

## **Whither Children's Television in India? Are children a concern?**

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More than half of television viewers in India today are children of below 15 years. And yet there is hardly any sensitivity about the relevance and impact of what is dished out by various television channels. All of them are operating in a competitive mode for one upmanship in the race for viewership. In this order channels are concerned more about “what interests or attracts” children rather than what is “in the interest” of children. Neither the Government nor the parents or the teachers seems to be concerned about this situation. For, the generation next and the civil society of the country is shaped and molded by what they are exposed to today on the “idiot-box” day in and day out.

Research studies over the years world over have brought out various types of negative impact of intense viewing of television by children. The direct influence of TV viewing on the extent of violence and deviant behavior pattern of children has been reiterated – even in India. In fact, there are a couple of confessions by adolescents, even a biography, as to how they picked up ideas about a rape or robbery or revenge or killing or suicide or kidnap, etc from one or other TV programme. Even some court judgments have commented on such effect of TV programmes. That TV has a double-edged effect and that it is the negative character which impacts more than positive potential often is known. But what is not realized is that there are no serious efforts to explore positive virtues of TV and that parents who should be more concerned about such a phenomena hardly do anything about it. In fact, **CMS studies have brought out, for example, that in Punjab and Uttar Pradesh, parents enjoy the same fare of TV along with their children and as keenly; where as in Tamil Nadu and West Bengal, parents try to restrain their children in favour of some discriminative viewing.** Teachers and social activists in a couple of places have been occasionally demonstrating about the influence

of television contents. Political parties too do not seem to be concerned to do something about. BJP, however, had referred to this adverse trend in its election manifesto a decade ago. But did nothing on coming to power, nor later.

Even the code for advertising, although outdated and inadequate, is conscious of “implications” to children of certain broadcasts and realizes the scope for misuse. For example, under the code no advertisements should be accepted which lures children to believe that if they do not own or use the product advertised they will be inferior to other children or that they are liable to ridicule for not owning or using a particular brand. However, in reality there is neither strict monitoring of the advertisements nor a rigid follow-up despite that many ads on television fall under this category. And most of these children’s channels have become marketing outlets for brands altogether to India.

Against this background and in this context there are certain recent trends on the Indian TV scene, which need to be taken note. **More and more media corporate are going for “children’s channels”. In fact, in 2011 there were two dozen “children channel” in all although not all of them are distributed all across the country.** One Indian channel (*Hungama*) was taken over by Disney. Most of these are beamed into the country as if no one in the country, the Government the least, is concerned about such a trend. What is not taken note is that **(a) most of these children’s channels and programmes are of foreign origin and are reruns over the years, (b) they do not have anything to do with enrichment or supplementary scope for school education or imparting moral standards (there are of course some good pre-school programmes); (c) some of these foreign channels are now entering their second phase in the country taking to marketing of toys and tools for children promoted in these serials. And, worse, as a result of all this, there has been a decline recently in the extent of locally originated programmes for children even in Indian channels.** To complicate the matter further these foreign programmes for children are now being dubbed into Indian languages. Except on a couple of festival season, foreign produced (originally) on these children channels is as high 85 – 95percent (2011).

There are international lobbies operating aggressively to thrust upon animation serials for children on countries like India. That is how today cartoons have become synonymous for Children's TV. Most of these serials are produced after much research. But not for ensuring educational or general knowledge aspects as for capturing and retaining eyeballs of children again and again. **Some of these serials are accused as having certain "dope-effect" on children.**

The kind of competition between DTH services brings out the urgency for Government take a view of this proliferation of uninhibited foreign fare for children and doing something about it so that television is also used with more concern and for positive ends. **The least the Government should do is to prescribe that every channel being down linked must have certain percent of locally produced and originating programmes for children.** In fact, in the case of children channels, this percentage of locally originated programmes has to be higher. Canada and European Union countries have one or other provisions in their laws in this regard. If France has prescribed 30 percent of contents of channels should be locally originated, India should go for a higher percentage or same, not less.

India has a rich tradition of enriching children with folk tales and grandma tales and imparting values and discipline and moral values in an entertaining format. When some of us advocated and argued a couple of decades ago for expansion of TV network in the country and for going for color television, one hope was that children's fare will get some priority and all that treasure of India gets a chance to figure. But what is happening now is contrary. The exceptions are only a few. For, **there is a decline in the extent of children's participation even in national channels.** The best specific examples of course are *Malguidi Days*, *Panchatantra*, *Tenaliraman* and the like. Realizing such strengths of Indian tradition, some foreign producers are scouting in India to capture talent for television, particularly in animation format. But what about our own initiatives?.

We do not seem to learn from our experiences. All India Radio in the earlier years has set good examples for children's programmes, which had enriching potential as well as entertaining and supplementary to school education. In fact, the format of those AIR programmes was such that they were participatory and empowering confidence and courage building in children and respect for elders and environment. **Today most imported children's programmes are all out to promote materialism, selfishness and consumerism "at any cost".**

Realizing the significance of media in the context of children, a few years ago, UN had prescribed annual day for mass media when children are supposed to be the producers of media contents. It is a good symbolic initiative. But it should be followed up by some support to promote "creative TV software" for children of 6 – 12 age group, in particular. For, there is UN Convention on Rights of Child with a set of standards to promote well being of children. Unfortunately, there is no public trust or foundation of civil society in India for such purposes. Even Public Service Broadcasting Trust (PSBT), which is a good initiative otherwise, is yet to be concerned about children's interests. **It is most unfortunate that neither of the plethora of Government agencies claiming concern for children has taken note of this vacuum. Not even the Ministry of Information & Broadcasting.** All this despite ample creative talents across the country to produce more positive, pro-active and locally relevant software for children than what is available now. It is unfortunate that the Government has neither taken pro-active or re-active initiatives in this regard. **While we have a Children's Film Society to promote films for children and a Children's Book Trust, we have none for television despite the number of children who see television is several times more** and, even more critically, the frequency of their viewing television is more than a couple of hours a day and much higher than adults.

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