime concern expressed over and over again was the need for greater involvement and liberalisation of satellite technology. Only a few dissenting voices, such as Dr. Dharmadhikari (whose official title was the only one missing in the entire monograph) managed to remind his interlocutors that for all the discussion of technological progress, access to airtime was limited to the state and private global networks while requests for licenses from NGOs, for example, and others in civil society were always turned down.22 This was not an incidental occurrence, but a marker of the ways in which globalization has sidelined those in civil society in whose name and on whose behalf terms like “democracy” and “freedom” were bandied about in the discourse of the globalization of mass media.

Writing in hindsight about the political, economic and social relations within which the Macbride Report on Communication Problems was received, Cees Hamelink observed that in the three crucial areas of communication policies, technology and culture, the emphasis of the report on autonomy and constructive alliances between the North and the South has failed to materialize. While outdated technology, if at all, was granted to the South, and national communication policy remained fraught due to the pressure of powerful lobbies for example, in the realm of culture Hamelink observes that “the media have become rather more involved in the creation of global rather than local culture, and that there are few indications of a more inten-

21 Interview, February 15, 1999, New Delhi.
22 For proceedings of the meeting, see CMS Consultations on the Broadcasting Bill 1997, New Delhi, June 16, 1997.
sive cultural dialogue in the world." Further analyses call into question the presentist arguments around the calls for globalization of mass media in the interests of the "fundamental right to freedom of expression" we encountered at the beginning of this chapter, by pointing out that the very pressures which had precluded autonomy for the countries of the South now exert themselves without the checks and balances afforded prior to the collapse of the Soviet bloc.

Within this particular historical understanding of the politico-economic relations within which the global communications order was being debated, what becomes clear is that the discourse of "fundamental freedoms" by the countries of the North was an alibi for the greater commercial expansion of their media and information sectors. Conversely, despite the good intentions of the countries of the South in their recognition of the role of mass media for autonomous development on their own terms, the power-ridden hierarchical societies such as in India, and the consequent pressures against true democratization of mass media, media policy had resulted in an ineffective, paternalist form of programming. Within the present conjuncture, when globalization and the free-market are the doxic modality through which media professionals, nation-states and TNMCs legitimate their own interests, it is "development" and "democracy" once again which has resurfaced, this time in its up-to-date, transnational mode of address. There is a ghost in the machine, in other words, and it keeps getting resuscitated back to life in the present, only this development's proponent masquerades as a globe-trotting media professional and not the native-dressed folk representative of indigenous tradition. That the discourse of fundamental freedom (of expression, or information and the like) underwrites both avatars of development should necessitate a more radical questioning of the discourse of rights itself, particularly "human rights" to the extent that this discourse evacuates any understanding of how human beings are situated at the multiple intersections of the social, cultural, economic and political relations through which they negotiate life. As Hamelink points out, the failure of national communication policies from being adequately formulated in the South had much to do with the powerful pressure exerted by important lobbies. The decolonized "native" was no homogeneous, isolated individual. Similarly, the present votaries of privatised, global communications and information would like to argue that in the hands of the market, media promote development by answering to the "people" and being held accountable by them. However, as Herbert Schiller and others have shown, transparency is one of the first things to go when communications policies become privatized. The replacement of state propaganda by the market mechanism is no guarantee of accountability. Thus, even when Vijay Jindal, CEO of Zee TV remarks, "taste, good or bad, is an extremely subjective and individual judgement that mostly depends on collective awareness and education prevalent in society. We feel it does not befit an organisation to exist in an ivory tower, from where it attempts to fit the world into its definition of good taste. We have a lot of respect for our viewers, and we owe it to them to respect their sensibilities and their intellect and treat them as they wish to be treated. The Market is the temple and the Consumer is the God – it is this healthy respect for what our consumers are, as opposed to a misplaced longing for what they should be, which has helped Zee to churn out our long string of chart busting programmes", his words need to be taken

24 See especially Herbert Schiller, Communication and Cultural Domination, and Armand Matellart, Multinational Corporations and the Control of Culture.
with a huge pinch of salt. A review of both the news programming and other entertainment genres that flood the Indian airwaves show that if anything is sacrificed at the altar of the secular temple of the market, it is the ideals of democracy, paradoxically shielded by a populist discourse of “the people.” One is tempted to invert Jindal’s view and argue that as long as the market is God, and the Consumer is the temple where collections are made on divine behalf, any assumptions of the necessary democratization of society through global television must be demonstrated rather than simply assumed.

If the above picture of secular globalisation in its economic dimensions in its sacralized clothing of consumerist populism sounds too sanguine, it might be worth remarking that no easy answer to the present dilemmas present themselves. Quite clearly, calls for a return to a return to state control would prove a misguided recommendation as long as the very social and political relations of India remain highly hierarchical and power-ridden. In fact, the factoring in of the social into equations between democracy and globalization remains largely absent in the current discourse around television. While we have long discarded the notion that TV is simply a mirror of society, and come to accept its integral role in the reproduction of social relations, a residual fetishization of the media as the panacea of all evils still underwrites the present globalization discourse as it did in the earlier state-interventionist ideology of development through planning. In a paradoxical inversion of Jürgen Habermas’ reservations about the capitalist penetration of the public sphere, the present populist discourse consecrates global television as the handmaiden to the people’s democratic rights. This discourse we encountered above is also reflected in some scholarly approaches to the media, where the new media are said to herald a greater democratization of religion. Further, in terms of cultural politics, terms like the global and the local prove wholly inadequate in grasping the curious convergence of different styles, values and content which mark present-day Indian TV programming. For example, Pradip Thomas’ call for the development of “non-western universals” that respect the cultural specificity of the countries of the South might prove ineffective given that at least in the realm of culture, to think of universals would play right in the hands of those hegemonic definers of the “modern nation” who subsume Hindu tradition, modern technology and unbridled consumerism within the discourse of the Sacred (marketplace) and the Profane (consumer).

SCREENING WOMEN

Women have traditionally been one of the most “fertile” material and discursive sites on which the fabrication of cultural identity has been forged. In the contemporary situation, in all its economic, political and cultural dimensions, there has been an accelerated proliferation of sites, discourses and values that have coalesced around the figure of “women.” Media like television are crucial in the discursive struggle to figure women, as Liesbet van Zoonen argues: “the conceptualization of gender implies that its meaning is never given but varies according to specific cultural and historical set-

27 For a recent example, see Dale F. Eickelman and Jon W. Anderson, eds, New Media in the Muslim World: The Emerging Public Sphere, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press 2000.
tings, and that its meaning is subject to ongoing discursive struggle and negotiation, the outcome having far-reaching socio-cultural implications.”29 From the early controversies around appropriate representation of femininity to the more contemporary discourses around the globalization of women, television has been an important resource in both perpetuating and reformulating the relationship between women and Indian cultural identity.

The placement of this section in a chapter on democracy is both pointed and polemical: firstly, arguments which characterise the eclipse of the citizen of a democratic polity by the consumer of global capitalism naively assume a break which empirically does not obtain. As argued earlier, discourses of consumerism operate at the level of “the people”, in their specific cultural modes of belonging; secondly, the well-known argument that culture gets primarily defined around women needs to be rethought such that cultural consumption is seen in relation to discourses of nationalism and femininity. Rather than frame the “woman question” purely in terms of consumption (a masculinist bias well-known in media studies), one needs to investigate how the figure of “woman” is simultaneously embedded in discourses of “the people” as well. In the emerging televizual landscape in India for example, the proliferation of programming for women and by women is often termed as empowering and democratic-empowering because it signals a questioning of traditional modes of representation, while democratic in that it broadens the signs and meanings of belonging to the nation. As we will see, these shifts are strongly linked to a middle-class ethos, but they are nevertheless embedded within a nationalist rhetoric of belonging and participation. “Screening” women thus signifies not just the evolving representation of women on television but the simultaneous foreclosing of those “other women” who do not fit either the fantasy of consumption or the failed promise of democracy.

In this section, I map out some of the changes in modes of representation, and kinds of images of the “Indian women”, in the context of the multifarious discourses of globalization. While the earlier control of television, primarily in the hands of the state, limited the range of possible representations of women, that situation has changed dramatically with the onset of satellite television and private broadcasting. If “Mother India” was the dominant figure of Indian womanhood in early film and television, shifts were already becoming apparent when state TV turned to advertising. On the one hand, this meant an increasingly consumerist address to women, such as the proliferation of advertisements and programming that placed her in the role of the ideal consumer of products, usually in the context of wife, mother or desirable object for men. At the same time, there were shifts in the discourse, such as that of the empowered woman who would resist oppressive power-relations and hunt out the sources of corruption, such as the very popular serial Rajani, on Doordarshan.

This shift to an increasingly consumerist, as well as empowered female subjectivity has undergone greater intensification at present. The section below “reads” this proliferation of imagery around women, and how they are framed in terms of representation, tradition and culture. My reading below thus enters into discussions of subjectivity at the level of media texts, and expands its focus to look at the articulation of such aesthetic representations to broader power relations at the present historical conjuncture in India. “Reading” here signifies an interventionary act that tracks and displaces the web of significations around gender and sexuality, as they are manifested in

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representational practice (media/politics). In this sense, Gayatri Spivak's characterisation aptly describes the analysis below: "The site of displacement of the functions of signs is the name of reading as an active transaction between past and future." 30 That is to say, at a time when globalization is cast as the quasi-Hegelian supersession of difference/contradiction and the final triumph of capitalism, tracking the shifts in the signification-function of representations of gender and sexuality enables an investigation of the nexus between subject-formation under postcoloniality and the evolving economic-cultural logic of globalization. Reading media texts as a transactional act that moves back and forward as it locates the vanishing present enables an intervention in the seamless empty homogenous time that we purportedly live in and that masquerades as the end of history.

The "text" in question then, cannot simply be the bounded representation of a film, TV programme or commercial, but its embeddedness within the ongoing crisis-ridden reproduction of social relations. As Laura Chrisman and Patrick Williams argue forcefully "[I]f texts exist in what... one could call a dialectical relationship with their social and historical context-produced by, but also productive of, particular forms of knowledge, ideologies, power relations, institutions and practices – then an analysis of the texts of imperialism has a particular urgency, given their implication in far-reaching and continuing, systems of domination and exclusion." 31 Their use of the term "dialectics" is deliberately provocative, given that certain forms of postcolonial theory, such as that argued for by Homi Bhabha has cast dialectics as a teleologically-dominated, universalizing mode of analysis. 32 Cultural representations, I am suggesting, must be understood dialectically in their articulation with other developments in the field of politics and economics rather than as free-floating signs unmoored from sedimented and evolving power-relations at the level of discourse, practice and institutions. I will track the particular constructions of the "new Indian woman" as she emerges within the mass mediated landscape of Indian society, focusing in particular on how this set of constructions of gendered national identification is thoroughly imbricated within a complex transnational socio-symbolic and economic imaginary.

As signalled earlier, representations of women prior to global satellite television were not free of consumerist biases, or critiques of traditional roles. However, with the proliferation of broadcasting networks, there has also been a boom in the kinds of genres and modes of representation of women and "women's issues." Talk shows such as *Aap Ki Shanti* (UTV), hosted by Mandira Bedi is broadcast daily and features women from all avenues of life. Serials often feature women characters in prominence, and use the plots to illustrate the complexities of marriage, the struggles entailed in pursuing professional life, etc. In an episode of *Kash-m-Kash*, broadcast on DD Metro (August 14, 1998), an outraged wife confronts her husband who has been using her paintings against her wishes to further his business. If the assertive woman is emerging on the screen in more dramatic ways than before, it is not as if the dutiful wife has been banished to the past. Or maybe, the increasing assertiveness of women can only be figured in a utopian past? When Arun wakes up sick one morning in an episode of *Jee Sahab* (Yes Sir, Zee TV), his doting Rashmi rushes to him and forces him back to bed, giving him a chest rub and showering him with attention. When he suddenly sneezes, he realizes he has been dreaming – his Rashmi is busy and gone off to Delhi and is not there.

32 Homi Bhabha, The Location of Culture.
Popular serials exploring the vexed problem of "traditional marriage" are booming, and have not been met without controversy. *Saans*, *Swabhiman* and *Faasle* have directly addressed themes of adultery and non-traditional roles of women but have also been attacked for their depictions of femininity. *Hasratein* (desire) which has been airing on Zee TV has been accused by some of being responsible for the alleged proliferation of infidelity. As one cynical commentator put it "talk shows, chat shows, never-ending soaps and sitcoms boast of dare-all, bare-all attitudes. Human desires, they call it, or more so, a desire to savour the forbidden fruit of love and emerge triumphant in a relationship that breaks all social barriers."34 There is definitely the familiar male dismissiveness in this response to programming addressing women, while simultaneously signalling the strong commercial rewards to be had for pushing the limits of acceptable programming.

Besides this financial incentive, it must be pointed out that most programming addressed to women and concerning them is very middle-class. For example, *Kora Kagaz* which started broadcasting on October 6, 1998 on STAR Plus addresses the darker sides of "traditional marriage" such as in-law problems, husband-wife relations and the like, but remains bound within the ethos of middle-class comfort, set as it is in a luxurious multiple-storeyed home with sweeping staircases and well-furnished rooms. DD Metro's *Mausam* is advertised as a family drama, revolving around two families, one in India the other in the U.S., and explores the complex relationships obtaining between separated kin. It has a particular resonance for many viewers who have family abroad, yet one is again struck by the limited character of the questioning of family relationships and gender norms within this primarily privileged set-up. While the middle-class focus is not in itself objectionable, one can locate the commercial constraints in terms of advertising, which limit the range of women that can be addressed in the present media situation.

If traditional marriage is being questioned in numerous shows, it is also being fought by the state, in the person of the then I&B minister, Sushma Swaraj. From capturing the headlines after she admonished newscasters for their immodest attire, she has gone on to be a thorn in the side for those programmers who have been pushing the envelope when it comes to representations of social and gender issues. Addressing the 23rd annual conference of state and union territory ministers of information and broadcasting, she stressed that modern technology must be used to "spread the message of India's culture and heritage", and promised to bring in legislation to check the frankness that has hit the airwaves, primarily in terms of sex (read adultery, sexual explicit material, "traditional marriage") and violence.35 The Indian mediascape addresses and reformulates the representation of women (as we will see in some detail below), while different groups such as the Hindu Right have been central in the discursive struggle over what constitutes the "real Indian woman." It is in the traffic between these two discursive spaces that Indian "womanhood" gets reformulated and other figurations of women get erased or shunted out of hegemonic public discourse. The following section will address precisely this dialectic of exposure and erasure that structures the construction of "woman" within Indian media and religious discourse.

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In probably the most eloquent yet condensed fashion, some forms of TV programming illustrate the ambiguity of a global discourse of “national belonging” in the age of mass-mediated reproduction. In the popular “Jai Jai Shiva Shankar” video clip on both the MTV India and Channel [V] channels, this ambiguity manifests itself in the alternative traditions of ancient Hindu texts and modern consumer culture. From the opening close-up shot of a pair of feet that casts off its wooden chappals for Adidas shoes, the video speeds through a high-tempo song that combines the rhythms of the ghataam, techno-pop and Bollywood musical styles as it narrates the happy marriage of tradition and modernity. A little Buddhist monk in his newly-acquired sports shoes is speeding towards the door of a matronly Indian woman in white hair, where he delivers a message that she has just won the “Video Ga Ga” contest. As she collapses to the ground in pleasurable disbelief, a gym-toned bare-chested man clad in a dhoti launches into the first chords of “Jai Jai Shiv Shankar” aided by his buxom muse. As they swap clothes from golden swimsuits and mini-skirts to rural clothing reminiscent of Ram’s exile in the forest, a bemused ascetic under a banyan tree rocks to the infectious beat. Mobile phones, Karl Lagerfeld sunglasses, muscular male and female bodies all vie for space among vermillion-marked faces of religious figures and the popular verses of old Hindi-film classics redone to a techno-beat. The enduring popularity of such representations of modern India where traditional markers of a recrudescent past are coeval with the high-tech lifestyles of urban India exemplify the mass-mediated imagination and the syncretic world-view of the urban middle-class consumer.

Representations of women function centrally in this re-imagining of the nation as both repository of cultural values and harbinger of a consumerist modernity in new India. Some more examples. A gym-toned, woman dressed in black leather, and a suited man are undressing in erotic urgency, in grainy, cinema-verité style camera shots when the click of a key in the door interrupt them. Looking up, the woman whispers, “It’s my husband!!”. As we realize the man she is straddling is her secret lover, he rushes to hide as her husband walks into the house. Mistaking his unknown rival’s shoes for new ones bought by his doting, consumption-crazed wife, he mutters ruefully “You’ve bought the wrong size of shoes again!” as he places them in his enormous shoe closet. Flash back to a few years earlier. A film by Shekhar Kapur titled The Bandit Queen, based on the life of a real woman whose legendary status as a Robin-hood figure, a vengeful, murderous criminal, a threat to the establishment, depending on who you are. As a young low caste just-married girl, fetching water from a well she is attacked by a group of boys who destroy the water pot she has laboriously filled. As she screams expletives at them, the onlooking women in her husband’s family mutter disapprovingly about how “modern” she is. It’s 1998. An enraged crowd attacks and badly damages a cinema theatre in Bombay protesting against Deepa Mehta’s film “Fire”, for portraying Indian women as “lesbians.” The film is temporarily withdrawn by court order and re-released, the central character’s Hindu names cut out.

The representation of women in the media has undergone a sea-change, partly through the processes of globalization, which while linked explicitly to cultural poli-

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36 See Nira Yuval-Davis, Gender and Nation, London and New Delhi: Sage 1997, for a detailed discussion of the role of women in the material and cultural reproduction of the nation.

tics in India transcend the national imaginary in important ways: the “modern” woman who compulsively shops for her husband and is having an affair on the side, the “traditional” woman who defies a caste-ridden, patriarchal society and against whom the term “modern” is an expletive, “Indian lesbianism” attacked by Hindu nationalist women and men as a western-fabricated myth. The coeval yet conflictual representations of gender, tradition, modernity and “India”, understood within a post-colonial frame of reference must also be situated in the context of its production and embeddedness in shifting social relations now. A London-based Indian filmmaker making a film on Phoolan Devi, a Canadian-Indian’s controversial resignification of “Indian femininity” and religion, a globalised social imaginary of “the new Indian woman”, checkbook in one hand and deceived husband by the other – the translation of gender and “India” here confounds our received understandings of the relation between nation, state, media and representation. The traditional representations of women in film and television as mother, goddess, daughter and wife are now being reworked and alongside these representation we have the “empowered” modern woman, the Indian lesbian and other images which symptomize a reworking of gendered subjects within the evolving cultural, economic and social dynamic of globalization.

The examples cited above are a symptom of this re-orienting landscape within which global media expansion, diasporic imaginations of “home”, refashioned subjectivities of womanhood and the like intersect. With the booming fortunes of the urban middle-classes and the dramatic expansion of satellite broadcasting networks, the traditional discourse of “woman as consumer” is married to a sophisticated and labile plethora of images of Indian womanhood. At once traditional and modern, dutiful wife/mother/daughter and empowered, go-getting businesswoman, defender and representative of tradition and symbol of a global modernity, gendered subjectivity is being redrawn through a series of resignifications. The overall strategy in terms of the production of identity and the consumption of goods and images is also marked by a nationalist tone that is not subservient to the dictates of a western-directed globalization process. The coding of economic and affective value, in terms of consumption of goods and symbolic imaginaries involves resignifying globalization outside a purely western provenance and a linking of consumption to a particular “Indian ethos.” These media images of Indian women disprove the thesis of inevitable homogenization of culture under globalization and point to the discourse of “cultural difference” and its materialisation through media programming.

Some of the images of the “New Indian Woman” marketed by advertisers falls within the double-function of avid, trendy consumer fanatic and empowered professional, while at the same time not losing her “feminine” side (the doting, shoe-buying, yet adulterous wife), performing her dutiful role as mother, daughter, wife and role-model of the nation. In fact, the modernity/tradition divide does not hold conceptually at the level of the everyday negotiation of life for most urban elites, who manage to rework what these terms signify. The mood is captured in the blurb that opens an article on the young, hip generation – “being young in the nineties is more than tatoos and mini-skirts. Its about a whole new lifestyle, balanced by pragmatism, ambition and also, tradition.”

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...tiation is pain-free, even in her relatively privileged position, remains open to question. According to Youth Track '96, a survey carried out in 20 urban centres, sentiments like the following were expressed: “I admire the West for the elements of modernity it brought us like science and technology. But overall I think we adopted the wrong values from the West—such as smoking, drinking and pre-marital sex. Also, some of the west’s over-advanced ideologies such as women’s liberation can destroy our family lives.”

The dizzying diversification in the discursive construction of the “Bharatiya Nari” (Indian woman) is a symptom of what Chandra Talpade Mohanty and Jacqui M. Alexander call “free-market feminism.” Empowerment through consumption and lifestyle choice (rather than “over-advanced ideologies like women’s liberation”) however, does not result in the wholesale jettisoning of “traditional Indian womanhood” but its discursive re-ordering and articulation that straddles sometimes inapposite arenas. The proliferation of different images of women in the mass media is also a function of the niche-marketing strategies of advertisers and producers who cannot afford to construct a monolithic figure of pan-Indian womanhood. This strategy follows a general form, however, which must combine invocations of tradition with the blandishments of consumerist emancipation. The Ambience advertising agency conjured up an “ID kit for the ideal Bharatiya Nari” which argued that “[T]he ideal Woman that today’s young woman aspires to be must look like Aishwarya Rai [a former Miss Universe]...[yet] she wants to be like Phoolan devi and fight male oppression, and at the same time she likes to be considered as an angel that is Mother Teresa.” Combining the supermodel, avenging goddess and benevolent nun, the figure of the postmodern Indian woman emerges as the end-product of the cosmetics and mass media boom, the charity industry and Bollywood film. As Ashok Kurien, Managing Director of Ambience remarks, the ideal woman could be a sort of “Pistol packin’ mamma with drop-dead good looks and a matching halo.”

Obviously, this happy marriage of tradition and modernity cannot be easily approximated by even the most privileged, class-enabled Indian woman. Yet it functions as a sign-system that shifts the discursive terrain within which the contemporary gendered subject is played out, by displacing received understandings of tradition and modernity, combining the markers of “good femininity” such as dutifulness and “family values” with a checkbook-empowered new lifestyle of “pragmatism and ambition.” It further symptomizes the redrawing of the “national” as a discursive, material and imaginary space, where “the nation” is being radically rethought as a framework for delineating the postcolonial Indian woman. This resignification of socially-sanctioned femininity, in particular its urban, class basis, when read for its exclusions enables the recovery of other co-existing figurations of Indian women which cannot be countenanced within this happily hybrid image of a global consumerist culture.

Witness the controversy surrounding the Miss Universe beauty pageant held in 1996 in India, and co-sponsored by a company owned by India’s mythical filmstar, Amitabh Bachchan. Mainstream media representations of the demonstrations against the pageant gave pre-eminence to the role played by Hindu nationalists in the protests, and in effect sidelined the innumerable women’s groups whose political and ideological differences with the former are significant. As a consequence, the dominant

mass-mediated discourse revolved around “protecting Indian traditional womanhood”, and against “the globalization of Indian women.” The pre-eminence of this traditionalist discourse displaced longstanding feminist critiques of the reduction of the woman’s body to spectacle (for men), the commodification of women’s subjectivity in the interests of capital and the ongoing exploitation of women’s labour under the structural adjustment policy adopted by the Indian government. The local, nativist discourse of tradition articulated by the Hindu Right could only sustain itself by deliberately ignoring another form of globalization going on – the integration of women’s labour under liberalisation under ever worsening conditions. Further, domestic and state-sponsored violence against women, the worsening conditions under which women labour and the symbiotic relationship between consumerism and the commodification of women’s bodies and subjectivities were the absent presence which underwrote this traditionalist discourse around the protection of the “Indian woman.” The complex link between the domination and exploitation of women, linked to globalization, had to be written out of this other narrative of globalisation, here figured as Indian women parading in swimsuits on television. Probably one of the most telling interventions against the pageant outside the Hindu traditionalist discourse were the women in the audience who stood up with satin sashes around their saris proclaiming “Miss Rape”, “Miss Dowry Death.”

Within such a context, discourses of hybridity and in-betweenness, liminality and “living on the border” might unwittingly play into the hands of precisely those transnational marketing quarters which postcolonial theory claims to critique. If the “new Indian woman” is hybrid, she is also the subject-effect of a discursive and material network of power-relations that inserts her into a seamless narrative of “development”, “progress” and “empowerment”, from object of exploitation to efficient subject of economic productivity. The discursive figuration of the hybrid, traditional/modern Indian woman, both inside and outside different regimes of subjectification is a crucial symbolic resource in this “intensive dimension” of globalisation, which speaks the language of culture, tradition and “difference”.

My point here is two-fold: Firstly, the fragmentation in the normative figurations of “Indian womanhood” in the mass media is a symptom of the increasing integration of Indian society within the circuits of a global capitalist, cultural and social imaginary; secondly, that every figuration (or ID kit) of Ideal womanhood must displace competing figurations of women whose embodied subjectivities are embedded in the socio-economic and cultural transformations of globalization. Given that the gendered subjectivity of postcolonial Indian women crosses and recrosses the borders of a nationalist imaginary, recourse to a primal scene of the “local” where cultural difference is fetishized against the supposed homogenizing impulses of globalization cannot provide a viable political strategy – hence the problems and possibilities posed for

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43 Spivak’s critique of the “hymen” for figuring women’s non-representability falls with equal force, in my view, on theories of hybridity which, like the figure of the hymen, locate “woman” as both inside and outside representation, as a liminal figuration of the non-place where she is inserted. The hybrid invocations of consumption-empowered Indian woman are caught up in this discourse of the exchangeability of the woman’s body as an object of legal ownership under heterosexual and patriarchal relations. The burden of my argument is located at tracking this coding of the “hybrid” Indian woman as a functional displacement in sign-systems under globalization See Gayatri Spivak, “ Displacement and the Discourse of women”, in Mark Krupnick, ed., Displacement: Derrida and After, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 1983, pp.169-195.

44 Mary John’s “Gender and Development: Problems for a History of the Present”, Thamiris 4, 1, Spring 1997, pp. 137-153 provides an excellent analysis of the reconfiguration of gender subjectivity under the discourse of economic liberalization in India.
feminists in India who tread carefully between indigenist accounts of subjectivity on
the one hand and universalist presumptions of essential womanhood. Rather, by
tracking the continual resignifications through which the sign of “woman” is elabo­
rated, and looking for the constitutive outside to these displacements in sign-systems,
a postcolonial cultural critique could move in and out of the texts of cultural repre­
sentations to recode postcoloniality into the narrative of neo-imperialism.

This necessity for recoding postcoloniality in relation to women takes on greater
relevance at present, when votaries of “postfeminism” ally themselves to postcolonial
feminism without addressing the complex imbrication between “development” and
“women”. For example, Ann Brooks argues that postcolonial studies interrogates the
binary of the West and the East, and overlaps with postmodernism and a critique of
modernism. By conflating all postcolonial feminism with postmodernism, Brooks
celebrates a hybridity, which as I have argued above, need not be seen necessarily as
resistant to either patriarchal power-relations or global capital. By locating hybridity
outside hegemonic power-relations, one might end up asserting one's hybrid identity
(our ID kit for Indian women) outside broader power relations, but such assertions
remain caught up, despite themselves, in the surplus of colonialism in the very heart
of nationalism. Spivak argues that the scripts of independence, the assertion of sov­
ereignty, the revamped nationalism of postcolonial states like India, cannot be avail­
able to those who have occupied a subaltern position within the social formation. Her
point can be read in two ways. Firstly, if the hybrid Indian woman that populates the
small screen is empowered, it is a power that feeds of the reassertion of Indian iden­
tity in all its contradictions, and this hybrid identity is caught up in the post-colonial
as neo-colonial. Secondly, those subalterns who remain invisible within this logic of
hyper-visibility and active accumulation, like those women who cannot make it to the
TV screen, cannot traffic in the liberatory discourse of hybridity, since these women
are caught and struggle in the surplus of colonialism, neo-colonialism, that marks the
present conjuncture.

The figurai displacements of women in the present media context cannot be framed
within a celebratory discourse of increasing democratisation, without a concomitant
recognition that the demos in question cannot be completely saturated by all people
and particularly, all women. The meanings and images circulating within the present
mediascape are indeed proliferating, but lest we succumb to the temptation of view­
ing this as the enlargement of the public sphere, it is worth recalling that the “strug­
gle over meaning is not a mere pluralistic ‘debate’ of equal but contending frames of
reference. It is circumscribed by existing ethnic and economic power-relations.”

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47 Van Zoonen, “Feminist Perspectives on the Media,” p. 43.
Aleksandr Rodchenko, *Oval Hanging Construction, No. 12*, circa 1920