



Power of Television to Mediate Culture: Recounting Surabhi- Doordarshan's Pioneering Cultural Show of the Nineteen Nineties

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ABSTRACT

This Paper recounts the backdrop and conception of Doordarshan's pioneering cultural show Surabhi, which ran successfully on the national network for eight to nine years beginning 1993. The nature of programming content and reasons of its popularity are looked at. Discussed theoretically is the role of television in mediating culture, and how by its very character, television has a 'real content' viewer relationship with the audience than it does with cinema or any other medium.

The contemporary cultural programming patterns on television prevalent today are appraised and an outline of the plausible future delineated. In a digital environment that evolves by the hour and participation of audience made spontaneous by the touch screen mobile phones, the contrast with the scenario of a decade and half years ago cannot be more telling. And yet, the success story of Surabhi, attributed to the richness and texture of its content, remains invincible.

KEYWORDS : National Public Broadcasting Channel, Medium, Television, Culture, Popularity, Viewership/Viewing Relations

The Backdrop and Conception of Surabhi:

In 1991, when the market economy in India opened up for foreign investors and the mighty multinationals, one profound impact of liberalisation was in the form of satellite invasion. At that time this "cultural invasion from the skies" with the projected bombardment of open-minded western ideas and life styles was perceived to be a major threat to our Indian culture and values. Earlier, the Report of the Working Group on Software for Doordarshan titled "An Indian Personality for Television" headed by Professor P.C.Joshi, had contended that a developing country like India is exposed to the danger of erosion of its national cultural identity, and the need is to resist this onslaught, through restriction of imported programmes and our own 'positive software planning'. The committee discerned a 'credibility gap' created by the growing hiatus between profession and practice, between official policy pronouncements emphasising use of television for development and education, and the increasing drift and departure from them in favour of commercial advantage. It therefore urged the exploitation of the 'developmental potential' of television.

It is in the pangs of this backdrop that *Surabhi*, meaning *fragrance*, a pioneering and popular Indian cultural magazine show was conceived and born. Hosted by Renuka Shahane and Siddharth Kak, it ran from 1993 to 2001. It was telecast on Doordarshan, the Indian state-run National Public Broadcasting Channel, and later moved to Star Plus on Sunday mornings. *Surabhi* was produced by Kak's Mumbai based production house Cinema Vision India (CVI) and directed by Abhilash Bhattacharya. Presented in different segments, Indian culture was its central theme. The show holds the distinction of being India's longest-running cultural series and features in the Limca Book of Records for receiving, at that time, the largest measured audience response in the history of Indian television. The title music of *Surabhi* was composed by L.Subramaniam. Indian cooperative dairy giant Amul sponsored it for a long time, and the show was titled *Amul Surabhi*. One of the reasons of its popularity was the weekly quiz open for viewer participation. At that time, mobile phones and internet were hardly prevalent in India and viewers were required to post their responses using the 15 paise postcard of Indian Postal Department. According to the Limca Book of Records, the show once received the highest ever documented response in the history of Indian Television—over 1.4 million letters in a single week. The Indian Postal Department was forced to issue a different category of postcards called "Competition Postcards" priced at two rupees each for participating in such contests. With an average mail response of about 30,000 letters a week and feedback and queries by email, *Surabhi's* success with viewer participation is unmatched. *Surabhi* was dubbed in English and Indian regional languages like Tamil, and got tremendous response from all the states in India as well as other countries like Mauritius and Singapore where it was broadcast. During the 1990's, *Surabhi* had become a benchmark show and is now known as "one of the best television shows ever made that reflected the volume and depth of Indian Culture from across the length and breadth of

the country". The show ran for nine seasons encompassing four hundred and fifteen episodes. Subsequently, Kak established the Surabhi Foundation with the assistance of Ford Foundation and started a project on preserving cultural artifacts. [1]

With every episode being a melting pot of diverse segments, *Surabhi* was different and innovative. It presented the wonders of our land, India, to the audience, talking about not only our past glories, but also human interest stories of lesser known people and their work, sometimes artistic, sometimes informative, but almost always rooted in the age-old wisdom of our ancient land. All this, with a modern presentational symbolism and perspective, enticed the audience keeping them as loyal viewers, until a few years later, the Cable and Satellite Television wave, with its offering of numerous channels and assorted content swept and strengthened its clutch on the minds of the people in our country. [2]

Television's Power to Mediate Culture: A Theoretical Context

The advent of television changed family life in many important ways. We know that certain programmes, televised events, entertainment shows and fictional series in the public monopoly channels have audiences many times larger than the most popular films, and that they have enjoyed tremendous popularity. As such, television becomes inevitably and inextricably linked to the "real", and therefore, perhaps, *nonfiction content* finds a more natural fit with producers and the audience of this medium than cinema seen as "larger than life", or any other medium. [3] Once television is turned to as an activity, the real-life context that may have shaped the turn does not recede completely into the background. Yet, the attention of the viewer tends to be focused on television imagery. Despite the apparent simplicity of much television programming and the taken-for-granted nature of the set's presence in people's homes, the viewing culture is, in fact, a quite complex social world. In attempting to determine the meaning of viewing *per se*, there are numerous factors to consider, including the ways in which the different symbolic forms of programming work in constituting the mindful and emotional quality of *viewing relations*, and how the meaning of these viewing relations may be constituted differently depending whether or not people watch alone or with others. In discussing the turn to television, it is necessary for an analyst to recognise the structuring role that television often plays in exposing the people to discourses of selling and consumption on a scale and with a repetitiveness that is unmatched by their involvement in other activities, save perhaps for radio listening and shopping itself. This is true too for *viewing relations*: an analyst must be able to determine something of the power that these particular discourses have in ordering and organising people's mindful and emotional experience. But analysts must do more than that, too. In order to consider how television works once people have turned to it, they obviously need to focus more directly on their viewing relations. And it is important to do so by first accounting for the complexity of the

symbolic forms that comprise programming, since the meaning of viewing is constituted in large part by the mindful involvement that people have with these symbolic forms. In this context, it would be appropriate to use Suzanne Langer's (1957) term, *presentational symbolism*, to focus attention on how images may evoke or signify meaning without relying on the linear or temporal development that we typically associate with the working of story-telling conventions or persuasive messages. Referring to different kinds of cultural life as "presentational", is attempting to clarify how symbolism of programming works in ways that do not seem to demand the same kind of attentiveness that we typically associate with the interpretation of persuasive messages or story telling conventions. While each depiction of cultural life or impression made by visual imagery may be traceable to the intentions of creative people, including a show's producers, or to programmers, the broader patterning of these depictions and impressions need not be intentional, and yet the patterns do exist, objectively, and can be documented empirically as a form of symbolism available for 'meaning-making' by the people who watch. These patterns of presentational symbolism are closer to what Deleuze (Deleuze and Parnet, 1987) and others have called "assemblages": the patterns of cultural life that are produced unconsciously and thereby emerge from a place beneath or beyond intentionality. For Deleuze and others, these patterns take their place in the realm of what is cultural. [4] Television, thus wields its power in mediating culture in the public domain.

Contemporary Scenario and the Plausibility Ahead:

The diversity of the varied cultures of its people, the places they live, languages they use, music they listen to, lifestyles, traditions, values, beliefs, religion, philosophy, preservation and propagation of heritage art, literature, dance, attires, and much more, collectively represents the culture of India. And Television, an important mode of communication in people's lives, omnipresent as it is, helps portray and spread the awareness and enjoyment of this rich treasure trove. The programming formats, however, have changed and evolved with the ad-

vancement of technologies as well as the shift in audiences' exposure and sensitivities. Content today is treated in very different ways than before, it being more 'spiced up' and packaged to suit contemporary tastes and *popular trends and culture*, and also maintain commercial viability. Several music shows like Indian Idol, Sa Re Ga Ma Pa, Star Voice of India, MTV Unplugged, Coke Studio, Sound Trippin, The Dewarists, and others - running into many seasons and broadcast on different channels like Star Plus, Sony, V Channel, MTV, Zee TV, Star World, etc. are a case in point. [5] Similarly, Dance shows like Dance India Dance and Jhalak Dikhala Ja; food shows like Highway on My Plate and others, talent shows like India's Got Talent; as well as several Reality and Talk/Interview shows cull out from the socio-cultural aspects of life in our country and provide for the reinforcement of customs and traditions through *channel specific customised treatment*. Many classical and folk dance and music programmes, and informative documentaries on Doordarshan too continue to keep the culture cauldron brewing. Thus, television by its very *content accommodative* nature continues to provide opportunities and scope for exploring and presenting varied cultural content to now a more *media literate* audience than before. After all, what could be more 'real' than *culture* to suit television?

In a vastly contrasting technical scenario, where at the one end is the simple yet endearing way of communication of the yester years by the audience through post cards (later coined "snail mail") for feedback, and on the other hand, the now highly sophisticated, instantaneous, and humungous participatory communication through the smart (mobile) phone, the perennial question that hangs precariously in this culture conundrum is: which is the more "real", alluring, and enduring texture? The content of television programming based on culture in the future will certainly continue to woo the audience, but perhaps, the attempt would pale in terms of its sincerity and appeal as compared to that all permeating, everlasting fragrance of *Surabhi* -telecast in the nineteen nineties!

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