



PRIME TIME SOAP OPERAS ON INDIAN TELEVISION

SECOND EDITION

Shoma Munshi



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This book examines the phenomenon of prime time soap operas on Indian television. An anthropological insight into social issues and practices of contemporary India through the television, this volume analyzes the production of soaps within India's cultural fabric. It deconstructs themes and issues surrounding the "everyday" and the "middle class" through the fiction of the "popular".

In its second edition, this still remains the only book to examine prime time soap operas on Indian television. Without in any way changing the central arguments of the first edition, it adds an essential introductory chapter tracking the tectonic shifts in the Indian "mediascape" over the past decade – including how the explosion of regional language channels and an era of multiple screens have changed soap viewing forever.

Meticulously researched and persuasively argued, the book traces how prime time soaps in India still grab the maximum eyeballs and remain the biggest earners for TV channels. The book will be of interest to students of anthropology and sociology, media and cultural studies, visual culture studies, gender and family studies, and also Asian studies in general. It is also an important resource for media producers, both in content production and television channels, as well as for the general reader.

Shoma Munshi is Research Scholar and former Professor of Anthropology at the American University of Kuwait (AUK) and Senior Research Partner at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Ethnic and Religious Diversity, Göttingen, Germany. She is the author of the first edition of *Prime Time Soap Operas on Indian Television* (2010) and *Remote Control: Indian Television in the New Millennium* (2012), as well as editor of *Images of the 'Modern Woman' in Asia: Global Media, Local Meanings* (2001) and co-editor of *Media, War and Terrorism: Responses from the Middle East and Asia* (2004, second edition 2007), in addition to authoring several articles in refereed journals. Munshi has earlier worked at Delhi University, University of Amsterdam, University of Pennsylvania, and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), New Delhi, India.

“Shoma Munshi has crafted a sophisticated, theoretically penetrating, and richly informed account of Indian soap operas in the first decades of the twenty-first century. The second edition adds an essential introductory update in one of the world’s largest television markets. Munshi fuses scholarship and elegance in an extremely accessible narrative. It still remains the only book to cover this topic in the Indian context, thereby setting a milestone. It will be an indispensable benchmark for all future studies of Indian television and of similar television industries worldwide; and it will interest media scholars, anthropologists, sociologists of culture, and the curious general read.”

–Peter van der Veer, *Director, Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity, Göttingen, Germany*

“The original edition of this breakthrough book placed Indian ‘soap’ operas on a cultural map previously limited to their U.S. and British counterparts. Indian prime time soaps foreground women and their changing family and gender roles. The introduction to this new edition takes account of how both the soaps and the media through which they appear have dramatically transformed audiences over the past decade and have equally been transformed by their audiences. The soaps now appear in regional languages, increasingly viewed not only through TV but also mobile telephones, tablets, and computers. Claude Lévi-Strauss would have said that *Prime Time Soap Operas* is good to think with, and it firmly links media studies in India to the main currents of social thought elsewhere.”

–Dale F. Eickelman, *Ralph and Richard Lazarus Professor of Anthropology and Human Relations Emeritus, Dartmouth College, USA*

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Shoma Munshi

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AND MY SISTER, POROMA MUNSHI REBELLO

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Star Jalsha is just one of Star India's regional branches.

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0.2 Promo for *Irabotir Chupkotha* xlvi

Visuals from *Kasautii Zindagi Ke*

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INTRODUCTION TO THE SECOND EDITION

First published in 2010, this book still remains the *only full-length book* to examine this particular genre of popular culture – prime time soap operas on Indian television.

The first edition covered the time period of the *first prime time soaps* from the year 2000–2010. Ekta Kapoor’s Balaji Telefilms was the only game in town, with her now-iconic *Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi* (Because the Mother in-Law Was Once a Daughter-in-Law, henceforth *Kyunki*, Star Plus, 2000–2008) which helped, in no small measure, launch Smriti Irani’s political career; *Kahaani Ghar Ghar Ki* (The Story of Every Home, henceforth *Kahaani*, Star Plus, 2000–2008) which made Sakshi Tanwar’s Parvati a household name; and *Kasautii Zindagi Kay* (The Trials of Life, henceforth *Kasautii*, Star Plus, 2001–2008) which Balaji relaunched in 2018, for the millennial generation unfamiliar with Anurag-Prerna’s love story. The book also dealt with those two popular soaps that stopped the Balaji juggernaut after their unprecedented runs of seven to eight years. They were *Saat Phere: Saloni Ka Safar* (Seven Circles of the Sacred Marriage Fire: Saloni’s Journey, henceforth *Saat Phere*) produced by Sunjoy and Comall Waddhwa’s Sphere Origins Multivision Pvt Ltd (Zee TV, 2005–2009); and *Sapna Babul Ka: Bidaai* (A Daughter’s Departure from Her Natal Home after Marriage: A Father’s Dream, henceforth *Bidaai*) produced by Rajan Shahi’s Director’s Kut (Star Plus, 2007–2010).

Serendipitously, by the time the book went to press, Balaji Telefilms’ so-called “K” soaps (because all their titles started with the letter “K” at the time) from the Balaji factory had wound up – either due to channel pressure, or because the narratives had run their course.

A lot has changed in the world of prime time soap operas since the first edition was published in 2010. Penguin India in 2012 published my *Remote Control: Indian Television in the New Millennium*, which examined three kinds of programming – 24×7 news, soap operas, and reality shows. In this book, although soap operas received the lion’s share of space, they still were only part of a bigger television picture. So when Routledge decided

to launch a second edition of this book, an updated introductory chapter was essential. Let me state at the outset that the original book is not being rewritten in any way because that deals with a specific period of time in India's media history.

This introductory chapter will provide some brief yet much-needed context to the tectonic shifts that have occurred in Indian television. I touch upon many elements of changes that have taken place. Some of them would easily warrant the word limit of a journal article, but I cannot go into minute detail about them in an overview introductory chapter. Suffice it to say that I provide the context for them, albeit briefly.

Santosh Desai, the well-known social commentator, is right in noting that

no other force has influenced change in India as much as its media. Bursting with chaotic energy, Indian media has in the last decade or so exploded in scale and mutated into a complex phenomenon of sweeping power . . . it mirrors, magnifies and distorts . . . no reading of India is meaningful without an examination of the role played by the media.

(2007: 285)

It is always an uphill task to make sense of industrial and governance changes as they occur, but we cannot hesitate too long because we risk losing some of the insights that occur during an important transitional period. Many voices – including industry stalwarts whom I met during fieldwork – predicted the “death” of television, and in particular soap operas, as we know them. Yet they still persist, and soap operas (generally referred to as serials or mega-serials in India) *still* remain a television channel's chief earner and remain “the lifeblood of the schedule” (Hobson 2003: 39).

But yes, arguably, television has been revolutionized insofar as distribution and screen technologies are concerned. (cf. Lotz 2014, 2017a, 2017b. For television's digital transformations, see also Spigel and Olsson 2004; Bennett and Strange 2011; Murphy 2011; Lobato 2019. See also Kevin Kelly 2017. In his latest book, the founding editor of *Wired* magazine discusses in detail the technological convergence between communication and computation.)

In his latest book, *The Inevitable: Understanding the 12 Technological Forces That Will Shape Our Future* (Penguin, 2017), Kelly writes that since the early 1980s, “when computers married phones and melded into a robust hybrid. . . [T]he internet/web/mobile system has moved . . . to the center stage of our modern global society” (p. 2). Kelly gives examples from North America of the “inevitability” of the “momentum of an ongoing

technological shift” but readily admits that he could “easily have found a corresponding example in India, Mali, Peru, or Estonia” (ibid, p. 4).

Contextualizing such transformations for India, it is, *first*, a “screen revolution” that has “occurred over multiple screens,” as LV Krishnan, CEO of Television Audience Measurement (TAM) Media Research, puts it. LV further added: “as internet becomes faster and cheaper in the country, the smart-phone is going to become the dominant screen for many Indians, especially the young people from the ages of 15–35, most of whom live in single-TV households.”

The launch of “Digital India” on 1 July 2015 by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, then in his first term as the Prime Minister of India, hugely speeded up this process¹ (see also Block 2019), which had been set into motion in the 1980s by late Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, who had dreams of taking India into the twenty-first century.

Thus, even though most households in India still remain a single TV set-owning household, the mobile phone with its Internet access changed everything forever. And no one has captured this market better than Mukesh Ambani’s Reliance Jio network, with its cheap telephone bills. By offering services at practically no cost – and at first for free – Ambani’s claim of democratizing the digital culture in India rings true.² In a niftily titled article, “The Future of Indian Television Lies Between *Naagin* and *Narcos*,” Diksha Madhok (2017) notes that

[A] survey of 1,000 Reliance Jio customers by Bank of America Merrill Lynch showed that nearly 75% of the respondents used the free and fast data to download video. As a result, young Indians no longer have to watch what they did on their family TV whose remote controls were with their grandmothers.

By February 2019, it was estimated that there were currently 1.17 billion mobile phone subscriptions in India, an increase of roughly 140 million subscriptions since August 2016 – the month before billionaire businessman Mukesh Ambani’s Reliance Jio mobile network was launched (Block, ibid). Writing in *cnbc.com* in July 2018, Manish Singh noted that

The months that followed its launch brought tens of millions of new users to the internet, and changed the way many consumed data. Thrifty Indians, once extremely conscious about each megabyte they burned on the web, are now reportedly clocking 1.5 million terabytes of data each month.

This competition was expected to get even more intense with the expected launch of Reliance’s JioGigaFiber service in August 2019, which will

disrupt the broadband space the way Jio did the mobile broadband segment in India. With Jio GigaFiber, Reliance customers will get ultra-high-speed internet speeds up to 1Gbps. The broadband service is accompanied by smart home solutions, 4K and HD content support, and more. The company also has plans for a JioGigaTV for high-resolution video conferencing. . . . The triple-service package will be available for as low as Rs 600 per month.³

(Kul Bhushan, *Hindustan Times*, 2019)

Even before this expected launch to notch up the competition, the price war that the launch of Reliance's Jio had already started was emphasized by everyone I interviewed during my fieldwork. Well-known social commentator Santosh Desai said "thanks to Jio, and their almost free data, suddenly the Internet which was out of reach . . . now exploded . . . because Jio was available at a pittance." Sani Ghose Ray of Acropoliiis Entertainment perhaps put it best when he said that "after Reliance's Jio launch, a window was opened by which everybody could now see the world," and he termed it an "intrusion of technology on an everyday basis."

A *second* transformative change in India, then, is what Amanda Lotz describes as "internet-distributed television," which is able to do new things – particularly allow different people to watch different shows chosen from a library of possibilities. This technological ability consequently allows new audience behaviors and new norms in making television (Lotz 2017a; see also Lotz 2017c). Indeed, as Ramon Lobato, in his timely study of the Netflix phenomenon reminds us,

Internet distribution of television content changes the fundamental logics through which television travels, introducing new mobilities and immobilities into the system, adding another layer to the existing palimpsest of broadcast, cable, and satellite distribution. Internet television does not replace legacy television in a straightforward way; instead it adds new complexity to the geography of distribution.

(Lobato 2019: 5)

Hotstar, launched by Rupert Murdoch's Star India in 2015, quickly became one of the country's most popular streaming apps because it foresaw that the second screen in Indian households would be a smartphone. Increasingly, the first screen will be, too.

India's streaming market is dominated by local players. Almost all the people I met and interviewed during my fieldwork noted that sporting events – especially cricket – and local content are crucial in bringing new users to video platforms and then keeping them online, two areas where

international giants are struggling. Hotstar, for example, owns streaming rights to the vast majority of cricket tournaments played in India and by the Indian cricket team. Notes Lata Joshi of the recently concluded World Cup cricket tournament held in England in the summer of 2019:

Sunday's [14 July 2019] ICC World Cup final between England and New Zealand proved that cricket is a religion in India. . . . Hotstar registered a massive 25.3 million concurrent viewers for the India versus New Zealand semi-final match earlier last week, the company said in a statement. The nail-biting game that India finally lost shattered Hotstar's own previous world record of 18.6 million set during the VIVO IPL 2019 final. Hotstar also witnessed an increase of 15 million concurrent viewers across multiple matches through the ICC Cricket World Cup.

Writing on *cnbc.com* in July 2018, Manish Singh notes that the streaming market "is proving to be a tough nut to crack for American tech giants Netflix and Amazon." One of the reasons for this is that by the time the US companies entered the Indian market, it was already overcrowded. Currently, India has about 40 OTT (over the top) streaming platforms. Rupert Murdoch's Star TV's Hotstar is the most subscribed one. Singh further comments that

Hotstar had about 70 percent of the on-demand local streaming services market in 2018, according to estimates by research firm Jana. It has 150 million monthly active users, whereas the American giant Netflix, by contrast, has fewer than one million subscribers in the country, according to industry estimates. . . . [M]any of those services are owned by local television networks and production houses.

Balaji Telefilms, known for producing some of the most watched family TV shows in India, "has amassed over 2.5 million paying customers on ALT Balaji, a streaming service it launched last year" (*ibid.*). Other popular OTT local services include Reliance Jio-owned Jio Cinema and Jio TV; Sony India's Sony LIV; Zee TV's Zee 5; Viacom 18 owned Voot; Eros Now from the Bollywood studio Eros; and Amazon Prime Video. Netflix now commissions original content in India. Other players include the Rajiv Mehra-founded Addatimes in 2016, a Bengali-language web portal that creates original web series, short films, and music videos. Launched in 2017, Hoichoi is an on-demand video streaming platform owned and maintained by Shree Venkatesh Films (SVF). Hoichoi is the first dedicated Bengali OTT service in India. It also has dubbed content from Hindi, English, and Arabic and is entering the Bangladesh and United Arab Emirates markets, where there are sizeable Bengali-speaking populations. Their aim is to reach the 250 million Bengali diaspora worldwide. In South India, TVF and Y films have been

major players in OTT content since 2012. In 2016, Zee 5 streamed the first-ever Telugu web series, “Muddappu Avakai.” Hotstar and Sun NXT are also entering the South Indian regional market. “Malayalam and Kannada channels too are slowly picking up the trend,” writes Nitya Chandran in *Outlook India* in June 2019, and continues: “[S]ince regional web series is a developing phenomenon down South, state-based and sometimes national brands don’t hesitate in associating with them. It’s a niche audience, which also includes NRIs [non-resident Indians], (and which) promises an added advantage in viewership sustenance.”

Third, the main reason for viewers shifting to web series is the phenomenal rise in mobile video streaming in India – “nearly 200 per cent over the past two years, the highest in 10 countries tracked in a report by App Annie,” notes Lachmi Deb Roy in a recent article in *Outlook India* (2019).

Fourth, the much lower subscription rates have also helped local OTT platforms penetrate deep into semi-urban and rural India. Reportedly, while Netflix charges Rs 599 a month, Hotstar comes for a monthly rate of Rs 299. Ekta Kapoor’s ALT Balaji, known mainly for its adult series, charges as low as Rs 100 for three months. As Roy (ibid) notes: “People with smartphones/tabs and mobile data can now watch whatever, wherever, whenever they want to.” Actress Tisca Chopra is on record saying, “Kids are watching their stuff on their phones or tablets while parents hog the TV screen or vice versa” (ibid). Another interesting point is that shows (with some exceptions) which fall out of favor with television audiences are watched online. “We are seeing maximum traction from reality tent pole properties like *Bigg Boss*, *MTV Splitsvilla* and *MTV Roadies* (among others),” says Gaurav Gandhi, COO, Viacom 18 Digital Ventures (Rediff.com 2017).

Linked with streaming services is an important and perhaps (un)intended development. *Fifth*, well-known stars of soap operas now also act in OTT platforms. Examples abound. The successful pairing of Ram Kapoor and Sakshi Tanwar in *Bade Acche Lagte Hain* (This Is So Liked, Sony, 2011–2014) have transitioned into successful streaming in ALT Balaji’s *Karrle Tu Bhi Mohabbat* (Go Ahead, You Too Fall in Love, three seasons, 2017 onwards); Vikram Chatterjee has acted in Hoichoi’s *Khoj* (The Search, 2017). Even successful Bollywood film actors regularly act in streaming series or films now – for example, Rajkumar Rao in ALT Balaji’s *Bose: Dead/Alive* (2017); Radhika Apte, Bhumi Pednekar, Vicky Kaushal, and others in Netflix’s *Lust Stories* (2018), Saif Ali Khan and Nawazuddin Siddiqui in Netflix’s original content for India *Sacred Games* (two seasons, 2018) . . . the list is a long one.

Consequently, and *sixth*, as Lachmi Deb Roy notes:

The vast canvas – gangster, romcom, spy thriller, horror, adult shows – has opened up a whole new world not just for actors, but also for the

Indian audience. *With web series being made in regional languages and in different genres, actors are spoilt for choice, as are viewers.*

(ibid, emphasis mine)

This is also why OTT platforms are strongly resistant to any government proposal of a censorship mechanism for regulating content – mainly adult themes and strong language. Web series makers feel the medium is thriving because it is not bound by such shackles.

A recent article titled “A Global Timepass Economy: How the Pursuit of Leisure Drives Internet Use,” in *The Economist* (8 June 2019: 23–26), notes how rural women in Madhogarh village in the state of Rajasthan in India, who had

no particular interest in this internet thing . . . [but] liked the idea of learning something new . . . [first learnt] how to turn [a smartphone] on and off . . . [and] once they had mastered that, they got down to the essentials: “How to take a selfie, WhatsApp, Facebook, YouTube, how to search.” That was in September 2016, when nobody in the villages had a phone. “Now everybody has one,” says [a school teacher] Ms [Indra] Sharma of Madhogarh. “You see old people walking around watching ‘Mahabharat’,” a television series based on a Hindu mythological epic. Down the road from her home three men sit in the shade of a rohida tree, playing a game of ludo on one of their phones.

Following from and linked with the previous point is the *seventh*: that the consumers and consumption of television itself have changed. Television itself is now watched differently. “[Technology] has united the entire world into one global audience but the more technology has changed, and spread, the more it has splintered us: today, no two people necessarily watch the same content in the same room” (Bajpai 2016).

Conversations with my students stressed this point like no other. They watch television in the most varied and interesting ways. Just like with my students at the American University of Kuwait (AUK), a section of people in India now also watch television on multiple screens – on their mobile telephones, on their computers, or streaming via a plug and play dongle device such as the Amazon Fire Stick. Annette Hill employs the useful term of “roaming audiences” as “a metaphor that captures the dynamic practices of people as they experience storytelling that takes place across dispersed sites of production, distribution and reception” (2019: 1).

Just one example in India is how, nowadays, a number of people watch a soap opera’s new episode at 6 am on the streaming platform of the particular TV channel on their smartphones – the same soap that is broadcast on conventional TV screens in the evening. These people then post parts

of the episode online in various fora such as fan clubs of shows, and even tag the lead actors online. I am not on social media (except messaging on WhatsApp), yet I created an account on Instagram without a single posting and was able to watch large portions of daily episodes of soaps (which at times are not accessible in the Middle East), including interviews with the stars I would otherwise not even have had access to! So in a way, a simple Instagram account became a rich source of original data for me. This was not the case when I was working on the first edition of this book ten years ago. This underlines the point Santosh Desai made when I met him that “what digital does is more interesting . . . it is a more decentralized form of entertainment . . . more personal.” Thus, Kevin Kelly is right when he notes

[O]nly by working with these technologies, rather than trying to thwart them, can we gain the best of what they have to offer . . . we can do them only with deep engagement, firsthand experience, and a vigilant acceptance . . . *these technologies are not going away. Change is inevitable.*

(Kelly 2017, op. cit, p 5, emphasis mine)

The question then arises whether web series are the future of entertainment in India. The projected numbers seem to point in that direction. India is set to be among the world’s top 10 OTT video markets by 2020, with revenue of around Rs 5,595 crores.⁴ And as noted before, there are big international as well as national players around. Ali Hussein, CEO of Eros Now, makes the important point however that

the demographic profile of OTT viewership ranges from 18 to 35 years, and that band comprises two segments: 18 to 24 years and 24 to 35 years. *Television and OTT target two different demographic audiences . . . the older population will start reducing over time, and video viewing is going to go up drastically through mobile distribution and cheaper data.*

(quoted in Roy 2019, op. cit., emphasis mine)

Which brings us to our *eighth* point: that despite the explosion and intrusion of OTT platforms, most Indian households – at least at the time of writing – still remain single TV set-owning households, where general entertainment channels (GECs) even now attract the maximum eyeballs. As of 3 July 2019, TAM (Television Audience Measurement) Media Research notes that there are 900 television channels in India, of which 171 are GECs.⁵ Of these, the largest number of GECs are Hindi, clocking in at 35. This is followed by the four South Indian language GECs – Tamil, 25; Telugu, 18; Malayalam, 16; and Kannada, 14. English GECs number 13, followed by Bengali, 12, and Marathi, 11.⁶

Ninth, and consequently, we see a dramatic increase in the reach of television. Apart from Hindi GECs, which were at the forefront in 2000, there has since been a veritable explosion of GECs in regional languages. The daily newspaper *Business Standard* noted in 2018 that

[O]ver the past few years, entertainment networks have upped the ante on their regional presence, and three out of the four major broadcasters in the country have channels in multiple Indian languages. While Bengali and Marathi GECs are part of all the leading GEC broadcasters' bouquet, players are going about tapping the south Indian language markets in a phased manner.

(Malvania 2018)

A note here: in studying regional markets, I concentrated on Bengal for a few reasons: one, Bengali is my mother tongue, and rather than becoming “lost in translation” in South India (another huge regional market), or elsewhere, I focused on an area where I read, write, and speak the language. Two, Bengal is a huge market. Partho Dasgupta, the CEO of Broadcast Audience Research Council (BARC) India, notes that 2018 saw the increase in regional channels and viewership. Dasgupta writes, “Bangla grew 13 per cent dominated by Movies (up 20 per cent) and GEC (up 12 per cent). Interestingly, even Bangla language HD Channels saw a 30 per cent growth in the year” (BARC India website, n.d.).

Moving on, a *tenth* point is that viewership data that was tracked earlier by TAM Media Research, when I wrote the first edition, started being tracked by the Broadcast Audience Research Council (BARC) India, a joint venture founded in 2012 by stakeholder bodies representing broadcasters, advertisers, and advertising and media agencies. With sizable resources from this three-way alliance, BARC India started rolling out ratings from April 2015. BARC India audience measurement reached deeper into Tier II and Tier III towns and, most importantly, rural India than TAM India had. On 23 October 2015, BARC India's website, on its “Announcements” page, noted as follows:

With the release of the All India data, BARC India has expanded its reach to 153.5 million TV households, representing All India and all modes of signal. Of this 77.5 million are urban TV households and 76 million are rural TV households. BARC India will now be reporting Megacities, 10–75 lakh (1 lakh equals 100,000) towns, less than 10 lakh urban areas and rural.

BARC India's “Across Genres” listing has the Tamil GEC Sun TV and Enterr 10 Television-owned Dangal TV fight it out for the top spots (except

of course when the Cricket World Cup is being played, as I write, in July 2019). Other leading GECs such as Zee TV, Star Plus, Colors, and Sony go up and down the ranking charts (BARC India Weekly Data, 15 June–21 June 2019).

The latest Ernst & Young Report of 2019 on the media and entertainment (M&E) sector of India, in its section on television, notes in its “Key Messages” that

the number of private satellite channels increased to 885, of which 43% were classified as news channels. . . . TV viewing households increased to 197 million, TV penetration increased to 66% in 2018 from 64% in 2016, 88% of these television homes were digitized.
(p 28)

Most importantly, the same report notes that

[C]ontent went interactive and time spent increased – total time spent increased to 3 hours 46 minutes per day, 77% of time spent on television was on escapism (GEC and film channels). . . . Jio, Sony, Star, Zee, Viacom 18, Television 18, and Netflix, amongst others, enabled interactivity with their viewers.
(ibid, emphasis mine)

Eleventh, therefore, regardless of the bouquet of shows on offer, GECs still rule the roost and soap operas remain, as noted earlier, “the lifeblood of the schedule” (Hobson 2003: 39). GECs in India offer “fiction” – as soap operas are often termed – for at least five to six days of the week; and some GECs offer nonfiction on all seven days of the week. What Dorothy Hobson noted back in 2003 still holds true today:

Whilst it has always been recognized that soap opera is needed to bring and retain audiences for a channel, its role in a more competitive multi-channel era has and will become even more important. Soaps are essential to broadcasters. They are the lifeblood of the schedule.
(ibid)

The head of drama series for the BBC underlined the importance of soap operas when he said in 1999 that

Channel Controllers love them. So do the advertisers and the schedulers. They’re often referred to by a channel as the flagship programme. A show that can define and identify that channel and its viewers. A good quality soap can serve as a great entry point for

the viewers, when coming to a channel. They can be drawn to other programming that they would not normally sample.

(quoted in Hobson, *op. cit.*, pp. 39–40)

That is why, for example, when the Bengali regional channel Star Jalsha on 10 June 2019 launched *Sreemoyee*, telling the story of a hardworking, self-sacrificing homemaker whose family does not appreciate her – a story that finds resonance among large numbers of women in India – it unsurprisingly started pulling in high TRPs (television rating points) from the get-go. This is also due, in no small measure, to the story-telling capabilities of the immensely gifted Leena Gangopadhyay, the czarina of Bengali television, who is often likened to Balaji Telefilm’s Ekta Kapoor; as well as the acting skills of its experienced heroine, Indrani Halder. *Sreemoyee* in fact managed to dislodge the double digit TRPs of Tent Cinema’s undefeated one-year-on-air *Krishnakoli* (Flower of Lord Krishna, Zee Bangla, October 2018–present) in November 2019, a feat that was not possible for Star Jalsha’s two earlier productions in the same time slot – Magic Moments’ *Sanyasi Raja* (Monk King) and Acropoliis Entertainment’s *Irabotir Chupkotha* (Iraboti’s Secrets).⁷ Audiences who start their evening viewing with *Sreemoyee* tend towards “stickiness” with Star Jalsha soaps thereafter. This is proved by the fact that *Sreemoyee* is immediately followed by Boyhood Productions’ so-far unbeaten *Ke Apon Ke Por* (Who is One’s Own and Who is Not), currently three and a half years on air, which is scripted by the energetic and successful Susanta Das. The above underlines a TV channel’s strategic programmatic thinking as to which shows have to compete against each other in the same time slot.

Moving on to the heroes of soap operas now brings us to my *twelfth* point. Creating heroes as fantasy figures is something the legendary American producer-writer Shonda Rhimes knows a thing or two about. She designed the role for Dr Derek Shepherd, played by Patrick Dempsey, on the hugely successful prime time series medical drama *Grey’s Anatomy* (2005–present, ABC). The moniker “McDreamy” was used for the neurosurgeon character. “‘He was designed as a succulent morsel for women to feast upon,’ Rhimes explained to [a] reporter, so ‘we can stare at our televisions, turn to our boyfriends, and say, ‘Why don’t you talk to me like that?’” (Press 2018: 116).

In the Indian context, “McDreamy” can be applied to a few television heroes who gather a female fan following very fast. The first edition of this book in fact noted the popularity of the role essayed by Ronit Bose Roy as Mr Rishabh Bajaj (or simply “Mr Bajaj” as he was referred to) in *Kasautii*. What started as a three-month cameo lengthened into a three-year role. *Balika Vadhu*’s adult Jagdish Bhairon Singh (or Jagya as he was called) launched the career of Shashank Vyas, while Siddharth Shukla’s portrayal of the bureaucrat collector proved Vyas’ worthy opponent. My ethnographic

research in those years demonstrated how they had brought in a long missing “swoon” factor on daily soaps (cf. Munshi 2012).

On Bengali GECs today, this honor rests currently with a few actors. First must undoubtedly come the suave and charming Vikram Chatterjee who has had a long innings. Listed as “The Most Desirable Man on TV for 2018” (and also in 2017) by *Calcutta Times*, the entertainment section of the daily newspaper *Times of India*, Chatterjee has a huge female fan base. An accomplished film actor as well, Chatterjee told me “although I have done 14 films to date, [including Magic Moments-produced] *Khoj*, and *Saheb, Bibi Golam* on Netflix . . . still, television has given me everything.” He is perhaps best known for his role in the Leena Gangopadhyay scripted soap opera *Ich-chenodi* (A Wish Fulfilling River, Star Jalsha, 2015–2017), and the recently concluded *Phagun Bou* on Star Jalsha (2018–19),⁸ also scripted by Gangopadhyay. Says Chatterjee, “If people love a particular face on TV, they will come back for that ‘face’. . . . TV has given me much more love, more success [than films]. . . . Stars on TV have their own contribution.”

Based on ethnographic audience research with women in Kolkata and Delhi, as well as Kuwait and Dubai (which would end up being another book altogether!) about current soap heroes’ “swoon McDreamy” factor, the list also includes Neel Bhattacharya, the young fresh-faced hero of *Krishnakoli*, who debuted in Star Jalsha’s *Thik Jeno Love Story* (Just Like A Love Story) in 2014, followed by even greater success with *Stree* (Wife, Zee Bangla, 2016–2018) and a film, *Chitra* (2015, director: Abhigyan Mukherjee). Bhattacharya has a huge female fan following and is followed on his Instagram page by leading Bengali film directors as well. Another actor who audiences and colleagues alike feel should grace the big screen and who has garnered a vast female fan following in a short time is newcomer Syed Arefin, currently essaying the lead role of nonresident Indian (NRI) businessman Akash Chatterjee in *Irabotir Chupkotha*. A former model, Syed is tall, always mindful of his sartorial getup, and obsessively passionate about acting. When I asked Syed if he was enjoying all the attention, he smiled shyly and responded, “This is what I always wanted. . . . I love being a star . . . I am happy with the fact that people know me now. . . . I want everyone’s blessings for doing even bigger things.”

There have been other heroes in the past as well who women have found attractive, notably Rishi Kaushik, who has set many a heart aflutter, first as Ujan Chatterjee in *Ekhane Akash Neel*⁹ (Here, the Sky Is Blue, Star Jalsha, 2008–2010); then as Ronodeep, an IPS officer almost always clad in his khaki uniform, in *Kusum Dola* (loosely, the swaying of flowers, Star Jalsha, 2016–2018); and since January 2020, as Ankur Banerjee in *Kora Pakhi* (Kora Bird) on Star Jalsha. TV and film director Anindo Banerjee recounted to me how a group of young high school girls had come to the sets to meet Rishi Kaushik, but merely upon seeing him, they told him to go away because they couldn’t believe their eyes at seeing him in person, and one of them fainted!

Rishi Kaushik joined the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in Bengal on 18 July 2019 along with a host of other television and film stars, just as film stars Nusrat Jahan and Mimi Chakraborty contested and won Lok Sabha seats as candidates from Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee's Trinamool Congress in the national elections in 2019.

Producer-director-writer Snehasish Chakraborty has in fact gone one step further. He is the only one in Bengal – and dare I say in India as well – who makes what he termed “hero-centric” soap operas. When we met, he mused rhetorically “*shotti ki chheleder golpo kora jai na serials e?*” (“Can we really not tell stories about men in serials?”). Chakraborty's productions have always had heroes as the central protagonists – for instance, the eponymous *Khokababu*; *Bhojo Gobindo*; *Tekka, Raja, Badshah*; and currently *Hridoyharan*. Apart from being able to give birth, Bhojo of *Bhojo Gobindo* was able to cook, sew, clean, plait his wife's hair . . . the whole nine yards. Khoka of *Khokababu* was this gentle giant of a man who managed to always keep peace between his wife and mother and worried that people flying kites should not use powdered glass to sharpen the strings held to fly kites in order to cut down opposing kites because it caused birds accidentally hitting such sharpened strings to bleed; as he asked, “*payera der ki betha lage na?*” (“don't pigeons feel pain?”). According to Chakraborty, after Khoka's request made it on prime time TV, the incidence of using powdered glass to sharpen kite strings declined dramatically.

Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose (the more things change, the more they stay the same). So while some things might change, the obsession with fair skin remains a constant in India;¹⁰ and soaps dealing with such themes are successful. Which brings us to my *thirteenth* point: in 2007, when Zee TV gave Sunjoy Waddhwa of Sphere Origins a one-line brief that they wanted “to tap into an existing social concern, [so Zee asked for] *ek kali ladki ki kahaani* (a dark-skinned girl's story),” Waddhwa said he realized that “whether one subscribes to it or not, the color factor exists in India.” In making *Saat Pher*, Waddhwa decided that “*pehle aap samasya dikhaiye, aur phir uska samadhan*” (“first show the problem, and then its resolution”). Waddhwa said that “Saloni started off as an underdog, but see how she has come up in life . . . now she has a perfect marriage, a good husband, a loving family.” Star Plus screened Rajan Shahi's *Bidaai*, where the dark-skinned sister Ragini faced discrimination due to her complexion. Producer-director Rajan Shahi told me “Let's face it, skin color is still an issue in India. But we have handled this theme in a sensitive way” (see Munshi, first edition, pp 144–46). On Bengali GECs, it is difficult (although not entirely impossible) to destabilize *Krishnakoli* (as mentioned earlier), recounting, as it does, the classic underdog story of a dark-skinned girl, who, despite her many talents, has to negotiate a rocky path to gain the affection of her husband and her in-laws. The heroine Shyama's journey in *Krishnakoli*¹¹ is similar to the story of Ragini in *Bidaai* and, to some extent, Saloni in *Saat Pher*.

Unsurprisingly, therefore, Sunjoy Waddhwa and Rajan Shahi's voices are echoed a decade down the line by producer-director Susanta Das' successful *Krishnakoli* on Zee Bangla, on air since 2018, and the only soap pulling in double-digit TRPs on a regular basis. Susanta Das told me "We are still obsessed with fair skin. That's why fairness creams are in such high demand. With this mega-serial, we wanted to break the notion that a girl should only be judged by her complexion."

Fourteenth is the manner in which television soaps are watched in India. Both content producers and executives in television channels note that it is a "unique situation." Overseas, particularly in the US, there are season breaks before a show returns. In India, there are no season breaks. "People watch soaps every day of the year . . . it is a unique situation where the characters become a part of your family. The experience of viewing is completely different in India, you watch without a break, they are one's daily *dal-chawal* [lentils and rice, often a staple diet in India], says producer-director Rajan Shahi."

Linked to this is the *fifteenth* point. GECs now count 5 pm–11 pm as prime time slots, whereas earlier it used to be 8 pm–11 pm. Within this, too, different markets have different imperatives. For instance, the South has an earlier prime time than the Hindi market and has more viewership in the morning time band than Hindi GECs. Also, some soaps are broadcast every day of the week.

Sixteenth, at the time I worked on the first edition, soap operas were set mainly in urban areas. But with television audience measurement reaching the smaller towns and rural areas, where advertising inevitably followed, soap stories started being set in these areas for a few years. So sisters Sadhna and Ragini lived in Agra (*Bidaai*); the child bride Anandi's story was set in the Jaitsar village in Rajasthan (*Balika Vadhu*); *Na Aana Iss Des Laado* (Don't Come to This Land, Darling Daughter, 2009–2012, Colors) and *Maryada* (Honor, 2010–2012, Star Plus) were set in Haryana; *Pratigya* (Vow, 2009–2012, Star Plus) was set in Allahabad in Uttar Pradesh; *Agle Janam Mohe Bitiya Hi Kijo* (Make Me A Daughter in My Next Life Too, 2009–2011, Zee), *Bhagya Vidhata* (Creator of Fate, 2009–2011, Colors), and *Afsar Bitiya* (Officer Daughter, 2011–2012, Zee) were set in Bihar. Now, prime time soaps divide their narratives equally between the big cities and smaller towns, catering to every taste.

Seventeenth, the focus on a wider viewership has inevitably meant that there is demand for a spectrum of new content. *Saat Phere* and *Bidaai* dealt with the experiences of fair and dark-skinned girls; *Balika Vadhu*, with child marriage; *Yeh Rishta Kya Kehlata Hai* (What Is This Relationship Called, Star Plus 2008–present), *Bade Achhe Lagte Hain* (This Is So Nice, Sony, 2011–2014), and *Parichay* (Introduction, 2011–2013, Colors), with falling in love with one's husband after an arranged marriage and negotiating the new terrain of the in-laws' house; and *Na Aana Is Des Laado*, with female foeticide. *Uttaran* (Hand Me-Downs, 2008–2015, Colors), was a

story about the haves and have-nots; *Agle Janam Mohe Bitiya Hi Kijo*, was about the practice of selling off young girls in marriage to ward off poverty; *Pratigya*, was about an educated girl forced to marry into a rich but illiterate family; and *Saas Bina Sasural* (An In-Law's House Without a Mother-in-Law, 2010–2012, Sony), was a young girl married into a family where there are no women around; *Kuchh Toh Log Kahenge* (People Will Always Talk, 2011–2013, Sony), dealt with an older man and a much younger woman's love affair; and *Maryada*, dealt with illicit relationships, and even homosexuality (Star Plus). *Afsar Bitiya* and *Hitler Didi* ('Didi' refers to elder sister, 2011–2013, Zee), both were about a young girl's mission to look after her family; *Silsila Badalte Rishton Ka* (The Story of Changing Relationships, 2018–2019, Colors/Voot) dealt with marital infidelity and domestic abuse. *Shakti: Astitva Ke Ehsaas Ki* (Strength: Feeling of Being, 2016 – ongoing, Colors) dealt with an intersex heroine; and *Udaan* (Flight, 2014–2019, Colors) was about bonded labor. Similarly, among Bengali soaps too, *Bokul Kotha* (The Story of Bokul, 2017–2020, Zee Bangla) told the story of a tom-boyish girl who shoulders family responsibility; while *Ichche Nodi* told the story of sibling rivalry set within a love triangle; and so on.

Eighteenth, unlike soap operas at the turn of the century, which remained on air for seven to eight years, soaps nowadays no longer run beyond two years. Three years is a record of sorts! Among Hindi soaps, *Kyunki* and *Kahaani* were on air for eight years; *Kasautii* was on air for seven years; *Balika Vadhu* (Child Bride) was also on air for eight years, virtually launching Viacom 18's channel Colors. Director's Kut produced *Yeh Rishta Kya Kehlata Hai* on Star Plus is the record holder, having first aired in January 2009 and still on air 10 years on. Among Bengali soaps, Boyhood Productions' *Ke Apon Ke Por* (Who's One's Own and Who's A Stranger) is now in its fourth year on Star Jalsha and has consistently managed to remain in the Top 5 of All-India rankings, no mean feat. Generally speaking, however, the usual run is one to two years, and some get taken off air even in a few months' time.

This brings us to the *nineteenth* point. In soaps that do not last beyond a couple of years, there is a glaring lack of multiple narratives – which is commonly understood to be a characteristic of soap operas that, theoretically, have no end. Production houses and channels give various reasons for this. In a fiercely competitive industry, the demand for grabbing eyeballs reigns supreme from Day One. Consequently, there is a fear that TRPs will drop if the track – or indeed, even the camera! – moves away from the lead pair of any soap. Thus, when “measurement (of TRPs) is second by second,” as Santosh Desai told me, “people go away. . . . They go in and out.” Desai did work with Star, and his research data showed that

people generally don't watch end-to-end episode, even during the program. This explains the anxiety that channels have . . . if there

are peaks and troughs, channels lose. . . . It's like a dopamine hit, with audiences forever seeking hits . . . thus, a normal rhythm can never be built up . . . viewers are impatient, they don't wait for a high to happen because they leave at the first low.

This explains why, when I was at a production house, a channel (both house and channel shall remain unnamed) called to ask the creative head why the camera had moved away from the lead pair and stayed on the expressions of the ensemble cast for 1 minute 42 seconds!

Twentieth, this has an unintended fallout in that audiences do not identify with characters as much as they did in earlier soaps. There are few Tulsis (*Kyunki*) and Parvatis (*Kahaani*) on the small screen today. If one looks at *Yeh Rishta*, the longest running soap opera, at 10 years and counting, there are several generations of two families that are still carrying on. It was the same in *Kyunki* and *Kahaani*, dealt with in the first edition of this book. And if matrimonial advertisements asked for their future daughters-in-law to be like Tulsi or Parvati, embodying all the qualities of a Sita in the epic *Ramyaana*, no such demand exists any longer. Mercifully, matrimonial advertisements nowadays also place less emphasis on being “beautiful and convent educated” (reads fair and speaks English fluently) than on being a working woman (a double income being a necessity in today's day and age).

Twenty-first, the growing importance of regional language content cannot be overstressed. Regional language soaps are now being remade in Hindi. Soaps like the Bengali *Potol Kumar Gaanwala* (Potol, the Singer, 2015–2017, Star Jalsha) is currently *Kulfi Kumar Bajewala* (Kulfi Kumar, the Musician, since 2018) on Star Plus. Both soaps are hugely popular with high TRPs. To be certain, some alterations occur in the narrative based on audience research. For instance, South Indian soaps apparently have OTT emotions and even violence, which don't go down as well with Hindi-speaking audiences. Rajesh Joshi, the scriptwriter for *Pavitra Rishta* (Pure Relationship, Zee, 2009–2014) is on record saying that while the soap's concept was taken from the Tamil *Thirumathi Selvam*, he had to incorporate several changes to suit the target audience of Hindi-speaking viewers. Since the show revolves around a Marathi family, “*Sirf ek character nahin, saare characters ko change karna pada*” (“We did not have to change one character, but all of them”; cited in Pal 2011). The mother-in-law's character had to be toned down to show her not merely as mean with her daughter-in-law, but also that she wanted her daughter-in-law back in her son's life (for more details, see Pal 2011).

Even on streaming platforms now, regional language content is king. The multi-language remakes of hit Hindi shows like *Bigg Boss*, *Kaun Banega Crorepati* (Who Wants To Be A Millionaire), *Sa Re Ga Ma Pa Li'l Champs*¹² and *Naagin* (Shape Shifting Snake Woman) show that broadcasters are ready to add cultural nuances to exploit successful existing properties across an increasing number of viewers. Industry experts like LV Krishnan,

Rama Bijapurkar, Anindo Banerjee, and Sahana told me during fieldwork that regional content yields better uptake in terms of engagement. People usually take half the time to lap up regional content as compared to Hindi or English, which are already cluttered markets. They said that more than three-fourths of their new consumers are from Tier II and Tier III towns, most of whom want to see content in their own language. Writing in 2018, Lata Joshi notes that “Voot has witnessed close to a 200% increase in content consumption on the back of regional language content over the last six months.” Hoichoi of SVF Entertainment, as noted earlier, is dedicated only to Bengali language content. Vishnu Mohta, co-founder of Hoichoi, is on record saying “We want to put our best foot forward. This market is so nascent today that it will take the best of three to five years to reach a critical mass audience. But we are very sure this is where we want to be and where we see the future” (cited in Joshi, *ibid*).

Another very new phenomenon on television is the rise of spin-offs. Writing as recently as July 2019, Sana Farzeen makes my *twenty-second* point, that

the trend of spinning off a new series from an original show might still be in the teething phase in the Indian television industry but its popularity is on the rise. . . . Star Plus’ *Dil Boley Oberoi* (The Heart Says Oberoi), a spin-off of *Ishqbaaaz* (Lovers, 2016–2019) kick-started the fad in 2017 but unfortunately, it did not find too many takers . . . [but] Ekta Kapoor’s *Kumkum Bhagya* (Vermillion In My Destiny, 2014 onwards, Zee) spin-off titled *Kundali Bhagya* (The Fate In Our Stars, 2017 onwards, Zee) started topping the charts from the second week of its launch . . . [and now] Rajan Shahi’s *Yeh Rishta* . . . Spin off *Yeh Rishtey Hain Pyaar Ke* (These Relationships Are Those of Love, March 2019 onwards, Star Plus) is also topping the TRP charts.

Production houses and TV channel executives both concur that recall value, attention to detail, and, more importantly, an emotional connect with the characters helps spin-offs. During fieldwork, Rajan Shahi, the producer of *Yeh Rishta*, the longest-running soap opera on prime time since 2009 and counting, and its spin-off, told me that “some soaps stand the test of time because people connect so closely with the characters. . . . We pushed the spin-off with the mother show *Yeh Rishta*’s Kartik-Naira introducing the lead actors in the spin-off.” Shahi added that

there still remain strong challenges in pulling this off. There’s already a huge expectation because one is already running a popular original . . . and while one can grab eyeballs to start with, maintaining the momentum is where the challenge lies. For this, the script is king.

Earlier soaps, like the so-called K soaps in the first edition of this book, had time leaps of five or ten years, sometimes more. Nowadays, it's more spin-offs. But as Shahi said to me, "Whether leaps or spin-offs, ultimately it is always content that sells."

Spin-offs are not just limited to TV. Zee network's streaming service Zee 5 has released *Ishq Aaj Kal* (Love Nowadays), a spin-off of Zee TV's popular show *Ishq Subhan Allah* [This Love, Praise be to Allah] in eight episodes on 4 July 2019. It is also said to be reportedly working on spin-offs of serials *Jamai Raja* (Son-in-Law Like A King) and *Guddan Tumse Na Ho Payega* (You Won't Be Able to Pull This Off, Guddan). Comparing spin-offs and streaming, Aparna Acharekar, programming head of Zee 5, says,

[W]hile spin-offs have been popular among the television audience, *Ishq Aaj Kal* is a first of its kind series in the OTT space. *Broad-cast gives you the option of watching the content by appointment whereas the digital medium gives you the freedom of binge-watching and is not confined to timelines*. So we believe the curiosity of unfolding the new storyline and love for the original show's characters will pull the audience to the web space also.

(cited in Farzeen 2019, op. cit., emphasis mine)

Twenty-third, since Bollywood superstar Shah Rukh Khan's success with *Chak De! India* (loosely translated as "winning against all odds"; 2007, director: Shimit Amin) gave a much-needed fillip to women's hockey, Bollywood has concentrated not just on sports biopics – *MS Dhoni: The Untold Story* (2016, director: Neeraj Pandey); *Mary Kom* (2014, director: Umong Kumar); and *Dangal* (wrestling arena, 2016, director: Nitesh Tiwari), to name just a few – but also other stories.¹³ Keeping up with this trend, there has also been a recent rise of biopics in the Hindi and regional GEC segments. Despite contenders like *Taarak Mehta Ka Ooltah Chashmah* (The Upside-Down Spectacles of Tarak Mehta) and *Kulfi Kumar Bajewala* that grab high share of eyeballs by reaching more than 20 percent of core Hindi GEC audiences, *Porus* (Sony, 2017–2018) garnered a spot among the top ten shows. *Porus* tells the story of an ancient legendary Indian warrior king who is credited with having battled Alexander the Great in the Battle of Hydaspes in 326 BC, and whose valor Alexander was allegedly very impressed with. Currently, *Netaji*, based on the life of the iconic freedom fighter from Bengal, Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose, garners high TRPs every week on Zee Bangla. A few others include *Sanyasi Raja* (Star Jalsha, 2017–2018), based on the life of Ramendra Narayan Roy, the prince of Bhawal who came back from "the dead"; and *Rani Rashmoni*, who was closely associated with Sri Ramakrishna Parmahansa and founded the Dakhineswar Kali temple (Zee Bangla, 2017–present).

Twenty-fourth is the rise of mythologicals in the GEC space. In 1988, at 10 am every Sunday, India came to a virtual standstill when the epic *Mahabharat* produced by BR Chopra was aired, but even a quarter of a century later, the story is not very different. Newer versions of the epic, along with the other great epic *Ramayan*, rule TRPs. The list is long, including *Jai Shri Krishna*, *Devon Ka Dev . . . Mahadev* (God of the gods . . . Mahadev), *Radha Krishn*, *Sankat Mochan Mahabali Hanuman* (Vanquisher of Troubles, the Mighty Hanuman [monkey god]) and others in Hindi. Regional language channels also have their list – for example, *Manasa*, *Shiv Puran*, *Shani*, and *Mahapeeth Tarapeeth*, in Bengali.

Television, of course, is not operating in a vacuum. Films and even best-selling novels (for example, Amish Tripathi's bestselling Shiva Trilogy, available in every bookstore in the country) are delving into the rich well of Hindu mythology once again. What is different today is the (sometimes) interpretation, presentation, and consumption of this genre. Special technological effects hook the younger generation who have cut their teeth with the Internet and cell phone technologies. So war scenes, for instance, on televised epics and in films such as the two-part blockbuster *Bahubali* (2015 and 2017, director: S S Rajamouli) draw in huge audiences. Sociologist Dipankar Gupta is on record saying,

The appeal of mythology also increases at a time of social stress, of rootlessness. People want to reconnect with their culture when they are in a flux, and the age old stories in the epics are comforting and help them solve their problems.

(cited in Pasricha 2014)

When I questioned producers of epics regarding their popularity, they said that every episode or story in the *Mahabharat*, for example, finds relevance even today. The moral aspects, greed, ambition, love, family values, and women's role in families and in the world all come to play in these fables. Epics have drama, action, heroism, and betrayal – many of the elements that account for a soap's appeal. Very interestingly, audiences for such fare extend to countries in the Middle East and even China (see for example, Pasricha 2014; and *The Economic Times* 2017).

Twenty-fifth, and I am making a link here with Hindu mythology: we come to representations of female villainy in soap operas. Just as Ekta Kapoor modeled the famous villainesses in the K soaps mentioned earlier, female villainy has since taken on a new form. There is now a rush to jump on to the supernatural bandwagon in soaps to wreak vengeance, ever since Ekta Kapoor's weekend series *Naagin* became a TRP chartbuster in 2015. Its third season recently ended in May 2019. The plot has two attractive, shape-shifting women-serpent siblings out to avenge their parents' murder. The TV channel Colors could not have put it together better, with all the

elements of a potboiler thrown in – love, hate, revenge, suspense. “It is the Indian housewife’s *Twilight Zone*,” says Mythili Chandrasekhar, national planning director at J. Walter Thompson in Delhi (cited in Bansal 2018), referring to the American television drama series combining fiction and fantasy, which had its first season run on CBS in 2019 and which reportedly has been renewed for a second season.

The snake is a deep-rooted symbol in Hindu mythology. And it is no surprise that in the *naagin* persona, many women’s repressed anger finds an outlet. A Psychology 101 course can tell us that revenge, hate, jealousy, aggression are all emotions that people are often told are “wrong” to feel, let alone express. Thus, media representations where television and/or film actresses display such emotions openly serve as an outlet for people to give way to those feelings. Explaining the success of the *naagin* phenomenon, Santosh Desai agreed with this assessment, telling me that the *naagin* is

a women’s repressed anger finding an outlet of an extreme kind, where the wronged woman takes a particularly vengeful form. She uses her sensuousness and locates it in vengefulness rather than submission . . . she is attractive, but this attraction is often fatal . . . the *naagin* is a siren in a culturally specific way.

Interestingly, *Naagin* connects across both urban and rural areas and has spawned regional remakes – Colors Bangla airs it as *Naagin*; Gemini TV airs it as *Naagini* in Telugu, as do Sun TV and Colors in Tamil. *Naagin* is also telecast overseas in Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan.

“Mythical stories are, or seem, arbitrary, meaningless, absurd, yet nevertheless they seem to reappear all over the world” wrote Claude Lévi-Strauss (1978: 3). One just has to look at the success of vampires and blood lust in Western writings, TV series, and films, dating back to the iconic 1897 Bram Stoker classic novel *Dracula* (1897/2000). It came to define vampires – sleeping in coffins, drinking blood, being repelled by garlic, getting burned by the sun, and so on. There have been other writings thereafter, but perhaps none as famous as Stephenie Meyers’ four-book *Twilight* series, which spawned five films based on the novels about a human–vampire romance. In her books, Meyers successfully created an alternative prototype of the vampire as against the Bram Stoker model. In Meyers’ books, Edward, the vampire, is clearly portrayed as the hero, protecting Bella from several dangerous situations and near-death experiences. TV in the West has also not shied away from shows such as *True Blood* (2008–2014, seven seasons, HBO), *The Vampire Diaries* (2009–2017, eight seasons, the CW), *Buffy The Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003, seven seasons, The WB, UPN), and others.

Speaking at an *Outlook India* event held in October 2018 to honor Vinod Mehta, the magazine's (late) founding editor, Ekta Kapoor seemed to have taken a leaf out of Lévi-Strauss's book, saying

They [critics] find my show *Nagin* regressive. But how can folklore be regressive? They believe that it stokes superstition. Well, it is akin to saying that *Game of Thrones* is promoting dragon birth. *Naagin* is actually the story of a shape-shifting snake-woman (*ichchhadhari naagin*) who is out there taking revenge. How can it be regressive, promoting superstition in a country that believes in the folklore? There are superheroes worldwide and you cannot take away the fact that shape-shifting *naagin* is among our superheroes. It is weird that you can accept a house of magic in a J. K. Rowling novel but the magic becomes regressive in India. It is basically your rules. You want to sit on the top of a tower and condemn anything populist. It is nothing short of a high-brow attempt to disregard anything entertaining for the masses as plebian. It is a sad situation that we cannot call out these sitting-in-a-high-castle critics.

(Kapoor 2018)

I concur.

Unresolved contradictions in soap operas that leads towards their non-closure was highlighted in earlier soaps through the roles of the villainesses, such as Mandira in *Kyunki*, Pallavi in *Kahaani*, Komolika in *Kasautii* . . . and so on. They did not accept unhappiness as their norm and were presented as intelligent, scheming, and (destructively) powerful. In her scheming and manipulations, the villainess constantly disturbed the patriarchal status quo. Films have closure, soaps do not. Lead actresses playing negative roles are finally contained within the film's narratives. They may excite, threaten, destroy, but are ultimately punished for their transgressions.¹⁴ The soap villainess, on the other hand, by virtue of the never-ending character of soap narratives, can scheme and fight on endlessly. Soap villainesses, therefore, turn feminine characteristics

which are often seen as weaknesses ensuring her subordination into a source of strength . . . she uses her insight into people to manipulate them, and she uses her sexuality for her own ends, not for masculine pleasure . . . above all, she embodies the female desire for power which is both produced and frustrated by the social relations of patriarchy.¹⁵ The ultimate control that soap villainesses work towards is, *control* not over men, but *over feminine passivity*.

(Modleski 1982: 97, emphasis mine)

Before I move on to my next point, a question arises. Since most of the mythologicals are drawn from Hinduism, and with this continued reinforcement of Hindu iconography across various mediums, the issue naturally arises if there is a conscious/subconscious reinterpretation and revival of Hindu nationalism and identity? This would be a long discussion that I am unable to address here. For the purposes of this introductory chapter, suffice it to say that the answer has yet to be fully formed. In a time of great change, people's own approach to mythology in popular culture (and soap operas are part and parcel of popular culture) mirrors their own changing realities, one that is not quite yet fully understood and is still mulling over different possibilities.

And now, to my *twenty-sixth* point: I cannot conclude without taking up a favorite bugbear of many – that of the issue of representations of women in soap operas being “regressive.” The indifferent, accidental viewer – or, more specifically, the highly critical activist or journalist – is aghast and revolted at what takes places on these shows. The most criticized producer with regard to being “regressive” is, of course, Ekta Kapoor, right from the time of her “K soaps” and the first edition of this book. This issue of “regression” is a point not dealt with in as much detail as I would have liked in the first edition, so I would like to correct that balance here, since I have always taken the opposite stance (see Munshi 2012).¹⁶ My point was – and continues to be – that *one should not mistake form for content*.

Ekta Kapoor says:

It's a myopic view of some people to call our television serials regressive. They don't see what we see in a show. When I ask them about the reasons for calling our shows regressive, they say that we depict women wearing bindis and big jewellery, who are always crying. But that is not regressive. *Regressive is a mindset. You can find a show tacky, melodramatic or over the top, but that is not regression. . . .* On television, we have dealt with domestic violence, marital rape and even something like breast examinations for cancer in our shows. That is not regressive, that is informative. *If you can actually call something regressive just because the women wear too much jewellery (sic), then you are regressive.*

(Kapoor op. cit., 2018, emphasis mine)

For all the criticism that they provoked – including (almost constantly) being dismissed as “regressive” – the “K” soaps stood out for their representations of femininity. Shailja Kejriwal, who was the creative head at Star during the reign of the “K” soaps, told me during fieldwork,

Wives, daughters-in-law, mothers-in-law found their strength and their “heroes” in Tulsi and Parvati, just as they found their heroes