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Title: Engendering familial citizens: Serial-viewing among middle-class families in urban India

Abstract:

This paper explores a popular brand of Indian television fiction that centralizes the traditional Hindu joint family and places women at the centre of the family as nurturer and custodian of traditional values. This return to the traditional, the paper proposes, marks a new conjunctural moment in the evolution of Indian television, a moment characterized by competitive attempts among private and transnational cable and satellite television to Indianize content, the unprecedented growth of vernacular television and consequently the national circulation of traditionally inflected serials. This conjunction of dispersive and coalescing tendencies has come to represent the moment of feminisation of television in India.

Through an ethnographic study of serial-viewing among women in middle-class families in two Indian cities carried out between 2007 and 2009, I explore ways in which women and families in urban India engage with this moment of feminization of television. My paper argues that the manner in which differentially located women engage with narratives of idealized family and womanhood suggests certain specific gendered ways in which television mediates women's discursive access to and performance within both family and civic space. In conclusion, I suggest that the feminisation of television in India helps extend the ideal of a familial womanhood on to the civic space, limiting women's access to alternative, oppositional forms of civic belonging and citizenship.

Introduction

The Indian subcontinent has witnessed unprecedented growth in the viewership of serialised dramas since the early part of the 1990s, largely owing to the processes of economic liberalisation and privatisation. Serials, as soap operas are known in common parlance, produced

for the Indian market are avidly watched in their many dubbed versions – in Sinhalese, Dari or Mandarin - a fact widely documented in the Indian media as the spread of India's 'soft power'¹. Despite the rising popularity of reality shows, soap operas continue to re-invent their themes and remain unrivalled in terms of their mass appeal.

While research on Indian popular culture has sought to understand the everyday articulations through which the gendered and gendering narratives of television intersect discourses of religious nationalism (Mankekar 1999), of consumption (Fernandes 2001) or globalization (Lukose 2005), there is little exploration of the way in which these narratives conflate discourses of gender and citizenship. Thus although television has been researched as a family medium, the manner in which the discursive context of the Indian family intersects spaces and practices of civic belonging remains to be explored in studies of Indian television.

In this essay I examine the popularity of a new brand of television serials, popularly referred to as K-serials among 20 working class and middle class families in the Indian capital Delhi and in Kollam, a small city in the South Indian state of Kerala. Drawing on ethnographic data gathered between 2007 and 2009 I argue that television mediates women's relationship with the family and with public spaces by redefining the permeability between the familial space and the civic space *in specific gendered ways*.

Although by the late nineteenth century the 'contractual' family became the normative model for much social theorizing in the West, feminist political scientists like Pateman highlight the contradictions and antagonisms in the dialectic between the family and civil society resulting from an early reluctance on the part of classical theorists to define family as associational, rather than organic, in nature. Pateman argues that treating the family as the 'foundation' of social life and as the point of procreative origin of society and locating it as a corollary to Nature, has debilitating consequences for women's emergence as full-fledged citizens and their participation

¹ <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/2236945.cms>, dated 27/07/2007; accessed 09/07/2010, 9.30 AM, London.

http://www.india-forums.com/forum_posts.asp?TID=363605, dated 06/08/2006; accessed 09/07/2010, 9.30 AM, London.

'Indian Tv soaps charm Pakistan', Rasheeda Bhagat, The Hindu Business Line, March 01, 2004. See <http://www.thehindubusinessline.com/life/2004/03/01/stories/2004030100010100.htm>; accessed 09/07/2010, 9.35AM, London]

in civil society (1989:25). By association with the ‘natural’ family, women are “seen as guardians of order and morality as well as inherently subversive” (Pateman 1989:25).

In the Indian context, a “modern liberal democracy” has, far from creating a contractual family, been realized in a state that mostly refrains from defining the family as anything other than natural in its law and policy formulation. The developmental state in India has had to reach out to the vast masses of its population, rather than to its small, elite community of (male) ‘citizens’, in order to fulfil its welfare role, channelling democratic mobilization into the realm of a separate political society, which becomes the intermediary realm between the State and its population while civil society becomes the site of interaction between the state and its ‘citizens’ (Chatterjee 2001).

However, as civil society institutions, particularly the media, continues to mediate between the family and civil-political society, the continued stagnation in women’s participation in electoral politics and their selective familial engagement with civic spaces accentuates the role of the ‘natural’ family in shaping the nature of women’s citizenship. Consequently, maintaining conceptual distinction between civil society and family while recognising the permeability and interdependence of the two realms highlights the engendering of state and civil society through their interaction with the familial, particularly in relation to the constitution of women as citizens. Crucially, it can help highlight how the preponderance of the familial through mediating instruments like television can ossify prevailing gender hegemonies across both family and civil society.

According to respondents in Delhi, serial narratives become resources that women draw on in their efforts to “respectably” move between and normatively negotiate both domestic and civic spaces. Respectably negotiating the neighbourhood, the street and other civic spaces involves the regulation of attire, gaze and a general bodily stance that invokes patriarchal order. By reinforcing the ideal of a family oriented womanliness as best suited to the navigation of both domestic and civic spaces, I argue that contemporary Indian serials contribute to limiting women’s access to full-fledged citizenship. My usage of the terms ‘domestic’ and ‘civic’ do not connote opposition or binariness, rather that ‘private’ discourses in and of the family can help construct the contours of civic discourses, the conditions under which civic spaces are accessed and ultimately the nature of participatory democracy itself.

The Feminisation of Indian television: A new conjunctural moment

When in 1991, the Indian media market was opened up to foreign media, including transnational networks such as STAR (Satellite Television Asian Region), there was an efflorescence of private initiative in broadcasting. However there were few insights into the kind of women-centric programming that would come to dominate Indian television in the ensuing decades. In the previous decade, when Indian broadcasting was still in its infancy and the State-owned Doordarshan held a powerful monopoly, pedagogic serials on family planning and urban living that toed official policy was the mainstay of national television.

The decade of the 1980s saw a period of profound shift in the national political landscape – the rise of the Hindu Right-wing in Indian polity and the popular reception of the sacred epics Mahabharata and Ramayana on national television has been the subject of numerous scholarly interventions on popular culture and politics (Mankekar 1999; Rajagopal 2001). The unparalleled popularity of these epic melodramas was accompanied by a decline in representations of secular life; memorable narratives, including the struggles of ordinary people in ‘*Hum Log*’ (We, the people), a middle-class woman’s success against all odds in ‘*Udaan*’ (Flight), the working class life in ‘*Nukkad*’ (Street Corner) and the strife and pain of communal conflict in ‘*Tamas*’ (Darkness), began to fade from the national screen.

In the post-liberalization phase of the early 1990s, the growth of transnational television networks CNN, Sony and Star Plus and private national television channels like Zee began to be increasingly reflected in a spectacular expansion of women-centric narratives rooted in contemporary realities. These early post-liberalisation soap operas depicted the lives of women placed in diverse personal and professional contexts and emphasized a variety of roles for them. However, by the late 1990s, stiff competition for audience ratings and a general disinterest in dubbed programming originally made for a Western audience saw transnational networks, particularly the Rupert Murdoch owned STAR tv, launch an aggressive drive to ‘Indianize’ content. Indianization facilitated a return to the traditional and the televisual re-centering of old tropes of the traditional Hindu family and femininity. The era of the K-series had dawned.

The K-series, first produced by Balaji Telefilms, and broadcast exclusively on Star Plus as part of its aggressive ‘Indianization’ drive, inaugurated a narrative format that centralizes and

idealises the large Hindu joint family and Hindu womanhood by positioning them within a traditionalized and ritualized setting representative of an elite minority, that is both affluent and upper caste. Although the K-serial brand invokes many features of the epic melodramas, including its grandeur and opulence, it especially invokes its moral dichotomies; K-serials utilize idealized central protagonists to narrativise and resolve contemporary issues that threaten the integrity of the Hindu joint family.

The contours of a new conjunctural moment in Indian television became palpable in the hegemony of narratives that centralise the traditional Hindu family and domesticated womanhood. This moment of femininisation of television in India has been characterised by a new impetus in the diversification of vernacular programming.

Thus, in the southern Indian state of Kerala, the unprecedented success of Asianet, the state's first privately held television network, owed in large part to the phenomenal success of its women centric serialized fiction series, *Stree* ('Woman'). The *Stree* (Woman) series became a televisual cult phenomenon and inaugurated the long reign of women-centric narratives on Malayalam television.

Kerala's women audience were introduced to a slew of new women-centric soap operas by the two leading channels Asianet and Surya with a combined primetime viewership share of over 75 per cent. The state's principal political players were not left behind - the Communists (Left Democratic Front or LDF) and the Congress (United Democratic Front or UDF) launched channels of their own. The popularity of women-oriented narratives reached new heights on these new networks as they continued to roll out viewing schedules driven heavily by soap operas.

In a 2004 interview², Shyam Sundar, the creative head of Yantra Media, which produced the iconic *Stree* series, accounted for the popularity of its serials in their close emulation of the North Indian brand of soap operas, the K-serials. According to him, K-serials, a formulaic brand of soap operas inaugurated on Star Tv by Balaji Telefilms, so called because most of these serials have names that begin with the alphabet 'K', have had a tremendous influence on serials

² <http://www.indiantelevision.com/interviews/y2k4/producer/shyamsunder.htm>

produced in regional languages including Malayalam. He points out that alternative attempts at narrating stories that rebel against the essential women-and-family centric narrative popularised by the K-serials, have failed:

“We made a soap, *Snehanjali*, with this idea in mind. It had a hero-central structure. That was an experimental project. But it didn't deliver. After 50 episodes, we had to revamp the show and make the subject female-oriented. Even the third version of *Stree* which narrated the story of three women and the professional challenges they face didn't work. Melodrama didn't deliver there and we had to add family elements to the story to make it deliver” (2004).

In contrast with Hindi language serials such as *Saans Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi* (‘Because every mother-in-law was once a daughter-in-law’) and *Kahani Ghar Ghar Ki* (‘The story of every household’), which revolve around the traditional joint Hindu family, Malayalam serials are woven around contemporary nuclear families that are marked as upper caste and Hindu. More crucially, they feature protagonists whose place at the centre of the family is not assured. The protagonist only eventually, if at all, earns this central position in the family through her unwavering performance as an ideal Malayalee daughter or wife. While the popular serials in North India have a strong female protagonist directing the affairs of the family, in Kerala popular serials such as *Manasaputri* and *Parijatham* narrate stories of women who strive to build a place for themselves within the family through their roles as ‘good’ daughters and wives.

The growth and success of the serial industry in the regions of India is concomitant with a pan-Indian process of feminization of television. Evaluating the success of his sitcom, *Ettu Sundarikalum Njanum* (‘Eight beautiful women and I’) popular soap opera director Shyam Sundar suggests that its success primarily derived from the fact that it was not ‘male-dominated’:

“From a weekender, it [Ettu Sundarikalum Njanum/ESN] went on to become a daily because of sheer popularity. As a daily, it even beat Asianet's *Kathanar*'s [mythological melodrama] ratings. *ESN* broke the myth that Kerala TV audiences won't react to comedy. Male dominated comedy didn't work on Malayalam television. The TG [target group] is woman and the show should be packaged accordingly” (2004).

The tremendous success of *Stree* (‘Woman’), produced by Shyam Sundar, resulted in the creation of two more avatars of *Stree* – *Stree Janmam* (‘Woman’s life’) and *Stree, Oru Jwala*

(‘Woman, a flame’) - the first such event for any Indian soap. Madhu Mohan, who directed three serials in the *Stree* series which completed 1,000 episodes with its third instalment in October 2002 attributes the scale of the success to the brand recognition that the series achieved: “*Stree* is a branded bottle. Anything you bottle in it will be welcome by the female audience of Kerala³.”

Director Mohan suggests that the storylines of the *Stree* series was dictated not just by the preferences of the audience, but the channel concerned, the advertisers and even women artistes working on the programme. Following the success of *Stree* television began to increasingly adapt stories popularized by Malayalam pulp fiction, which registered a significant slump between 1998 and 2002, a period that saw the launch of the largest number of television channels in Malayalam, Tamil and Kannada. In the wake of the *Stree* series, all the constitutive elements of a new moment in Indian television came together in a dynamic confluence in Kerala; the regionalization and feminization of television content operated in tandem with the local adaption of nationally circulating formats of soap operas.

K-serials and the representation of ‘Indian womanhood’

The manner in which discourses on Indian womanhood have evolved through popular modes of representation since the colonial period to the present time reveals areas of significant continuities and disjunctures. The discursive conflation of gender, religion and nation was first achieved in the colonial period through various nationalist and religious reform movements and invoked in visual art forms such as painting and calendar art. Cinema, particularly early Hindi cinema, made use of mythological ideals of womanhood that emphasised the Sati-Sita-Savitri triple construct of the sacrificial-submissive-chaste woman, even though there also existed a wider repertoire of constructs. However, through the post-Independence decades of the 1950s and 1960s, the nationalist conflation of the Indian nation and the Indian woman/mother echoed in Hindi cinema, reaching its zenith in Mehboob Khan’s *Mother India*. With the arrival of colour television in Indian homes in the 1980s, the Indian State sought to construct a modern femininity by allying the image of the female subject with the development objectives of the state through the national broadcaster Doordarshan. Since its inception, national television unlike any other

³ ‘Malayalam tv serial makers soften feminism for the market’ by M.P. Basheer, www.thehoot.org, October 28, 2002.

visual medium, has sought to weld together the objectives of the state with its representations of gender and family.

In the late 1980s the broadcast of the epics Ramayana and Mahabharata on national television was a watershed in that it symbolised the harnessing of the surplus value of the growing Hindu nationalist rhetoric that attained particular force in the 1980s. By doing what the mythological film could not, namely, bringing the historic memory of the myth to the intimate and realistic realm of the family, the mythological serials on television powerfully aligned discourses of gender, nation and community, achieved through the Othering of non-Hindus, particularly Muslims. While the Ramayana reinstated Sita, represented as self-sacrificing, chaste and devoted to her husband Lord Ram, as emblematic of ideal Hindu/Indian womanhood, the Mahabharata underscored the deep co-implication of discourses of gender and nationhood in the figure of Draupadi and the powerful narrative of her disrobing (Mankekar 1999).

In their 1986 study of 27 television programmes, Krishnan and Dighe concluded that the broad pattern in the construction of femininity on television in that period was that of affirmation and denial; in the K-serials too sacrifices and self-denial are integral to gaining recognition and affirmation as ideal wife/mother/woman. In contemporary soaps the fundamental axis along which conflicts develop and are resolved in order to ultimately reaffirm the centrality of the Hindu joint family is one of rights versus responsibilities. It is through the constant reaffirmation of a woman's duties to the family as wife, mother and so on over her rights that determines the resolution of conflicts and ultimately the unity of the Hindu joint family.

Thus familial disagreements involve expanding and reclaiming the duties of the women rather than their rights so that the gender and power constructs that undergird the joint family structure remain intact. Coming in the aftermath of an upsurge of contemporary, alternative images of womanhood on television in the post-liberalisation period, this trend points to a specific conjunctural revival of representations of ideal Hindu womanhood that seek to naturalise a discourse of traditional womanhood defined exclusively in familial terms as *mata*, *pativrata* or *sumangali*. The critical slippage from Hinduness to Indianness is sought to be routinised by locating the traditional joint family as a site of epic struggles and consequently one that has to be continuously secured and defended by ideal (Hindu) womanhood.

The K-serials actively construct a hinduised femininity by drawing on various facets of Hindu womanhood – the mata (mother), the pativrata (chaste woman), the sumangali (auspicious married woman) and virangana (warrior woman) – and by reasserting the home as a woman’s primary domain. The dominant discourse that underlies the ideal womanhood that the first wave of K-serials such as *Kyunki* and *Kahani* offer for consumption is one in which women are perceived as embodiments of Matri shakti or mother power. Women are strong and powerful within the family and are performers par excellence in their roles as wives and daughters-in-law enacted through the tropes of self-sacrifice, patience and chastity, markers of traditional womanhood in the Sati-Savitri-Sita mould⁴.

Contemporary soaps have also reintroduced the heroine-vamp dyad of Hindi cinema as essentially a polarized opposition between women who make the family and women who break it. The patriarchal family had been the principal vehicle in the televisual discourses of ‘women’s uplift’ and national development deployed by the national broadcaster Doordarshan prior to media liberalization (Mankekar 1999). In the post-liberalisation period, these older narratives about the patriarchal family are not jettisoned but re-worked around anxieties regarding familial stability that permeate contemporary middle-class domesticity; the family has become the diegetic terrain on which to articulate a new middle-class (Hindu) womanhood.

The pedagogy of ‘order’

Alongside the patriarchal equivalence between nature and female, male and culture, Pateman identifies the ‘disorder of women’ as fundamental to patriarchal and liberal thought. It is individual and social, private and public, because, as Pateman says, “women have a disorder at their very centres – in their morality – which can bring about a destruction of the State” (Pateman 1989:18). It stands in opposition to and heirarchized by patriarchal order – which is in fact an erasure of the metonymic substitution of patriarchal order as effect rather than cause. Women frequently invoked this discursive logic by attributing the lack of safety that confronts women on the street as a result of them disbanding gendered orderliness. “The public realm,” Pateman points out, “cannot be fully understood in the absence of the private sphere....Civil freedom depends on patriarchal right” (1988:4)

⁴ The mythological triumvirate of ideal Hindu womanhood.

Hegemonic middle-class womanhood – conceptualised as a discursive node wherein the ideal and the ordinary, the dominant and the normative coalesce - thus symbolises patriarchal order and is pitted against the subversive moral disorder of the ‘Other’, the vamp, the disorderly woman. Disorder thus becomes a vantage point from which to survey order; it makes order legible; in this case, the gendered constitutive strategies that help represent ideal middle-class womanhood in the K-serials.

The K-serials have signalled the emergence of a new trend in the representation of ideal Indian womanhood, a trend characterised by the domestication of the female subject, her recentring within the large, extended family and the home and her traditionalisation through the figure of the mata (mother), the sumangali (auspicious married woman), the pativrata (chaste wife) and the virangana (warrior woman). The dominant discourse that underlies the ideal womanhood that the first wave of K-serials such as *Kyunki* and *Kahani* offer for consumption is one in which women are perceived as embodiments of Matri shakti or mother power. They are exhorted to be strong and powerful within the family and are performers par excellence in their roles as wives and daughters-in-law enacted through the tropes of self-sacrifice, patience and chastity, markers of traditional womanhood in the Sati-Savitri-Sita mould⁵. This strikingly echoes the observation that Kapur and Cossman have made in relation to Hindutva’s conception of women: “The constitution of the new Hindu woman – a woman who may be educated, and who may work outside of the home, a woman who is strong and powerful, inside her family, and her community – is still a woman constituted through traditional discourses of matri shakti, as mother and wife, and of Sita, as chaste, pure and loyal” (1993).

At the heart of such a conceptualisation of womanhood is the belief that women are the sources of creation (nirmatri) and power (prakriti and adishakti) and therefore “for a ‘nirmatri’ to demand rights equal to her own creation (men) is to despoil the divinity associated with her status. The conception of feminist agency that undergrids this representation is animated by the ideal of ‘nari shakti’ or woman power, rather than ‘nari mukti’ or emancipation of women” (Ghadially 2007: 65).

⁵ The mythological triumvirate of ideal Hindu womanhood.

In a 2007 study of Hindi soaps, the New Delhi based Centre for Advocacy and Research, an independent television monitoring agency, observes that the situations of familial conflict that are central to the narrative progression, work in specific ways to textually reaffirm ‘responsibilities’ rather than ‘rights’ for women (Ghadially 2007). This reaffirmation of responsibilities over rights is achieved through a re-dispersion of order and disorder as corresponding with or having equivalence with responsibility and rights respectively. Thus ‘orderly’ ideal protagonists tirelessly perform their responsibilities while ‘disorderly’ antagonists simply demand their rights.

The producers of the serials themselves position the narratives within the larger canvas of middle class morality, thus expressly claiming to align discourses of womanhood and class. In a 2003 interview, Ekta Kapoor, the creator of K-serials, said: “Most of the rich people do not need values, most of the poor do not have time for them. Hence, middle class values are what my serials are about. These middle-class values are incidentally in keeping with the cultural ethos of the country. As far as I am concerned, economically I belong to the high class, but morally to the middle class”⁶.

The familial narrative in contemporary serials places women at the heart of a project to build and replenish the ideal middle class family. It encourages women to perceive the family as simultaneously a locus of struggle and an (orderly) ideal to be achieved. In this way contemporary serials set up a discursive limit of orderliness within the narrative that offers familial womanhood as natural and commonsense both within the family and outside it, on the street, the locus of disorder and lawlessness.

Women identify the familial narrative as central to their interest in serials. And their chief interest in the familial plot was following narrative threads on how the central protagonist held the family together against all manner of odds, posed principally by the ‘vamp’. Contemporary soaps reintroduce the heroine-vamp dyad of Hindi cinema as essentially a polarized opposition between women who make the family and women who break it.

⁶ Interview by Vickey Lalwani posted on indiantelelevision.com on May 29, 2003.

In Delhi's middle-class neighbourhoods, women appropriated the figure of the vamp in distinct ways through the monthly held kitty parties⁷, articulating it as, possibly, more heroic and real than the ideal role essayed by the protagonist. Yet, ultimately, unlike ideal womanhood seen as an appropriate performance both within the family and the public arena of the street, the articulation of the vamp remained confined within the resistive female space of the kitty party. In other words, the commonsense of ideal womanliness represented in the serials, seemed legitimate and useful to women across the domestic-public divide notwithstanding their awareness of and desire for other ways of being a woman. Ultimately, the serial's assertion of the centrality of the family and the commonsense realities of their own day-to-day existence made it impossible for women to escape the scene of the family, the performance of gender appropriate to it and most crucially prevented them from discursively reimagining the family and their structural location within and without it.

Serial texts and the 'disorder of women'

According to male members interviewed in Delhi families, serials reinforce the tendency in women towards chaos and disorder. Women who watch serials attempt to reverse gender roles, "do politics in the house" and upset settled family patterns; girls and boys who watch serials fall in love and thereby bring shame on their families.

Chauhan: Families are falling apart...all the discord in families in the present time is being caused by the serials. In the families brothers are at war; the women are doing politics in the house. Like my brother's house - when he has to go for duty she [wife] makes him do all the household chores!

Komal: It is true.

Chauhan: He is the servant of the house.

⁷ "The kitty party serves as an informal credit institution, where a group of women each contribute to a common pool or 'kitty' and then draw lots to decide the order in which they get to take it home. In Ludhiana the kitty party has taken on a highly elaborated form: catering or dining out is essential to most middle-class kitty parties, though they might also be based on other activities or themes, such as the *bhajan* kitty (where a singer is invited to perform religious hymns) or the couple kitty (where couples go away for weekend parties, replete with DJ). While most kitties are of the order of thousands of rupees (a few hundred US\$), they can go up as high as Rs 10 lakhs or 1million (approx US\$20, 000)" (Jain, Kajri 2003:10).

Komal: Yes, she makes him do all the household chores.

Chauhan: So this is happening. When you interview people, most of them are going to be artificial. They won't tell you the truth...90 per cent families are being spoilt because of these serials.

Komal: Girls and boys are falling in love these days.

When women are interviewed in the presence of their family they tend to substantiate their family's view on how some women are negatively influenced by watching serials. But, for the most part, their engagement with the serial narratives centres on its pedagogical value. Serials, women agree, teach them to resolve differences within the family and hold the family together against all odds.

“Tulsi was in the middle of criticism from all sides. She was being pulled in different directions. Her husband had gone astray, a son had gone astray; she had to deal with her mother in law's schemes, she had to deal with her husband's infidelity. And go through the process of understanding the son (Karan) he had out of another woman. She adopted Karan as her own son and he also soon began to love her more than he loved his own mother. Karan and Tulsi are outstanding characters. You won't find a son like Karan and a mother like Tulsi, a daughter-in-law like Tulsi or a sister-in-law like Tulsi. I have learnt a lot from Tulsi.” (*Komal, Kishan Nagar*)

The discourse of State sponsored television as a source of knowledge informed viewers' responses to older Indian television programmes and continues to inform the manner in which they engage with serial narratives in the post-liberalisation period. Televisual discourses on women's roles and responsibilities are perceived as forms of invisible pedagogy. I use the term invisible pedagogy, drawn from the work of Basil Bernstein (2000), to draw attention to women's evaluation of televisual discourses on womanhood as a non-hierarchic process of teaching and learning.

A young girl whose family had moved to Delhi from neighbouring Punjab explained how boys and girls in Kishan Nagar treated each other like family and enjoyed a relationship of mutual

respect. As part of such a respectful exchange they did not look each other in the eye. However, once outside the perimeter of her neighbourhood she felt distinctly unsafe.

“The world is really cantankerous. When I go out, I dare not even look up and even if somebody passes a comment, I ignore it.” (*Rimi, Kishan Nagar*)

The world outside the family is chaotic and dangerous. If a young woman is to negotiate civic spaces without fearing harm, she has to be an exemplar of patriarchal order. However, older women suggested that younger women and girls invited teasing and molestation on the streets by being attired immodestly. The importance of being in ‘modest’ attire was obvious from many incidents in the serials - if one displays modest familial attire while out on the streets one could be an exception to the rule (of being molested).

“One should always display one’s sense of dignity and honour. One should always keep one’s head covered with the *pallu*. I always keep my head covered. And I always wear a *Salwar-Kameez*...If I wear a skirt and go out, people are going to stare at me. They will not see that I am a mother, a wife, a sister or a daughter-in-law. They will see me in the wrong way. They will think of me in strange ways. Can’t fathom what they might think of me. They might even molest me. What can I do? Nothing. Because that is how I am dressed.... In the serials they always wear sarees. *Bhumi* [from the serial *Kyunki*] had once worn a jeans and top. Her husband said, ‘Bhumi I don’t like this’. Since that day, Bhumi has also been wearing sarees.” (*Komal, Kishan Nagar*)

The saree, the Indian ‘national’ attire, is seen as embodying an exemplary form of modest attire. For older women, wearing a saree in one’s own distinct style was seen as a mark of confidence and aplomb. Serial characters who wore sarees in their own characteristic style were applauded for their style and poise. For younger women and girls, learning to drape a saree was seen as a coming-of-age rite. There were distinct expressions among respondents that suggested that the saree conflated both tropes of the nation and religion. Women undertaking religious fasts and rituals did not view their observances as authentic unless they were draped in sarees. Wearing a saree was juxtaposed with wearing jeans, a ‘westernized’ attire, which was viewed as figure hugging and ‘revealing’ and therefore immodest.

In different ways, women expressed their feelings of inevitability about the lack of safety on the streets. If one failed to rein in disorders grounded in one's body and morality there was no escaping molestation. Women are called upon to maintain a bodily discipline in public spaces that places discursive limits on their sexuality and makes them invisible subjects within the civic arena. Their attire should be such that they do not provoke male desire, which are sites of a reactionary disorder.

“Girls who wear small, dirty dresses with deep cuts....ok, wear them because we live in a free country. Every person has his own wishes about how to live. But you know what - girls are also responsible for this because they wear such seductive attire that the one who sees it simply goes mad.” (*Rimi, Kishan Nagar*)

In this self-prescribed regime of order, the disciplining a woman's gaze carries a central significance. For young women, roving eyes or direct eye contact with men are both considered disorderly acts that might invite molestation and mark one out as “easy prey”. Instead, ‘good’, orderly, women can navigate civic spaces only through the patriarchal agency produced by the “impossibility of choice” between looking somewhere and looking everywhere (Butler 1993:124). And in the final instance, women who are molested are marked as a priori of ambiguous morality:

“I've been here for two years. I've never been molested by anyone when I step out into the street or in the bus. Nobody has offered to befriend me. When I go out, *I don't get commented on* but the girls with me are taunted. My brother tells me, Rimi, if you are good, nobody will tell you anything. If you are wrong, if you are travelling in a bus and you look at someone, keep looking at someone, look here and there, eyes rove everywhere, if someone is in front of us and he is looking at us and we look back that seems wrong. If someone is looking, ignore it (emphasis added).” (*Rimi, Kishan Nagar*)

Molestation becomes a commentary on improper or flawed bodily discipline in civic spaces. Not being molested becomes proof of having achieved normative, even ideal, bodily discipline. The fear of sexual violence that permeated women's discursive engagement with the serial narratives moved seamlessly into their conversations about women's safety on the streets of Delhi.

“When *Ansh* raped *Nandini* I was so affected. I said God! It happened in a serial but I had to go with my aunt to the market to get clothes that day and I couldn’t even do that. You won’t believe I stood in front of *Babaji* [Guru Nanak] and said, Babaji please let someone come and save her.”

The inevitability of violence that women expect on the streets becomes part of their conversations on the failure of strong soap opera characters to maintain familial unity. When strong characters such as Tulsi of *Kyunki* are unable to fully tackle disorder within the family, ordinary women didn’t stand a chance against the various forms of sexual infringements that take place in every day spaces, be it in the street or the public transport. Women’s alienation from civic spaces thus becomes part of a familial narrative of women as mere custodians of familial integrity – despite women’s best efforts families fall apart and strong female characters never seem to be able to fully master the role of a patriarch. Despite her herculean efforts, Tulsi, protagonist of *Kyunki*, ultimately fails to pre-empt rupture and dissension within the extended family.

“Tulsi is willing to do anything for the family...she does not forgive anyone or anything that threatens the family. She is always fighting for truth and she wants to bring the truth of every situation (that threatens the family) to the fore.” (*Lalitha, Sarkar Marg*)

Given the failure of heroic efforts by inspiring but ultimately fictional characters at keeping the family together, women explained why as witnesses or victims of sexual molestation in public spaces they would prefer to silently retreat rather than protest. In a comment reminiscent of an important narrative thread from an earlier episode⁸, one respondent compared Tulsi’s role in the family to that of a social worker, who tries to remedy social ills at heavy personal risk.

“Today the situation is such that even if a social worker wants to prevent wrong-doing, it is likely that he might be killed because he does not have power. Even if he has power, he will be killed but there is more protection with power. But without power or protection, your morality and your values are worth nothing. Your principles are worthless. If you

⁸ Serial narratives often imply that familial duties can be seen as a form of social work. In her opening dialogue in Episode 101 of *Kyunki*, the family matriarch Amba Virani says, “I am the eldest member of the Virani family. And carrying such a large family along as one is the highest form of social work. I am always busy.”

are travelling in the bus today and see that two girls are being molested by someone can you stop him? If you stop him, tomorrow acid will be thrown at your face. This is the fear people have. And because of this, people are losing their values...Everyone wants to save his own skin.” (*Lalitha, Sarkar Marg*)

In the interplay of and intersections between the patriarchal categories of order and disorder, the orderly family, portrayed as in need of constant reclamation through the efforts of the good mother, the wife or the daughter, is set up in opposition to the disorder of the civic space. For most women, their own neighbourhood was safe and honourable while the world outside, the streets and civic arena outside the perimeters of the neighbourhood, were cantankerous and disorderly spaces that posed all manner of risks. Such disorderly spaces required performances of familial womanhood; it called for the initiation of certain disciplinary rituals grounded in a woman’s body and in her desire.

Familializing civic spaces: Respectable middle-class women become familial citizens

Marked as upper-caste and Hindu, the familial woman depicted in the serials, nurtures relationships and fosters harmony and is thus responsible for both the material and psychic well-being of the family. Crucial to the representation of the family in contemporary serials, is its disassociation from older state-led projects such as development, family planning or civic duty, tropes that characterised the depiction of the national family on the State-owned broadcaster Doordarshan. This erstwhile representation of the family depicted a form of womanhood ineluctably tied to these definitive ‘progressive’ and modernizing projects of the State. At the pinnacle of such depiction of womanhood are characters who epitomized the citizenly woman, portrayed as an individual who leads the daily battle against corruption and red tape and assumes civic duties relinquished by people in her neighbourhood and local community.

Contemporary serials, in centralising the (upper caste, Hindu) family and placing women solely within the domestic terrain, valorise familial womanhood as ideal both within the domestic setting and the realm of civil society. Thus fulfilling familial responsibilities, the narratives suggest, is equivalent to or superior to any other form of engagement with civil society. While it could be argued that K-serials accord value to the so-called private, domestic realm by centralising women’s familial roles and by highlighting women’s contribution to civil society

processes by making visible the emotional and physical work they undertake within families in order to nurture future (male) citizens, in that very representational act, it simultaneously makes invisible, even inferiorizes, women's own engagement with civil and political society institutions by demonizing female characters who actively seek a public profile, because they inevitably do so at the expense of the traditional family. In other words in investing the family and women's role within it with unprecedented significance, contemporary serials inevitably set up the family in opposition to the realm of and practices of civil and political societies in India.

In Delhi, women described the struggle of the familial woman in the serials as a reflection of the powerlessness they faced in the public realm, the streets, where sexual molestation was best avoided than challenged. They described a renunciation of their role as citizens who challenge harassment and molestation on the street as far more preferable to an assertion of their basic civic and human rights to free movement and personal safety. Just as the protagonist in the serials often failed in their long-drawn-out attempts to hold the large joint family together, women in Delhi felt they were powerless to challenge the street regime. Women in the Delhi neighbourhoods saw their safe access to public spaces as possible only through an extension of and explicit display of their domestic persona as mothers, wives or daughters. Thus women spoke of how it would be legitimate if someone verbally or physically abused them for wearing in public clothes inappropriate for their age, for the public would not be able to see that one was a mother, a wife or a sister unless one was attired in familial ways. When walking on the street young girls ought to circumscribe their body so it does not become the object of desire and subsequent harassment. If women wear skirts on the streets of Delhi, nobody will see that she is a mother, a wife or a sister; she will be molested. And that is why in the serials, women wear only *sarees*. In Delhi's lower middle-class setting, the familial woman was viewed as not only the normative but also the ideal mode of being in public.

Television serials idealise familial womanhood, which forms the discursive centrepiece of women's engagement with these narratives. In re-centering the family as a discursive site for the shaping of an idealised 'familial' womanhood, television serials help deepen the gendered and gendering nature of familial and civic spaces. Women found it meaningful to strive towards television's familial ideals in their domestic and public performances of womanhood. Serial characters that fully embody the traditional stereotypes of the giving, sacrificing, motherly

woman or the unquestioning, service-oriented and highly self-disciplined daughter were viewed as making a significant social contribution by holding their families together at great personal cost. Ultimately, television dramas purvey the terms of permeability between the familial space and the public space; it is a permeability grounded in women's performance of familial womanliness. The feminisation of television entrenches, from within the domestic space, the 'familial woman' or "domestic-oriented Womanliness" as the bedrock of women's participation in both familial and civic spaces and ultimately in a gendered form of citizenship.

According to Gramsci, the analysis of civil society and hegemony are corollary, for civil society is the site of hegemony, the site of struggle for dominance and leadership over the state (Gramsci 1985; Buttigieg 1995:26). By expanding the commonsense of familial womanhood on to the terrain of civil society and citizenship, contemporary serials have hegemonized the familial woman as a legitimate discursive and performative gendered mechanism for mediating middle-class women's movement between the public and the private, between the family and civil society. In other words, the hegemony of familial womanhood across civic and familial spaces makes the familial woman the preferred gendered subject of the state; and middle class respectability becomes a key normative discourse deployed in the process of familializing civic spaces. Thus despite critical awareness among urban women of the commonsense of familial womanhood and their concomitant desire for alternative modes of womanly agency, there is a penury of political imagination, of alternative visions of being a good woman, among women viewers of the serials, drowned as it is in a deluge of familial, middle class, commonsense. Further, in reinforcing the familial nature of civic spaces, the erosion of its mediatory role as the site of 'expressed politics' is accelerated.

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