

MINORI TV: ASSESSING THE REPRESENTATION OF MINORITIES IN GLOBAL TELEVISION

Devanshi Lohani

Modern School, Barakhamba Road, New Delhi

ABSTRACT

The growth of television as a medium is progressing rapidly across the world, and especially in India. With the growth of online platforms and internet accessibility, television content and news is venturing into areas that it had previously not done before. In this context, it is further important to acknowledge the fact that with changing social mores, content and news must change along with it. There has been a constant struggle for minorities with respect to their representation in television and the news, the stereotypes used to represent them, and in a country like India, the language. Given the diversity of the country and the number of local as well as tribal languages, it is a worrying trend that the media industry and the government does not provide more of an emphasis on protecting minorities and linguistic minorities in particular. This paper will highlight the key issues with respect to such minorities and the measures that should be taken to ensure their adequate representation on television. The paper will then assess the conflicting issues of representation and censorship and the status of the debate with particular focus on language, concluding with policy recommendations to tackle these issues.

Keywords: Minori TV, Television, Minority, Indian media, Languages

INTRODUCTION

Television is a rapidly growing medium, both in India and around the world. With the arrival of several streaming platforms, television is now more accessible to a large number of people, and these platforms are investing huge sums into content generation at an unprecedented scale. For example, it was estimated that Netflix would spend around 15 billion dollars on content generation in the year 2019 (Spangler, 2019). Streaming platforms have allowed for television programs to become more diverse, detailed, and almost cinematic in their quality.

However, there continues to be a struggle for adequate representation for minorities, such as women, people of colour, and religious minorities, without the issue of exotification. This

struggle is one faced both in India, and globally. Television serves the purpose of entertainment, and also to create revenue. The economic driver of television is advertising (Chuang, 1999). For broadcast television, it is for all intensive purposes the sole source of revenues. Broadcast television operates in what economics defines as a dual market. A dual market is a situation in which a business serves two markets. In this case, they are content consumers and advertisers (Chuang, 1999). Therefore, advertisers exert great influence over every aspect of television.

While the business model of streaming platforms is different and not as fundamentally based on advertising, there is still conflict. Especially in India, there is significant public debate as to the censorship of content on online streaming platforms, which do not fall within the purview of the current censorship laws. This confusion, public sentiment, and threat of litigation has led to a worrying trend of self censorship by these platforms in India, even if the law does not require it (Deep, 2017). This poses a chilling effect on the freedom of speech that allows for content that is critical of government, and highlighting the issues of minorities which the majority may find objectionable (Deep, 2017).

This paper will highlight the key issues with respect to the representation of minority groups in television, and review the debates surrounding the definition of minorities, censorship and freedom of the media, as well as highlight the role of representing minority languages in television for effective representation, with a focus on the Indian context. The paper will then pose policy recommendations with respect to the future of the debates on representation vis-à-vis censorship.

BACKGROUND

Adopted by consensus in 1992, the United Nations Minorities Declaration in its article 1 refers to minorities as based on national or ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic identity, and provides that States should protect their existence. There is no internationally agreed definition as to which groups constitute minorities. It is often stressed that the existence of a minority is a question of fact and that any definition must include both objective factors (such as the existence of a shared ethnicity, language or religion) and subjective factors (including that individuals must identify themselves as members of a minority) (United Nations, 2010).

The difficulty in arriving at a widely acceptable definition lies in the variety of situations in which minorities live. Some live together in well-defined areas, separated from the dominant part of the population. Others are scattered throughout the country. Some minorities have a strong sense of collective identity and recorded history; others retain only a fragmented notion of their common heritage (United Nations, 2010).

In India, the definition of minorities is the subject of debate. The term ‘minority’ is not defined in the constitution of the country, however, it is understood that Articles 29 and 30 cover the subject of minority rights, as it covers a section of citizens having a ‘distinct language, script or culture of its own’. A circular issued by the Central Government notified only five communities - Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists and Parsis — as ‘minority’ community, without defining ‘minority’ and framing parameters for the identification of minority (Staff Reporter, The Hindu, 2019).

A recent public interest litigation has prompted the Supreme Court to direct the National Commission for Minorities (NCM) to take a decision on a plea seeking guidelines for defining the term ‘minority’ and for their identification State-wise (Staff Reporter, The Hindu, 2019). The public interest litigation alleged that the classification of religious minorities at a pan-India level had not only created a wave of inequality across different States but also encouraged those who did not belong to those minority religions, to convert themselves for social, political and economic benefits (Staff Reporter, The Hindu, 2019).

Therefore, the definition of minority continues to remain unclear. However, it is largely understood in popular culture to mean religious minorities, women, people of colour, and sexual minorities, even though it is not explicitly defined in the law. In India’s minority rights discourse the issue of linguistic rights has not been of much concern. This is unjust, as the denial of linguistic rights not only hampers the cultural development of a community, but is also detrimental for the social and economic development of a minority and for the society as such (Benedikter, 2013). While the culture industry and the big media privilege a few dominant languages, minority languages and tribal cultures alike are dying a silent and slow death. In India many such languages have definitely disappeared and several more are on the edge of extinction. This fact is not unknown to politicians, rather it is taken as the inevitable price to be paid for economic modernization and cultural homogenization (Benedikter, 2013).

The issue of censorship has always been a subject of conflict, with a conflict between moral Puritanism and new age values. The current and most contemporary debate surrounds streaming platforms which do not fall within the current censorship framework. There is a looming question as to whether this is desirable, especially with respect to the representation of minorities which will most necessarily entail criticism of the majority (Alex, 2015; Naik, 2019).

DISCUSSION

In a multi-ethnic and multi-lingual country like India language is a key element in cultural expression. Though the Indian Constitution recognises only 18 languages there are more than 400 languages spoken across the country. ‘National’ television, which claims to have pan-Indian

viewership, is generally understood to be in Hindi (the most widely spoken language in the country) and English (the language of higher courts, top bureaucracy and higher education as well as of pan-Indian corporate elite) (Thussu, 2000). Although state-owned DD focused on creating a uniform 'national' identity through Hindi and English programmes, sensing the ground reality they started broadcasting in various regional languages in order to cater to the regional audiences (Thussu, 2000).

There has been a growth of popularity of regional language channels in several regions of the country. However, it has been noted by scholars that despite this, there is a focus on the Hindu ideology or majority culture or upper castes, without a focus on the minority groups (Alex, 2015).

The attributes discussed above are primarily associated with India's vocal middle class. Television's middle class connection is to be understood in relation to its task of promoting national development and 'creating modern citizen-subjects' (Mankekar, 1999: 48). Television discourse on modernity has been meant to foster the interests of consumerism, through which it constructed 'middle-classness' which subsequently has become indispensable for the survival of television (Mankekar, 1999). Agreeing with the contention that the television news media feeds on and feeds into the interests of the urban middleclass, it is argued by scholars that such mutual dependency isolates the vast majority of the population leaving them with the only option of being mere spectators and listeners.

They are neither heard nor do their views get expressions on television in a country where the democratic process is so vital for its existence (Alex, 2015). Therefore, it is crucial for there to be representation of minorities in order for there to be a mass awareness of issues that affect them. However, the debate surrounding representation and censorship has underlying difficulties with respect to ethical concerns and cultural relativism, since what is offensive to one group would be inspirational to the other. As stated in the previous sections, this has led to calls for censorship of television especially in the online sphere, from the central government and majority Hindutva groups.

The concept of hegemony, ever since Antonio Gramsci coined it, has been widely used in critical analysis of the news media (Anderson, 1988). Language plays a key role in the hegemonic construction of 'common sense'. The notion of 'common sense' derives its meaning from a social world divided into 'us' and 'them'. Mass mediated public discourse, of which language is a crucial element, gives expression to hegemonic ideology and makes it available for public consumption. In Gramsci's view hegemony is the ruling class's domination through ideology and the shaping of popular consent (Alex, 2015).

This paper will not compare and contrast instances of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ representation of minorities, with a focus on language. The show ‘Balika Vadhu’ was critically acclaimed for shedding light on the issues of girls forced into child marriage, and a majority of the show was in the Bhojpuri dialect, and was praised for its authenticity. The show ‘Made in Heaven’ recently released on the streaming platform Amazon Prime was acclaimed for highlighting issues on womens’ rights, LGBTQ rights, and addressing morally taboo topics such as divorce, adultery and mental health issues that are not highlighted. However, this was in English for the most part, and therefore still does not contribute to the protection of minority languages. Reality shows have also begun to feature contestants from marginalized sections of society (Dixit, 2013).

However, local languages can be used to disseminate propaganda and misinformation. For example, Gujarati media and news channels promoted hatred against the Muslim community in the aftermath of the 2002 riots, using images from pop culture portraying Muslims (Alex, 2015). During the communal violence that followed the assassination of Laxmananda Saraswati, a Hindutva leader, scores of Christians were killed and hundreds became homeless (Alex, 2015). Attempts are made to make the Christian minority ‘the other’ and the ‘enemy within’ and violence against them is perceived as patriotic, reasonable, and a legitimate nationalist response to past colonial atrocities (Chatterji, 2009). Overall, in the media, tribal languages are given next to no importance as well, which is a third instance of bad representation of minorities (Alex, 2015).

CONCLUSION

Government and society must pay attention to the recognition of minority languages and representation, investing in education and culture, adopting appropriate rules in public administration and services, strengthening the role of minority languages in the media, and recognising the protection of languages as a fundamental human right. In India particularly, there is a danger of minority languages being subsumed within the efforts made make Hindi the ‘national language’. However, this is also propagated by the Bollywood industry. In fact, so widespread is the assumption that Hindi is now widely understood across India that even English-only bastions like English newspapers and TV channels now liberally mix Hindi into their content (Scroll Staff, 2019). To follow Republic, Times Now or even sometimes to read a headline in the Hindi, an Indian would need to be familiar with Hindi (Scroll Staff, 2019).

The future of the debate on representation and censorship rests on there being comprehensive policies that protect minority rights and their freedom of expression, and develop metrics to assess the progress of the same. Such comprehensive studies and data do not currently exist in India. Although there have been studies conducted on news channels, there must be more

conducted with respect to the online sphere and streaming platforms as these are rapidly growing.

Today minority languages are not often openly discriminated against. They are just left alone, exposed to the arbitrary forces of social and economic developments, which leads to a lack of representation in the media. Language movements seldom have sufficient momentum to gain the national or international attention (Benedikter, 2013). Militancy in defence of languages is blamed for both cultural backwardness and anti-modernism, as well as ethno-political activism leading to movements of rebellion and secession. The recognition and implementation of linguistic rights, should be enshrined on all levels: national constitutions, international covenants, State acts or sub-state regional statutes (Bendikter, 2013). If all states, either united in a common federation or a supranational organisation agree on a common minimum standard of protection of minority rights and linguistic rights with the required legal remedies or supranational mechanisms of implementation and monitoring, it would be much easier to achieve linguistic human rights (Benedikter, 2013).

Further, to improve representation of minorities and their languages, the media cannot be improved in isolation. There also needs to be reform in the education sector to increase awareness about minority languages. the prevailing strategy to cope with multilingual complexity is the famous "Three-language-formula". This again acts to the disadvantage of the smaller, non-scheduled linguistic minorities (Benedikter, 2013). Major contradictions have emerged in the implementation of this formula. The major conflicts appear to arise between equal implementation in the Northern Hindi-belt vis-à-vis the States with Dravidian official languages in the South. But this ambiguous formula can hardly be combined with linguistic minorities' right to education in their mother tongues, let alone with the rights of tribal peoples who already suffer under weak education structures.

Despite many laudable efforts, the number of minority languages used in education is continuously declining (Benedikter, 2013). The duration of the use of minority languages in education, the availability of trained teachers and textbooks, the content of the curricula, the social appreciation of minority languages in public education, and the existence of institutions for the development of educational support are, in many cases, insufficient to meet tribal peoples' fundamental right to education in their mother tongues, as enshrined in the Constitution (Benedikter, 2013).

In conclusion, the government must take a fundamentally different approach to the laws that exist on censorship, and protection of minority languages for there to be real change with respect to the protection of marginalized sections.

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