

**Gender, Value, and Signification: Women
and television in Kerala**

Usha V.T.

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**Kerala Research Programme on Local Level Development
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1 Introduction: The TV and Her Story

It is a well-recognised fact that understanding a people includes understanding their society. The media in their various forms function as the major channels of cultural communication and the moulders and perpetrators of social images. Through the media, whether the press, the radio, the television or the film, it is possible to reach out to the vast majority of the population of a country with the minimum of effort. And this possibility makes media a critical and significant force in the discourse of social formation.

The television, or TV, as it is popularly known in India, is the medium of mass communication that is of extreme interest and consequence to the society to women, in particular. The area of its influence and reach is of course not only wide, not only in the spatial sense but in the sense of the family circle as well. This source of mass communication occupies the private and the personal space of the home, conventionally regarded as the domain of women. As schooling or specialised understanding of the visual discourse is not a prerequisite for viewership, TV is easily accessible to the woman subscriber, irrespective of whether she is a house-holder, student or a person working outside home. Here economic compulsions, social norms, communal considerations or gender bias do not hinder her TV viewership in any way. As a form of entertainment and education, this medium provides a high degree of access to women.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS: This project undertaken alongside my teaching duties moved forward in fits and starts my teaching work keeping me busy quite often. Further, the period of implementation of the project was interspersed with frequent transfers (four in the course of this project) and changes in the academic atmosphere (The introduction of the semester system at the postgraduate level imposed severe constraint on the time I could devote to the project analysis and report-writing). Nevertheless, the college allowed me leave of absence at intermittent intervals for which I am thankful. It was the constant pressure from the Programme Secretariat that stimulated me to achieve this much. The regular review meetings, the inputs and suggestions from experts, and encouragement of Dr K. N. Nair, in particular gave the project sharper focus, direction, and cohesion. Considering the pioneering nature of the study, and its broad-based structure, many apprehensions came up at the outset. Research methodology in the social sciences proved to be quite different from the methods I had been used to in the humanities. However, the two soon found cohesion and I made progress. As the study advanced, many things dovetailed and the survey results ushered in significant findings, which in turn kept my interests steady. I was actively supported throughout by my young and enthusiastic research assistants – Regina and Riaz – whose tireless efforts and dedication helped me complete the survey and process the findings in time. I am extremely grateful to my family who actively stood by me through it all. While my husband provided the intellectual backing and support with suggestions and comments, my two children brought in helpful information and supportive evidence through their own surveys and discussions. Above all, they kept out of my way with much understanding and patience when I needed solitude for my work. I would like to place on record my gratitude to KRPLLD for their enthusiastic support throughout this enterprise.

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Taking into account these factors, advertisers and the producers of the soaps (in the form of serials or mega-serials in the terminology of the Indian television world) target, for the most part, women as their consumers. They design their advertisements and programmes to attract women viewers. But how are the women themselves being projected in these programmes? And how do women viewers respond? What are the socio-cultural factors that go into the making of these programmes? It is to these questions that the present enquiry is focused.

Kerala has remained in the forefront of the developing countries in matters of socio-political awareness and development, for the past several decades. Statistics on male-female population ratios or literacy levels lend support to this contention. But in matters of gender sensitivity, Kerala had a background of matriliney, a system that gave women great security and financial assurance. The dowry menace was almost non-existent and female literacy levels were maintained high in this unique system. Widow re-marriage and divorce carried no social stigma, unlike in the present-day society. High levels of education of women have led to low-levels of infant mortality and relatively high work participation for women. Matriliney and the joint family system disappeared from Kerala even as early as the third decade of the twentieth century. Educational attainments and a limited degree of economic freedom do not seem to have conferred on Kerala women a high degree of social freedom. In dress and demeanour she is more constrained than her educated counterparts elsewhere in India or abroad. And with the passage of time and in spite of 'progress' on several fronts, her safety in the workplace or places outside home have become uncertain. Vulnerable as she is physically, social taboos forbid support to her in terms of need.

Though the sure beneficiary of her financial support, the society imposes heavy controls on her movements and activities in the name of maintaining high moral standards. Her job or educational status commands little respect and she remains as much the victim of male gaze as is her counterparts who stays homebound. The much-publicised assaults on Nalini Netto or P. E. Usha or the unfortunate victim of Suryanelli case in which the victim was harassed at the place of the villain, are notorious illustrations of the prevailing situation.

The television, is proving to be a boon to women in Kerala, who like their counterparts in other parts of India and elsewhere, have little avenues for entertainment and information for them, without heavy financial burden or dependency on others. In fact, it has created a revolution from within their homes, bringing in a wide perspective of the work around without the physical need to move out. Yet the question that arises here is: how broad and realistic is the perspective supplied by the television, or to frame it differently, how limited and distorted is the perspective? The enormous reach of the television is a well-established fact. But the manner in which and the extent to which it has influenced life styles, cultural standards, and aspirations of the people, especially women in this relatively conservative society, is the question that this enquiry addresses. I hope to discuss briefly the significance of television in the life of the Malayali, focusing, for the main, on its impact on the minds of the Malayali women who are undoubtedly its prime and avid viewers. My argument centres round gender-specific relationships shown on the small screen, particularly through its prime-time programmes.

Let us take a look at the physical as well as the societal dimensions of television in Kerala through a simple incident experienced by this researcher.

It was 7.30 pm when we finally managed to pay a visit to our friendly neighbour. She opened the door to us with a smile and invited us in, but for some reason the welcome seemed a little reluctant compared to her usual warmth and exuberance. We were rather puzzled at the lukewarm reception, for her invitation had seemed quite genuine. So what was wrong now? The reasons were not far to seek. We were led inside to the living room, where we found the rest of the family seated in varying postures with their attention focused on the television, placed prominently in a corner of the room. The conversation that ensued, moved forward only in fits and starts, for the major source of attraction was the television box and the drama that was unfolding on the screen despite the fact that neither the characters nor the situation of the programme – which incidentally was one of the prime-time serials – had any relevance to any of the persons present in that room. As the episode of the serial was broken for commercial advertisements the mother of my host turned to me and broke into our conversation with the remark, “Was it not mean of *Hari* to do that?” I racked my brains to remember which *Hari* she was talking about, but could remember none. Seeing my puzzlement, her daughter, my host, came to my rescue explaining that *Hari* was one of the major characters in the serial they were watching. Though everyone laugh off the matter, it struck me then that this small incident revealed but the tip of a serious social issue. The viewer had empathised so much with the story and the characters in the serial, that *Hari* particularly, had become as much a member of her close family circle and friends as any other. And his actions as well as the story were so important to her existence that she identified completely with the situation. This led me to think seriously not only about the depiction of women on television, but also about the responses and socio-cultural influence the programmes were having on women particularly the popular programmes professedly targeting women viewers, but which are usually conceptualised and designed by men and hence often make a male-centric position in production and casting. Even when women worked in/for these programmes or helped in their production, they were usually unwilling to stray from the usual male-centric position for fear of being dubbed “feminist” and becoming marginalised in their working environment.

“Women literature is in a sense the literature of the colonized”, wrote Christine Rochfort, noted Feminist critic, referring to the marginalisation of the woman’s voice and the exploitation of her body by the mainstream cultural orthodoxy. This statement aptly defines the role of the woman in television in general; television is an arena of interior colonisation, and consequently it has brought in a received visual awareness as well as an aesthetics conceived in male terms. The woman does occupy an enviably prominent position on the small screen in this publicity-hungry age; however, when it comes to the power equation her image is controlled and manipulated by the implicit, but dominant patriarchal frames. Hence the questions to be explored here, particularly when viewed from a woman-centric perspective, are the following:

- (1) How much of this exposure is warranted? Does the women receive the kind of recognition that is due to her for her actions or achievements? Or is this a kind of exploitation merely for male-centred visual gratification?

- (2) What is the role that woman plays in the decision-making process with regards to her position on the television? Does the woman – any woman – have an opinion on the manner in which women are represented on the small screen, as elsewhere?
- (3) Is the woman viewer aware of her subjective position and the influence this powerful medium exerts on her thinking?

Any gender issue would perforce have to begin with the notions of sex and of gender as opposites. Much of the prevalent stereotypes of woman arise out of the confusion with regard to terminology and usage – the term “sex” being used in place of “gender”. All the socio-cultural factors that go into the making of the woman as accepted by the popular, say, in dress code, patterns of social behaviour, even management of space and time, are treated as merely biological factors, and not as socio-cultural constructs as they should be; and stereotypes of the female are reiterated through the socio-cultural milieu/pursuits. It is assumed that a woman has to appear, act, or talk in a particular way, if she were to be socially acceptable. Likewise there are particular dress codes and prescribed patterns of behaviour as well as a common female space allotted to women. In dressing and wearing the latest designer-wear costumes, the Malayali woman is much slower than her counterparts in the other States. And anywhere else in the world, socially acceptable codes of conduct are prescribed for women and they had to work within that basic framework. The Table given in Appendix I, which is indicative of sex role stereotypes prevalent in America in the early 1970s, may not be out of place here for it gives a clear inkling of gender-stereotyping in society.

Though this Table is indicative of studies conducted in the 1960s in the United States, much of the gender stereotyping suggested by it is relevant to Kerala of today. And the television of Kerala is perhaps one of the best indicators of the popular socio-cultural environment prevailing here.

Telecasting began in Kerala in 1985 when the Doordarshan Kendra, Trivandrum was commissioned. But it was only in 1994 that the regional language satellite channel was introduced and Malayalam programmes came to be produced. Much of the early programmes depended on translations from English or Hindi, and it took some time for the Kerala culture to be viewed from the Malayali point of view. In the early stages, the accent was on education. But, even as early as in 1975-‘76, the satellite Instructional Television Experiment (SITE), an educational programme, had brought television to several remote and not easily accessible parts of Kerala. Asianet, the first private channel, began transmission in the 1990s. The arrival of Asianet marked a major event in the socio-cultural life of Kerala since it highlighted the strength and weakness of Kerala culture and the rapid changes taking place in the traditional beliefs and practices. Despite the fact that the programmes of Hindi and Tamil channels had strong influence on its own programmes, Asianet was undoubtedly the pioneer of popular wholly Malayalam TV channels. It soon found a competitor in the Surya TV channel, launched in 1998 by the Sun TV network. Much of the programmes of both these television networks are film-based, particularly the popular, formula film (the dream machine that churns out stories of impossible dreams coming true, to bring solace to the over-worked, dispersed, and frustrated average person), which often has little to do with the realities of daily living. Yet the channels manage also to portray, to some extent, the changing trends in contemporary Kerala society. The newest channel to telecast Malayalam programmes is Kairali, which

began in August 2000. The programmes of this channel have not been included in this study because we considered it too early to do so.

Television has entered the Kerala household in a big way and its influence on the Malayali psyche has assumed great proportions. A large majority of Malayali households possess televisions sets or have access to them. Age, gender, class, caste or educational status is no hindrance to television-viewing. The practice of watching TV, talking about its various programmes, and often imagining its world to be real, has become almost a way of life. Lifestyles and work schedules are adjusted to accommodate TV viewing, particularly, viewing of favourite programmes. Patterns of socialising time schedules for religious practices and prayers and for shopping and business transactions – all have undergone among Keralites – men, women, and children. In fact, social visits, religious rituals, and even study timetables are decided after consulting the programme schedules of the favourite television channels. The daily timetables for students prescribed by the school authorities allot a specific timeslot daily for television viewing. Cinematic dance, dress parades and such other entertainments, clearly influenced by the television, are now part of the stage performances of every school or educational institution. The television programmes often extend beyond their professed domain and occupy not only leisure time but encroach into study time and vitiate working environment. Television serials and their story lines, news coverage, and presentation styles (including the personality and make-up of the presentations) are discussed, not only in the home, but also at the work place. Official duties and responsibilities often yield place to discussion of the story lines of the serials viewed the previous evening. The Malayali penchant for television causes her/him health hazards too. That continuous TV watching is injurious to the eye is well known. Besides, sitting before a TV for hours together causes other health problems too. This is particularly true for women who seek entertainment at home in preference to other leisure time engagements, which would give physical exercise and mental relaxation, may be outside home.

Unlike cinema, which was one of the most important sources of entertainment till recently, television does not cause expenditure every time of viewing, by way of ticket charges and transportations cost. Going for a cinema to a theatre, calls for prior planning and preparation, especially so, if the cinema goer happens to be a woman. Perhaps she will have to take permission from the head of the household and get a willing and agreeable company of friends too. All this effort, time and money could be saved when television comes to house. If one could not acquire a television of one's own, one views the programmes in the house of a willing neighbour, relative or friend. As a form of entertainment, it is particularly suitable for the women, because it gave her an independent means of entertainment. Unlike in the case of cinema for which she has to venture outside home (and therefore has to seek male escort or other companionship), incur expenditure for the tickets and for transport, and to secure social sanction, television gives her self-reliance (at least apparently) and choice to watch favourite programmes sitting within the confines of her home, of which she is supposedly the person in command.

But even here, studies show that time management remains a big problem for her. Her time is clearly not her own, for her entire family (the husband, children, and elders) has demands on it; in addition are her own private and personal needs as well as her socio-cultural commitments.

Often the woman has to wait for her turn till the other members of her family finish with their watching TV programmes of their choice. High educational or occupational status does not land confidence to a woman to voice her viewing preferences or choices. Housewives feel guilty about spending leisure time on television viewing rather than gainfully employed elsewhere. Most of our women respondents mentioned about using the advertisement break or title song sequence to catch up with their household chores suspended during television watching. The housewife invariably makes an effort to perform as much of her daily chores as possible before setting herself to television watching. Nevertheless, a few items, which call for urgent attention, may remain undone. Housewives do feel guilty of negligence of their household responsibilities on account of television watching. But they seldom could help it, the lure of the programmes being so tempting. And the channels vie with one another in getting women glued to their programmes by producing and telecasting absorbing sob-stuff. For instance, the Asianet channel slotted one of its most popular serials *Stree* for a rerun at 23.30 hours so that women who could not view the programme at the prime time of 19.30-20.00 hours due to pressure of work or social obligations would not be denied their pleasure.

For the purpose of this study, I divided the programmes on television into three sections: (i) sitcoms or serials; (ii) commercial advertisements; and; (iii) anchor persons (comperes) of programmes. Detailed analysis of programmes and the responses of viewers, especially women viewers, to them have been attempted. The problems encountered by the TV personnel have also been looked into. For the survey, we selected 100 houses each from a rural area and an urban area in Thiruvananthapuram district. The Peroor ward of the Sreekaryam *panchayat* situated on the outskirts of the Thiruvananthapuram city formed the rural sample. The population in this ward is about 3000, and the number of houses nearly 700. The urban sample was the Sasthamangalam ward of Thiruvananthapuram Corporation. The respondents of the rural sample were more co-operative than their urban counterparts. Nearly the entire rural sample (98 percent) reported watching only Doordarshan programmes for want of cable connections whereas almost all the urban respondents who invariably had cable connections preferred to watch private TV channels. They found the programmes offered by these channels more interesting, lively, and full of variety than Doordarshan programmes which according to them, were more informative and technically superior.

The women viewers were classified into three groups: (i) housewives (those who do not go out to work); (ii) working women (those who work outside their homes for remuneration); and (iii) students. The viewers belonged to a wide range in respect of age: from below 15 years to above 70 years of age. In the sample, housewives constituted the single largest group. Housewives preferred to watch programmes telecast during afternoons when they were relatively free from housework and preoccupation while attending to the needs of other members of family. In short, this was the timeslot on which they had virtual monopoly television viewing, unlike the other timeslots, during which they had acquiesce in the choice of programmes of others in the family. Our field survey was conducted during October 2000-February 2001. The survey team included two qualified psychologists specially trained to elicit responses for sensitive questions even from unwilling and indifferent interviewees and often to read between the lines. It became clear that persons who began by saying that they seldom watched television programmes, hardly missed any of their favourite programmes,

usually serials and even when they did, they managed to catch up with storyline or characterisation through discussions with others who had viewed them. In fact, interest in serials often passed beyond the actual telecast time – the characters and the story, its message and the probable lines of its development all form subjects of serious debate at social gatherings and personal meetings with friends.

More than 70 percent of the respondents from the rural area belonged to the middle age group (30-59 years); about 20 percent was of the age group 16-29 years and only less than 10 percent were above 60 years of age. There did not exist much difference in the proportions as between the rural and the urban areas, in respect of age groups. Almost all the viewers interviewed (98 percent) had studied at least up to the X standard. There were a few graduates, postgraduates, as well as teachers and professional workers among them; however, viewership patterns were by and large similar among them though of course individual preferences varied. There were fewer working women in the rural sample than in the urban sample (29 percent). Students formed 11 percent in the urban sample as against 14 percent in the rural sample.

In the next section the impact of the serials on viewers is discussed. The third section deals with the commercial programmes, mostly advertisements, and their influence on the viewers, particularly women. In the fourth chapter the performance of anchorpersons of programmes is evaluated. The final section presents the major conclusions of the study.

2. Killing Her Softly: Sitcoms

Notions of woman as the “other”, (as quite different from the normal male who was the standard, whereas she was the deviant), exist even among the ‘educated’ and the intellectual. It is these notions that are reinforced by the soap programmes, popularly known as serials in the Indian television channels.

The Malayalam serials have been till now, rehashes of themes of popular films. The women portrayed in these sitcoms are stereotypes, whether it is the role of wife, sister, daughter or mother. The serials convey in subtle ways anti-woman messages such as *Na stree swatantriyam arhati* (Not for woman-freedom) attributed to Manu, the mythological political philosopher. The dialogues in them affirm and underscore the subsidiary position of women in family and society. This message is presented in emotion-filled dialogue-packages highly appealing to the female television-addict who then tends to conform to and dread to deviate from, the conventional role assigned to her. The conventional role of women is depicted graphically in *The Second Sex* (1949) by Simone de Beauvoir, the French thinker, in the following words.

She is simply what man decrees; thus she is called ‘the sex’, by which is meant that she appears essentially to the male as a sexual being. For him she is sex-absolute sex no less. She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with references to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the subject, he is the Absolute – she is the other. (p.16).

Hence the gender stereotyping of women – in their roles as dutiful daughters, wives, mothers, housewives, nurses, and unpaid domestics – looking for reward of any sort.

Gender stereotypes are common to much of Western literature and their visual adaptations abound in film and television. The characters of popular American fiction and cinema are usually either variations of Eve or Pandora as sources of evil, and demonic projections of Delilah and Circe as temptresses. The male protagonists of these tales also fit into a typical pattern – that of the modern day macho hero/anti-hero – Oedipus , Ulysses, Hamlet, Captain Ahab, Huckleberry Finn, or the inordinately evil villain with his motiveless malignity. These figures are adapted into the cultural context of the Malayalam story. In fact, when the questions of adaptation for the Malayalam screen of some of these so-called classics came up, a reputed filmmaker commented: “*Why translate and bother about copyright and permission? Let us simply absorb them into Malayalam*”. Given the contexts, this was not obviously difficult. The problems as seen in the context of the Malayalam film are applicable to the Malayalam television too. Close parallels are seen not only in the matter of story or content, but even in the choice of heroine. For many of the actors and actresses on the Malayalam screen as in the case of the television are former theatre persons. Actors and actresses move from the small screen to the larger one and vice versa with ease and fluidity for the components of the two are very much alike and they vary mostly in the case of size and scale rather than character. The primary difference between the two is the absence of the dance sequences and abundance of close-up and indoor scenes on the small screen. In matters of power and range of women characters, close similarity is observed as between the cinema and the television serials. The

characters in both consist of the typical wife/mother/daughter/sister and the female villain (in the guise of an in-law or a greedy aunt or the other woman). This is particularly true of the Malayalam films since the early 1990s. In the films of the earlier decades, women characters were more individualistic and powerful, capable of thinking for themselves and acting on their own. In fact, most well-known film actresses of recent years have gone on record complaining about the lack of powerful roles in contemporary Malayalam cinema, which provide an opportunity for them to display their acting prowess. The actresses are typecast in roles such as the loving and dedicated mother, the dutiful wife, the suffering sister, the obedient daughter and so on. On the other side, there are the figures of the mean mother-in-law, the errant daughter-in-law, the selfish daughter, sister, usually married off but demanding their dues from the family of their birth, taking sides with the mercenary husband, against their own kith and kin. The role of the avenging ghost is usually a variant of this position, feared by men and women alike, and accepted with a burden of guilt for the ill treatment meted out to them in the past. According to the story position, if the women characters are good, they suffer all along in silence, and perhaps will be rewarded in the end; or else, their reward is the happiness of their loved ones; if they are mean they are normally rewarded with some punishment in the end. Of course, no woman is consulted with regard to her opinion in the matter, for she is not expected to have an individual opinion, as different from the commonly accepted one (the male-centric one).

By providing role models and reaching them inside homes, the television has a prime role in perpetrating the subservient image of the good woman. In fact, survey results point to the fact that most women, regardless of whether they were educated, employed or stay-at-home housewives, strive to be obedient and self-effacing in order to fit into the frame of the ideal, whether mother, daughter, sister, wife or in-law. Thus it is possible to clearly point to the role of the television sitcom in Kerala in the suppression of the woman's position in the state. This seems to be in contrast to the projected image of the modern woman in the neighbouring States of either Tamil Nadu or Karnataka, both urban and rural, who displays a certain inherent vitality and independence quite alien to the Kerala woman.

An example in point would be the Tamil serial *Manga* whose protagonist, even while fitting into the mould, displays some initiative and decisive power in word as well as deed. She leaves her husband and takes an independent step forward on her own, when called upon by her husband and his family, to abandon the children she had adopted. She prefers to stand by her independent convictions, even when ranged against the entire society in the form of her husband and his family. The protagonist of *Sthree*, the first wholly Malayalam mega-serial, on the contrary, is so self-effacing that the main female character gives away even her beloved child, on whom she is emotionally dependent, after the fickleness of her husband, for the selfish personal pleasure of her former husband and his second wife. Her totally submissive position has evoked a wide range of responses from women viewers ranging from revulsion at her passivity to admiration of her capacity to suffer. Enjoying unprecedented popularity as the first mega-serial made in Malayalam, it broke all records and celebrated the subordinate position of women in the Malayali psyche.

Almost all the television serials project the same image of the woman. The Malayalam serials, and in particular the more popular ones, are clearly directed at the female viewer. The titles,

the title songs as well as the thematic content reveal this fact. They all include words like *Stree* and *Pennu* (woman and female) and invariably project the typical female stereotypes of conventional literature and cinema.

The serials *Stree*, Kerala's first mega-serial in Malayalam, telecast by Asianet, is a case in point. According to the storyline, the protagonist Indu marries Hari against socio-familial norms, but she soon wins over the members of the family who matter in its power structure through her goodness of heart, polite and docile behaviour, and submissive nature. But when Indu is separated from Hari by some mischance, his family makes haste to get him married to another girl. Hari himself goes ahead with the suggestion after an initial show of unwillingness and distaste. On her return, when appraised of the situation, Indu opts to keep out of Hari's ken and relinquish her legal and conjugal rights to him and his property out of her outdated notions of self-sacrifice and female virtues. She stays single and devoted to the man she had been wed, in the face of all his misadventures. The serial came to an end in June 2000 after a record 390 episodes. Though initially supposed to conclude after 260 episodes, the serial dragged on moving from one contrived addition to the plot to another to make maximum capital out of the mass appeal that it enjoyed. The heroine became the epitome of the 'male ideal' Malayali woman – soft-spoken, submissive, obedient, non-complaining, chaste, and devoted. She used to be decently and modestly dressed as opposed to the tomboyish or garish clothes worn by the anti-heroine in the serial. Yet, she had the courage for dealing with villainy with a sure and firm hand. She was educated, enchanting, beautiful, cultured, intelligent and proud, yet willing to be exploited, she would not fight for her own rights and privileges as a wife, simply because it would be inconvenient for the husband, to whom she believed, she was duty-bound to obey.

This accounts for the record-breaking collections the serial fetched in by advertisements alone. To quote a report from *The Hindu* dated 15 June 2000:

Asianet says it had jacked up the advertisement rates from the initial Rs 8,000 to Rs 12,000 for 10 seconds. Advertisements have been filling up at least seven minutes of each 30-minute episode. And according to the quoted rates, the channel has been earning more than Rs 5 lakh a day and Rs 1 crore a month (other sources report, however, that the revenue has been much higher).

The astounding success of *Stree* prompted the channel to launch a sequel to it soon after, by the same name, *Stree*. The sequel was produced and advertised with much gusto. Far from being an epitome of suffering and silent forbearing in the protagonist the new *Stree* and her girlfriends were smart, independent, self-reliant young women. It was *jwala* (flame) the title song claimed, a flame, which blazed with hope and enthusiasm for mankind in general. The heroine was conceived as an action-oriented person, unlike her predecessor and perhaps in response to popular preference. She took three forms, in three persons, and looked modern in dress and deportment. The three friends, professedly orphans, brought up by an apparently socially committed person, look fashionable in dress and radical in career options. They begin as independent professionals and grow into doctor, police person, and journalist in course of development of the storyline. They take controversial and significant professional decisions on their own. Yet when questions of their personal life come up, they turn quite

helpless and depend on male emotional support. Their decisions are women-centred-often sympathetic to women in helpless and dependant situations. But they never display independence or smartness in their personal lives in the presence of male authority a surrogate father or a newly acquired husband. The initial show of confidence and assertion quickly gives way to a version of the *Stree* of the earlier serial. The tale of sacrifice and suffering takes over.

Recent surveys point to a decline of interest among viewers in the new version of the serial. The number of advertisements has also gone down. Most viewers prefer the older version of the serial to the recent one despite its claims to modernity and extroversion. Perhaps the image of the modern Malayali career woman, independent and outgoing is not welcome to the conservative Malayali taste.

Apart from the prototypical pure woman, there is also the figure of the rebellions female, independent in thought and reckless in deed, dressed in tomboyish clothes (read unfeminine, and thereby unacceptable) and ruthless in her demeanour. She gets punished for her unseemly behaviour, gets betrayed by her men (husband, father or son) for whom she had shed her modesty. But she regrets her unseemly behaviour towards the end of the story, turning over a new leaf or making amends for her misdeeds. The character of Abhirami, the policewoman in the new version of *Stree* begins as a powerful individual capable of standing up against harassing male authority, and demonstrating physical prowess that can overpower bullying masculine strength, but soon falls into the typical conventional male-dependent, doting daughter-sister-wife mould.

There is also the mother figure typical to the Indian film tradition, surfeit with the spiritual qualities of self-sacrifice, religiosity, and steadfastness. She is the ideal of goodness, always suffering in silence, yet maintaining equipoise in word, deed, and thought. She, sober in apparel and calm and collected in bearing, is completely dependent on others particularly males such as son, brother or husband, and uses her tear as an overpowering weapon. Such mother figures are found in most television serials too. In the original *Stree*, Hari's grandmother filled the bill.

By deflecting responsibility from men, the woman is placed in the role of gatekeeper, as in the case with Indu, the prototypical *stree*, taking up responsibility for both her own marital misfortunes and her man's (here partner's) sexual deviancy. As in popular cinema, women characters are seen as "the icing on the cake – upholding traditional virtues" of chastity, religiosity, fidelity, and sincerity whether in service to God or family or man. (Pendakur, M, "New Cultural Technologies and the Fading Glitter of Indian Cinema," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, 1989, Vol. 11 pp. 69-78). By taking upon herself the entire responsibility, not only for her own actions, but also for those of her husband and the prevalent socio-cultural norms, she absolves him as well as the society of all feelings of guilt.

Another interesting sociological factor that emerges from this study is the fact that almost all the popular Malayalam serials are placed in the Nair or more often the Namboodiri setting, revealing the feudal historical background. The erstwhile upper class figures and their downfall are portrayed with sympathy; falls on the hapless female characters of those erstwhile upper

classes, who suffer for the evil deeds of their men folk, during their heyday. Certain camaraderie among women is highlighted regardless of class or caste. Hostility as is often shown among men is not depicted in the case of women. The three major religious groups feature in almost all the serials. A constant refrain in most of them is the breaking up religious harmony as a result of misgivings and misunderstandings. In such turmoil, the worst sufferers happen to women. Dress styles and behavioural patterns of women as well as the earmarking of their external space provide the context and the times of the events depicted. Regardless of whether the background and setting of the serial is a disintegrating *tharavad* of a feudal past or a modern nuclear family in the urban setting, the woman's status is shown to be more or less the same. She is very much seen but not heard. The central woman character is usually upper caste and beautiful, remaining beyond reach of a lower caste male. He is stereotypically virtuous and ambitious, and hankers for prosperity and social status. Thus, a conscious reinforcing of feudal class structures and ideology as well as a strong gender bias are blatantly portrayed in the storyline.

A variant of the portrayal of the modern woman is seen in the serial *Charulata* telecast by Surya TV at prime time; the effort is to depict an efficient modern woman, independent in thought and deed. Though the serial earned great deal of popularity initially, and secured for the lead actress, a sustained niche in the world of teleserials, its success wore away after a period. Most viewers felt that the character was too independent to be real and hence the fall off. They preferred to identify themselves with or at least look up to, conventional stereotypes of the woman, rather than freethinking individuals who they complain would lead the young generations astray.

Studies regarding the gendered power structuring of societies and their consequences have thrown much light on this problem. Kate Millett, the American sociologist, has, in her book *Sexual Politics* (1969) analysed such gendered power structuring of society. Elaine Showalter, the British critic has tried to identify gender stereotypes in the British literature of the nineteenth century, in her book, *A Literature of their Own* (1977). She identifies three phases in British women's writing.

- 1 Feminine (1840-'80): Writings during the period are imitative of the men's writing tradition. Little difference was seen between woman's and men's writings of this period in terms of perception. For example when the British writer Mary Anne Evans wrote under the pen name of George Eliot, no one realised any difference in perception in her writing from that of the mainstream male writers of the period. All the accepted stereotypes of woman could be seen in her writing. As we discussed earlier, the protagonist of Kerala's first mega-serial *Stree* has been the stereotype of the conventional heroine of men's writings. The popular female characters of most serials telecast on Doordarshan's Malayalam channel, such as the tolerant and forgiving Kochuthresia or the repentant Nandini in *Jwalayay* or Vilasini, the ideal wife in *Snehadaseema*, or the self-sacrificing Meera of *Mohanam*, or the patient and suffering Mallika of *Hari*, fall in this category. The female lead characters in the other Malayalam channels are also moulded in the same groove. Kamala in *Aksyayapatram* (Asianet) is soft-spoken, loving and obedient, and Hema in *Taali* (Surya TV) is smart and intelligent,

yet obedient, responsible and loving, perfectly fitting the conventional feminine image in literature and cinema.

- 2 The Feminist (1880-1920) is the protest phase. During this phase, the woman's voice took on a more aggressive tone, defying the till-then accepted stereotypical roles of woman. Women began to consciously and exaggeratedly dress themselves and behave like the men, hoping thereby to achieve some measure of equality with the male. A few characters from the world of the Malayalam serials do try to follow these patterns; however, they encounter serious hindrances in their efforts and eventually give up, retracing the feminine stereotypes. The anti-heroines and vicious characters in most Malayalam serials fit into this category. They dress up in pants or other attire considered immodest by conventional notions of femininity, swagger defiantly, swear at rivals, and talk loud and hoarse. Abhirami, the police officer in the new *Stree* started out in this incarnation but soon recoiled to the conventional mode immediately after her marriage, to conform to the feminine model.
- 3 Female (1920 to the present) is the third model. In this phase of exploring her female identity, woman seems to have tried to come to terms with herself. Though a few attempts have been made to explore the female self in Malayalam literature and film, very little of this approach has percolated to the masses, which popular television, for the most part, represents. The attempts made in serials to project the modern woman, her environment and her opinions as well as the problems faced by her have not actually received much public acclaim as evidenced by the survey results. The portrayal of Charulata, the journalist in the serial of the same name telecast on Soorya TV, takes some step in this direction. But a majority of the respondent-viewers stated their reservations in accepting this character as a role model. They felt that the character lacked verisimilitude and looked too bellicose and repulsive. To them the character of Hema in *Taali* was more realistic and admirable as she was able to win justice for the former wife without herself deviating from traditional values and virtues. The commercial advertisements telecast during breaks in telecast time appear, on the other hand, more gender-sensitive, in their efforts to portray the modern woman and her efforts to link the past with the present.

The studies that systematically identified and classified gender stereotyping have helped locate the problems in a variety of texts and point to the possibility and the need for a genuine woman's voice. Several studies made from the woman's point of view have dwelt upon the phallo-centric nature of language and its masculine power structures. The derogatory depiction of woman in commonplace parlance, such as colloquial usages and proverbs, as well as its impact on the unsophisticated mindset has been brought out clearly in these studies. Yet very little of all this has percolated to the common woman. Hence the clichéd images of woman persist in the perception and parlance of popular culture, regardless of whether the storyline is situated in the West or in India; even among the 'educated', the elite, and the socially conscious groups of Kerala these images predominate.

The most popular serials according to the survey were *Akshayapatram*, *Taali*, *Jwalayayi*, and *Stree* (the first version), in that order. The plot structure and story development in all

these serials exemplifies the gender bias in the popular psyche in Kerala. The most popular characters were Hema or Padmaja of *Taali*, both independent, intelligent, and responsible women, capable of much achievement, yet never stirring away from the socially acceptable norms of obedience to elders, particularly men folk, loving, caring, sympathetic to male problems, faithful, and hardworking. Kamala of *Akshayapatram*, Kochutresia and Nandini of *Jwalayayi* and Indu of *Stree* are the other popular characters that also fit into this mould.

Television audiences in Kerala and elsewhere in India and the production staff of television programmes, both off and on screen, seem to be ignorant of distinction between sex and gender. They do not appear to discriminate between sex as a biological fact and gender as a social construct, and thereby tend to operate within the prevailing gender stereotypes. To them, the woman is usually a mere body. She is, in casual parlance, a “sex-object”. She is not expected to act or think for herself. She is just expected to play her allotted role of the male-centric society. The ideal woman thus becomes the epitomes of patience, love, sympathy, tolerance, suffering, and self-sacrifice. As in the sitcoms, she remains faithful to her partner despite his tortures, torments, and abuses. Our survey data show that 90 percent of the women hold that an ideal wife/mother/sister/daughter-in-law/daughter is one who is obedient, submissive, and self-sacrificing. Even women filmmakers and / or directors often adhere to this conventional standards of the ideal woman, partly for fear of societal censure or but mostly for lack of independent vision.

3. Selling Her Loudly: Commercials and Jingles

Kerala's large workforce of women in educational health care and administrative institutions as well as in private sector establishments have earned some degree of economic freedom and financial stability. The emergence in the recent part of the small nuclear family has the housewife greater control over family income and expenditure. She has developed ways of either assisting her partner in the household who earns the family income or of finding new sources of additional income. Consequently the standard of living of families in Kerala has, in general, improved. Television has come within reach of the average Malayali households, with fall in television prices and increase in the availability of institutional credit.

Those who could not afford their own television sets took to viewing television at neighbours' or other nearby places. Households which had their sets – most of them of the middle and lower middle classes entertained their neighbours who came to watch television – and derives some sense of social importance thereby. The poor, who watched the programmes and commercial advertisements, derived some vicarious satisfaction too. Instances of programmes showing mothers buying fancy items of food or drinks for their children are cases in point. Further, such programmes also what their appetites and aspirations.

Realising the economic potential of women, as well as their interest in the well being of their family, commercial interests have chosen women as their advertisement blitzkrieg. It is prime-time programmes that advertisers prefer to sponsor. But there exists no direct evidence of their having, *per se*, influenced the content of any programme. Advertisements and the title songs are seen to take up almost one-third of the serial time, in the most popular ones. The actual time taken to telecast the serial episodes comes to, at the most, only 17 to 18 minutes of the allotted 30 minutes (a part of the allotted time is taken up for updates on the story).

Here is a sample break up of the time allotment for telecast of one episode of *Charulatha* rated as one of the most popular serials on Surya channel. The programme went on air during the 21.35 – 22.05 hours timeslot:

Advertisement	:	9 seconds
Title Song	:	2 minutes
Serial	:	4 min 51 sec
Advt.	:	3 min. 27 sec. (10 nos)
Serial	:	7 min. 15 sec
Advt.	:	2 min. 54 sec (11 no.s)
Serial	:	6 min 6 sec
Title song	:	2 min
Total time taken	:	28 min. 42 sec.
Total time take	:	
Advt.	:	6 min. 30 sec
Title song	:	4 min
Serial	:	18 min 12 sec
Total	:	28 min 42 sec

In short, the actual telecasting time for the episode of the serial took only 63 percent of the used up time, that is 18 minutes and 12 seconds out of the total of 28 minutes and 42 seconds. The importance of propaganda for promotion of commercial interests during telecast of serials thus becomes evident. Most commercial advertisements are examples of meticulously made short films meant to arrest and appeal to the popular psyche. They are strong in their power of expression and capacity to communicate so much in such a short time. As women form much of the target audience for the advertisements, their portrayal on screen in the advertisements is clearly of prime significance.

In the advertisements, two, sometimes contrasting, types of the woman are portrayed. In the first, she is the sex object pandering to the male ego, either as hapless victim or distraught damsel or obedient but adoring and considerate secretary. In the other, she is the shrewd-housewife taking upon herself the entire responsibility of managing the household. In the world of advertisement, women provide the humble services while man provides useful (?) advice. The repetitive nature of the advertisements with the message of the woman's stereotypical positioning in them is what is most damaging to the female as a person. The more expensive stuff is aimed at the man, while for the woman it is only cheaper household goods such as cleansing materials and detergents. Even pressure cookers and ovens and washing machines are shown to be preferred by men who realised with their worldly wisdom and expertise the advantages of using particular products or appliances. For instance, the washing machine, advertisement features a man washing clothes after messing them up in the absence of the wife, thus suggesting that washing clothes is a woman's job, but even he, not accustomed to the job, can operate it with ease. Here the man's wisdom in using the machine is extolled rather than his inefficiency in managing mundane jobs around the house, a situation that would be *infra dig* to the male ego. Or, take the advertisement of pressure cooker; here carelessness on the part of woman is highlighted first by showing how, inadvertently, she is causing traffic blocks and accidents, while driving. The husband's agony is shown to change to smugness when the woman is back in the kitchen since he knows that the brand of cooker she uses is safe even when handled by imbeciles. The message being projected to the woman viewer seems to be the following: "Take the man's advice. After all, he should know better than you, he being more worldly wise".

The unnecessary use of the woman's figure in advertisements has been the topic of discussion at most gatherings of concerned individuals and groups. As per The Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act of 1986, the female body is not to be exposed or exploited for commercial benefit. But this Act is totally ignored and violated with impurity by most advertisers. In fact, most people employed in the advertisement field report their total unawareness of such an Act. A large number of advertisements exploit the voyeuristic properties of the female body to draw attention to their products. The female form is unclothed and projected as *nauseaum* as in the advertisement for a motorcycle in which each part of the vehicle is equated to some part of the woman's body, to be ridden by the conquering male. In an advertisement for a variety of toothpaste, for instance, the woman behind the camera – the technically accomplished person – is converted to a model, again an object of voyeuristic interest, and the change is perceived as an ascent of woman in the social ladder. Another advertisement for a two-wheeler project, woman as an irresponsible and untrustworthy person who runs away with the machine, fully exploiting the genuine concern and faith reposed

upon her by the serious male. The woman herself is often seen as mysterious object to be acquired by winning her over by special scents and perfumes, or even certain male underwear. Here also she is the guileless female who can be led by the nose, as it were, from one male to another on the basis of the perfume he uses, which of course she finds irresistible. The advertisements for shaving creams, soaps, or masculine scents fall under this category. The woman in these advertisements is incapable of discretion or judgement and she is led by her senses, which are emotional and impulsive.

At the other extreme, she is portrayed as a person who takes on the roles of the dutiful daughter, the loving wife or the adoring mother, always surrendering herself and her personal pleasures for the larger interests of family and society. Almost all advertisements for the soap powder of the Wheel brand show the use of that brand by the wife bringing promotion in career of her husband; the advertisement for *Ujjala*, shows a child becoming an object of ridicule for wrong choice of blue by her mother, the housewife of the family; The *Whirlpool* advertisement, in which housewife's choice of refrigerator is shown to be important for the sake of family prestige, is another extreme version of this situation. The housewife, in these advertisements, identifies herself and her choices completely with those of the other members of her family. Yet she is presented as a spendthrift and cause of annoyance for the husband or the father either due to her wrong choices of products due to immaturity or impishness due to excessive pampering, depicting the overgrown-child syndrome. Advertisements for ornaments and jewellery as well as textiles and apparel fall in this category. The women in the jewellery advertisements or the sari advertisements are seen as decking themselves profusely in ornaments, jewels, and diamonds or enfolding themselves in sarees, under advertisement; some dream about becoming able to do so. The indulgent father/husband strives to fulfil the dreams of their daughter / wife. In fact, these advertisements rule out any semblance of wisdom on the part of the average woman. Most women viewers whom we interviewed asserted that they did not make purchases under the influence of such demeaning advertisements. The only advertisements they admitted that they enjoyed viewing were the ones, which featured children or happy family situations. But the first category where she is projected as the alluring but mysterious sex symbols that could entice anyone with her wiles has been definitely the most popular stereotype among advertisers. Her presence in advertisements for male-clothing, after-shave lotions or even exclusive male underwear was considered, not merely welcome but essential, as the advertisers were sure, it was the attractiveness of the other sex that arouses male interest. In all these advertisements, the notion of the woman as the "other", as an unknown but mysterious identity, yet appreciative of the supports of the male, particularly male of the "macho" type, has been repeated time and again. The third type of portrayal was that of the so-called liberated modern woman, quick, shrewd and efficient in decision and action. This woman always appears in advertisements on the television screen as smart, well-dressed, confident, smiling, outgoing, and efficient unlike her hapless counterpart of the past. She is depicted as a person in complete control of her household finances and capable of independent choice and action. Even when she is not the wage earner, she is a shrewd operator, making wise choices in the interests of her family. But note how even in this case, the family is her first concern. She is shown as the epitome of fortitude, sacrifice, and service in the interests of the social unit, her family. The need for her to be beautiful (*Fair and Lovely* creams, soaps, perfumes) as well as bejewelled and clad in costly and fashionable costumes is repeatedly stressed. There is almost no part of

the woman's anatomy that has been neglected by the advertisers of beauty products from the top of her hair to the tip of her toenails. Advertisements for shampoos, soaps, body creams, and nail polish come under this category. Here also, the tone of the advertisements suggests that the need to beautify herself is to attract male interest rather than fulfil herself. The advertisements, on the whole, play up the male-female dichotomy. The woman is most often seen as the other – strange, alluring, mysterious, inscrutable, and capricious – attributes that add to her charm. In this respect, the woman's presence on the Malayalam television is hardly different from those in other language televisions; though the language used is Malayalam, the advertisements are addressed the same for all language screens and give a pan-Indian message.

Though a large majority of individuals whom we interviewed, especially women interviewees, stated that they made use of the breaks for advertisements in between or within programmes, to catch up on household chores; still they were able to mention a few advertisements they liked or abhorred, for a variety of personal reasons.

Only 45 percent of the rural viewers and a little more than 50 percent of the urban viewers openly admitted to being influenced by the commercial advertisements in their choice of consumer products like detergents and household goods. Among the women viewers, the family was obviously an area of high priority, for most individuals, especially those from the rural areas, rated the advertisements featuring children or family relationships as their favourites. Advertisements for nappies such as *Huggies* and baby products such as *Johnsons* baby powder received a high rating among them. The *Horlicks* advertisements featuring healthy and naughty children, the umbrella as well as the dress advertisements with children as their target groups and sweets and biscuits advertisements were high in the popularity ranking of the women viewers. Absence of vulgarity and the homely quality of the advertisements was another high priority. The *Raymonds* advertisements, which feature the complete man as a family-oriented person, were high on the priority list of the women viewers. The funny advertisements, the unusual ones and those that feature a favourite film star or sportsperson come only next in priority. Here the *Pepsi* advertisements featuring the popular film star Madhavan, the *Coco Cola* ones with Hritik Roshan, the *Cinthol* ones with Aravind Swamy as well as the *Boost* advertisement with Sachin Tendulkar were reportedly the most popular ones in this category. Interest in the gold and jewel advertisements was expressed only by about 1 percent of urban women viewers, and that too for the presence of the children and beautiful women in them rather than the wares on display, while hardly anyone seemed impressed by the advertisements of beauty products or clothing, a finding contrary to popular notions.

The Malayali consumer considered such larger scale pampering of the woman as householder gave her a great sense of importance and well being. Identifying herself with the woman portrayed in the television, the Kerala women saw herself as an efficient and confident householder. As consumer, the women viewers were inclined to approximate the ideal on the television, smart in apparel and appearance, and shrewd and efficient with regard to disposition of time and management of finances. She was seen both within the household as well as outside it. She moved with dignity and was treated with great respect by the retailer. On television she saw herself in the image the rest of the world saw her – often in terms of the

male-centred society. She viewed with pride the projections of her ideal self in the screen and often strove towards that ideal. The ideals on the advertisements had a very positive effect too; she has gained confidence to move outside home and conduct herself usefully and productively in the social space. The Kerala woman who used to be seen only in the household, the temple or the festival ground, now went shopping, drove her own vehicle, and managed her child's education. In short, she has become the superwoman of the advertisements – smart, well-dressed confident, unlike her former plain and conservative self.

But that did not mean that her corporate image in the societal sphere has improved. Her image of herself in the context of the male-centred Kerala society with its conservativeness with regard to gender remains unchanged. Her activity within and outside the domestic sphere continues to remain unappreciated despite its vital importance to society for its sustenance and survival. And she continues to be exploited everywhere.

4. Anchoring and Compering

On the television, woman's presence is pervasive. Being charming and alluring to the male gaze, women seem naturally to fill the bill for inputs for the visual media. Their presence on the television screen is portrayed in a variety of roles and types: presenters, newsreaders, actresses, and models. In fact, in many of these roles, women seem to be preferred to men.

The question that needs to be raised in this context is this: are these types and roles genuinely of women's choice? Are they ever consulted in decision taking on their roles? Or are they merely puppet figures cut out for playing to the male-centred themes? Do these women have a woman-centric point of view at all? Is there any justification for typecasting women to a few stereotypes? The women in television, it may be maintained, merely voice or figure other people's opinions or view points, and not at all their own.

There are basically two aspects to women and television:

1. Their ubiquitous visual presence on the television screen, and
2. Their importance as the major proportion of viewers (consumers) of television programmes.

Woman presence in the visual media has been undoubtedly ubiquitous; question to ask is whether the presence is active or passive. Women appear as faces on the television, or as bodies, but only rarely as persons with ideas, skills, and expertise. They are employed as presenters, hostesses, scorers, actors, dancers, and singers; they also form part of the audience shown in some programmes; yet they are rarely called upon to voice their opinion on serious matters such as political currents, or economic policy unless the programmes concerned themselves are on women's issues. In fact, most women experts complain that they are rarely asked to give opinion unless it is on a woman-centred issue. The women presenters are usually there because they have a pleasant face, choice or personal charm to make the matter they present appealing to the audience. They are seldom given to voice their own views or opinions. They are given a script, which they render in accordance with the instructions of the director. In fact, most interviewers, male or female are specifically instructed to keep their personal opinions or views out of the discussions they participate in, in the name of objectivity. They are, in actuality enacting, faithfully, a male-directed role, with little intellectual or emotional involvement.

They are even given instructions, sometimes explicitly but most often implicitly, regarding their make up and costumes for the assigned role. In fact, sari was at first considered imperative for most woman presenters on screen, specifically within the Kerala context. Other dresses were strictly taboo. This rule seems to be upheld even today by the regular newsreaders, the most conservatively dressed among the presenters. Survey statistics show how most women viewers admire the dress of the newsreader and her mode of presentation. In fact, in some places the newsreader is treated as some kind of celebrity and she is called upon to grace public functions with her glamorous presence.

Now that costumes other than the sari have become socially acceptable, they are allowed on small screen as well. But producers of programmes on the Malayalam screen prefer not to present girls in short skirts or body-hugging costumes for fear of offending the popular taste and sensitivity of the Keralites. While producers outside Kerala choose flamboyant colours and stylish outfits for presenters, the Kerala-based ones opt for sober colours and simple costumes. Our survey results also point to the dislike of viewers for 'important' costumes definitely in serious presentations, but even in advertisements.

An investigation into the working environment of the production crew is essential in a study of this kind on gender status. In the production of programmes of major television studios, very few women are seen to be involved. A random sample of the staff list of Surya TV, which includes the full-time as well as the part-time workers on the channel's rolls, would prove the point. Among the full-time staff, women are virtually non-existent, both in the managerial cadre or the cadre of operations. Even the two women producers on the rolls are assigned a limited and specific role, of producing women's programmes such as on cookery, fashion, tailoring, pre-designed film-based shots or presentation of film songs. In the case of casual hands, the number of women employees is more in positions of announcers, presenters or even attendants of telephone calls for requesting film songs (referred to as hostesses in more sophisticated terminology), in which the woman's figure and demeanour are more important than professionalism or competence. It seems to be the commonly accepted view, at least among the television channels, that women are deft at handling the public, quite charmingly and politely. But when it comes to road shows and live theatricals, it is adolescent and young males who are preferred to females of the same age group. On the other hand, over 60 percent of the newsreaders are women. Their work discipline, translated as reliability, capacity, and willingness to put in longer hours of work in studio, goes unrecognised. Nor are their personal opinions or views discussed on the television. Their job is only to deliver the script given to them, and not to comment on them. Even the women experts appearing on the small screen are few in number, for women are usually invited only to speak on women's issues. For other, general and global issues, all the three channels prefer to interview men as experts. Perhaps the general consensus is that the woman's viewpoint on matters of general interest cannot/is not to be taken seriously. Even quiz shows prefer to use women as scorers or supportive persons rather than the lead person.

Survey reflects that even the busiest of individuals devote at least some part of their hectic schedule to television viewing. Patterns of viewing differ from individual to individual. While news and current affairs programmes are regarded as educational, other programmes such as serials and film songs as well as the Sunday movie are considered mere entertainment. Quiz programmes, music competitions, and campus or road shows are considered both informative and entertaining. Among the presenters of music shows, unlike the more intellectual quiz performances, are women included, perhaps, for the visual appeal. Each programme has its own exclusive and hence captive viewership. While the men in a household claim to prefer to watch news and coverage of political developments and sports, women, on the whole, fall into a stereotype – of viewing serials, cinema as well as cinema-based programmes. Of course none of these assumptions are final, for there are several men who regularly view serials and cinema-based programmes, and many women who prefer news, politics or current affairs to

mere film song and dance, and other trivia. Yet the survey statistics confirm the stereotypical viewership patterns.

Quiz programmes on the television screen is a recent phenomenon. As they are supposed to provide both information and entertainment, the viewing of these programmes is encouraged, particularly for students, by most families, even the conservative ones which discourage children from television-watching. The programmes also have provision for a certain degree of viewer participation, almost by proxy. One of the most popular programmes, almost phenomenal in its success, is, of course, the Amitabh Bachan-starrer *Kaun Banega Crorepati* (KBC), popular on primetime Star TV on most weekdays. Though not conceived or produced in Malayalam, it has captivated Malayali viewers as much as viewers anywhere else in India. This programme is moulded in the typical *American Dream* pattern of getting rich quickly, without much effort or even resourcefulness by answering simple questions that do not even test the prowess or memory power of an average individual. In this programme, sex, class, caste, educational level or upbringing seems to matter little in the common man's race for riches. On the Malayalam Asianet channel, the FTQ (Family Tele Quiz) provided a much-watered down version of this. This programme completed its 100th telecast recently. However, the stakes here are hardly a match for the KBC. The attraction to the programme for the viewers is the fact that they do not have to be physically present for the quiz. As the participants phone in and the viewers answer the questions, anonymity is maintained to a certain extent and even the shy can participate in the process. This is perhaps one of the reasons why large numbers of housewives and other women who normally shy away from publicity, participate enthusiastically in the show. The presence of a woman on the screen as interrogator, who is neither harsh nor hypercritical, could be another reason. In this programme, the script and research is by a woman, Rekha Menon, unlike in the usual quiz programmes, in which the woman dons the subdued roles of scorer or presenter, and remains on the screen for the glamour, not her wits. In dress and demeanour also she is moderate and conventional, in conformity with the expectations of the average Malayali psyche, despite her gender transgression. Of late there have been new entrants to the Malayalam Television scene, such as in the programme *Kodeeswaran* on Surya TV, a clear imitation of the Amitabh Bachan-starrer. Anchored by the Malayalam film actor Mukesh, it seems to be gradually gaining ground in the popular Malayali psyche. Though the settings and the tone are very much like its Hindi prototype, the questions asked in the quiz are more local-specific. Enthusiastic participation of women on an equal footing with men is by itself an interesting aspect of the programme; however, followed on the screen, it is found to be gender-discriminatory. For instance, men who appear on the screen greet the audience with a swaggering "hello", while women do so with a polite *namaskaram*. Thus in very unexpected situation the Malayali gender bias becomes evident.

Another much touted programmes on the Malayalam small screen is the talk show. Among them, the most popular show seems to be the one called *Nammal Tammil* anchored by Srikantan Nair on Asianet that recently completed its 300th episode. In this show, prominent individuals discuss their views on specific topics and respond to an invited audience. The show is meant to be on contemporaneous issues and controversial in its approach. But the question of whether it does or does not achieve its aims is debatable. In the 300th episode, for instance, the topic under discussion was the decreasing importance of the role of women on the Malayalam

screen. The topic seemed at the outset gender sensitive; but the discussion followed the usual pattern, with men lined up on one side away from women. The female actors present at the programme clearly expressed their ardent desire and ability to portray powerful women characters, which could prove a touchstone to their acting prowess, but lamented the lack of opportunity to do so in the absence of a supporting framework of producers, directors, and story. The filmmakers stated on the other hand, financial and societal reasons for their conservatism. The final comment came from the anchor who laid the blame squarely on the actresses rather than on the filmmakers (who were all male), for the non-presence of the strong woman character on screen, a clear exposition of gender insensitivity verging on the ridiculous.

Almost all discussions on gender issues on the television follow this general pattern with men lining up against women, unashamedly making impudent sexist statements. A typical example would be that women incite rape by wearing provocative clothes, disregarding the fact that the rape victim is often a school child, innocent of her sex. Here the tendency is to ward off sympathy and the sense of guilt from the public conscience and replace it with blame on the victim so that the violence against women may be perpetrated without prick of conscience. Even in the women's programmes, the same pattern is reiterated, with the women's voices, often including that of the female anchor, getting shouted down by the authoritarian and presumptuous but predictable male responses.

The television, in Kerala in particular, often takes over the role of grandma of the earlier joint family setting, often acting as advisor, comforter, and mentor. Programmes for women such as cooking classes, health care, skin care, beautification, indoor decoration, and etiquette falls within this category. And since mothers and grandparents of today have little time for story telling, the television has taken over this task as well, through programmes based on the exploits of mythological heroes and heroines. These time-tested popular stories are handed down from one lingo to another through dubbing. The storylines and their presentations are crafted clearly and blatantly in male-dominated, patriarchal mode with their female characters cast always in stereotypical mould. Our women respondents had Parvati, the consort of Lord Shiva, as their favourite, the ideal. She was the epitome of goodness, beautiful and dutiful, submissive, and yet powerful – the stereotype of ideal womanhood. The notion of *Arahanareeswara*, where the male and the female attributes of God are equal in powers of protection and destruction is completely lost to them; to them, wife was a step below her man, always looking up to him for protection, ever obedient, modest, and soft-spoken.

One of the professed social objectives of Doordarshan is “to highlight the need for social welfare measures including welfare of women, children, and the less privileged”. Avowedly to fulfil this requirement, Doordarshan runs a weekly programme for women. Other channels too, in their endeavour, not to be left behind in matters of gender justice and social awareness, have followed suit. Programmes on cookery, home-making or beauty treatment fill the bill, perhaps on the assumption that women would be interested in little else. On the positive side, they hold interviews and discussions with successful women from various fields, which could give women viewers confidence and inspiration to venture ahead on their own, contrary to the message provided by the sitcoms. They also hold discussions on issues such as the *pardah* or the dowry system or women's education through programmes of interviews with both men

and woman; however, such programmes display little gender sensitivity. The discussions often trail along beaten tracks of male-centred thought, with women taking a defensive stance against dominant patriarchal discourse.

Women's programmes telecast by television channels, whether on Doordarshan, Asianet or Soorya, were definitely not high on the popularity rating scale. Among the women viewers interviewed, only one-third admitted to watching them at all. And even among those who did watch about 20 percent did so only occasionally. Those who did watch the programmes regularly found them, however, interesting and informative, particularly the programmes on cookery. They also found the programmes serving as a window to the world, which they hardly had known.

The presenters on the Malayalam television channels, though usually dominantly female, have little else to do than make their visual presence felt. They make for glamorous presence and mouthpieces/rather than individuals speaking their mind. In fact, their presence on the screen provides little other than voyeuristic pleasure. Woman's voice is rarely articulated, an indication of the social evil that oppresses women.

5 . Conclusion

As far back as 1934, the well-known aesthete, John Dewey, in his book *Art As Experience*, pointed out the transient nature of popular culture. In his own words:

Some aesthetic products have an immediate vogue; they are the “best sellers” of their day. They are “easy” and thus make a quick appeal; their popularity calls our imitators, and they set the fashion in plays or novels or songs for a time. But their very ready assimilation into experience exhausts them quickly; no new stimulus is derived from them. They have their day and only a day.

Popular television with its instant appeal to an appreciative and gullible set of viewers has a very wide reach. The social-political consequences of the message carried across are also immediate. There is no question of the viewer having to bring into use his/her own intelligence or critical / discerning faculty. Hence the probability of false images or stereotypes getting perpetrated is strong in this medium. The immediate impact, their widespread, direct visual appeal, could produce both positive and negative consequences. Sometimes, the impressions the programmes create may be long lasting too, even though unintended.

Despite claims to education and intellectual superiority, the Malayali remains ignorant of the issues of gender discrimination for the most part, gender-insensitive too. For instance, eve teasing, a social menace, is projected on the screen and particularly in film-based programmes, as an offshoot of the normal male-female discourse. Though displaying distaste initially, the girl is shown as succumbing to the advances of her male tormenter in due course of time. Hence the social menace is reinforced constantly in the teenage psyche as a prelude to normal partnership requirements. Is it in any way surprising then that instances of female harassment as well as crime statistics recording violence against women are on the increase in Kerala? Ignorance of genuine social relations and the need for gender sensitisation are the requirement of the day. Mature and gender-aware programmes can definitely play a useful role. In fact, media agents do not seem to be even aware of the presence of women in spaces other than the home.

Television programmes and in particular, the popular serials are produced often by lowly educated and gender-insensitive production assistants who have little concern about social consequences. Their only concern seems to be to churn out sob-stuff that will be of appeal to a large set of emotional viewers, and collect huge amounts from advertisements. Actors and presenters have little voice in the making or packaging of the programmes, even if competent.

The woman characters of sitcoms, though situated in the modern time frame and in the Kerala locale are mere variations of the nineteenth century stereotype: (1) The good, silent, meek, suffering heroine, either ideal wife or mother; (2) The tomboy villain counterpart far from demure in dress and demeanour, who gets duly punished for her waywardness; (3) The ghost who represents the betrayed women who takes revenge and is dreaded by all, the men in particular, but is brought to book in the end by superior, masculine magic/supernatural power.

Fed on these sitcoms and deprived of any other source of entertainment, the women viewers of Kerala are in grave danger of being reduced to becoming silent, suffering heroines of the type depicted in these programmes. Most women viewers, irrespective of education, occupation, age, income or community status, regard the television stereotypes particularly the heroines, with awe, worth emulating. This is an attitude inculcated in the female psyche by their men folk. In fact when the interviewers tried to conduct survey in many homes, they had to at first face a barrage of questions and resentment from male members. Men believed that the women to be interviewed, whatever their level of education, were invariably taciturn and incapable of expressing independent views. The women interviewed also were quite willing to be seen that way, whether in the presence of men or elsewhere. They seemed to think that taciturnity and modesty were prerequisites to femininity and that the bold expressions of an independent opinion would deprive them of that attribute.

In sum: in the Malayalam small screen woman has a ubiquitous presence, but her own voice is not heard much. Though formally educated, she is depicted as a docile and meek person. On the screen, as well as beyond, in the society, she gets little opportunity even to form her views, leave alone to air them. Her role on screen and off-screen is passive and undefined. In her insecurity and inhibition, she often forgets even the fact that she could have an opinion of her own and the ability to voice it, in public or in private. In a sense, she becomes the other, the societal requirement, the stereotyped version of her real self, in her haste to conform to its demands. She becomes as passive as her model on the television, and just as ineffectual and helpless.

The Malayalam television channels, like the other channels within India and abroad, are full of stereotypes of the conventional woman. Despite Kerala's matrilineal heritage and her people's claims to high educational standards for both women and men, there exists very little evidence of high social positioning of the women. In fact, the practice of dowry, which was once lesser known to the formerly predominantly matrilineal Kerala society, is now a popular, socially accepted practice. The widespread use of *purdah* on the streets and demarcating separate spaces to women and men in social gatherings and places of worship is a comparatively recent phenomenon. Keeping women's institutions away from public gaze in the name of social propriety and treating educated women, as chattels are more recent developments. On the screen as elsewhere in society, she is treated as a mere sex object or a glorified unpaid, domestic 'hard'. She is considered an imbecile with attractive features. Her occupational status – as a person who works outside home for remuneration – does not make a change.

The wife of a Gulf emigrant, a grass widow, may be managing her household finances on her own, but receives little recognition or acknowledgement for her services. This is the popular image of a woman seen in the television channels of Kerala particularly the Malayalam channels. Women are not able to hold out against the prevalent gender bias in Kerala society even if they work in super-specialty areas; in general they bow down to family and societal pleasures, often refusing promotional transfers in the interests of the family which takes their sacrifice for granted and fail to reach their potential.

Television audiences in Kerala and the production staff of television programmes, both off

and on the screen, seem to be innocent of differences between sex and gender. Gender is not considered by the Kerala society an important issue at all. The television programmes are reinforcing this attitude. And the stereotypes persist.

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