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We welcome contribution (in English & Oriya) and letters from our readers

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Towards Gender Sensitivity in the Media

Anjali Monteiro & K.P.Jayasankar

The idea that the media reflect and reproduce the dominant relations of power in society, be they of gender, class or race, is well established by analysts of the media. Contestations of these power relations, generally by movements, often involve questioning of media representations that perpetuate these flows of power. Thus, the women's movement challenged, and continues to challenge, patriarchal language ('mankind', 'chairman', 'manpower'), stereotyped representations of women as sex-objects and home-makers and the invisibility in the media of significant issues that impinge on women's lives.

The critique of the dominant media from a gender perspective, however, has sometimes been based on simplistic notions of the media and its relationship to society. The media are often seen as functioning as a 'mirror' to reality, having an awesome impact on vulnerable viewers (what could be called a 'hypodermic' model of the media). Hence, the critique offered is in terms of whether media portrayals are 'realistic' or 'distorted', the attempt being to work towards a more 'realistic' portrayal of women. However, developments in theories of language and the media question this notion of language/media as reflecting

or naming an external reality. They assert that it is the other way around: we can never know reality *per se*, but what we see as 'reality' is made possible only through the framework of language and various interpretative categories within which we are situated. Hence, it becomes difficult to speak of a single, objective reality, which could be used as a reference point to validate media representations; there are multiple, sometimes conflicting realities, depending on where one is situated in the order of things. The question to be asked, thus, is not whether the media faithfully reflect reality or not, but rather, what do they articulate in terms of gender relations of power: do they reproduce the dominant patriarchal relations or do they offer spaces for resisting these power equations. Further, one need to look at not merely the representations themselves, but at how audiences/readers are using and making sense of these representations.

If one adopts this perspective, then there is more room for negotiating and making use of the mainstream media. One begins to appreciate how, even within the popular media, there could be spaces for resistance; in fact, many media texts offer complex and

contradictory sites that reproduce the dominant and, at the same time, allow spaces for some questioning of the dominant. Rather than dismissing popular mass media as escapist nonsense, this approach helps one understand how and why audiences draw pleasure from the media. It also helps alternative media to address itself to issues of reaching audiences, to think of 'alternatives' not in terms of boringly predictable and politically correct doses of 'realism' that preach to the converted, but of approaches that are creative, imaginative and relevant to the audience's concerns.

In the wake of the feminist movement, in the West, there has been a substantial revision of language, children's books and other media artifacts, towards greater gender equality.

In our own context, one finds a mixed picture. On the one hand, there is an assertion of old stereotypes couched in modern garb and an increasing and alarming trend of representing violence against women in ways that legitimise it. On the other hand, one sees some changes in representations of men and women in various media, be it satellite television commercials and soaps or in print media news. For instance, the Raymond's complete man who is gentle and sensitive or the exuberant Cadbury's Chocolate girl reach out to certain market segments and could be

seen as an attempt by the market to co-opt changing notions of manhood and womanhood. While one has to recognise and appreciate these changes, if one merely lauds these artifacts as gender sensitive, in opposition to a host of other commercials, which exploit women's bodies and perpetuate stereotypes, one would be missing the point. One has also to look critically at these commercials in the context of the institution of advertising as a whole and its project of linking desirable identities to buying ever more. I buy therefore I am. If I can't buy, I am nobody.

Thus, one cannot look at gender relations of power in exclusion to other power equations, such as those of class. It is no accident that the gender-savvy young men and women in advertisements of a post-feminist era belong to a certain class of society. It is no accident that certain sections of men and women are invisible in the urban-based media, or if they appear, it is only as victims of calamities, spectacular oppression and so on. The boundaries of what it means to be normal and respectable are tightly drawn and constantly reinforced. Those who are concerned with advocating a gender-sensitive media need to look at these issues: what are the norms of beauty and respectability, of a desirable life, of relations between men and women, that the media reproduce? How do

these impinge on the lives of viewers/readers and which sections of society get marginalised or unrepresented in the process? A consideration of such issues would help to situate a gender critique in the context of a host of equations of power that intersect and reinforce gender relations of power.

We live in an age where the market is the bottom-line that shapes media representations; the state has become increasingly marginalised and state censorship as a mode of controlling 'undesirable' representations is no longer viable, given the post-globalisation proliferation of satellite television and the internet. On the other hand, one also sees the rise of right wing fundamentalist groups who hold civil society to ransom and take the law into their own hands to exercise extreme and violent modes of censorship. In the recent past, the state has been tacitly encouraging such demonstrations of extra-legal censorship, be it in the case of the films such as 'Fire' and 'Water' or the destruction of Hussain's paintings. This is a dangerous mode of censorship that women's groups and all other movements working for civil liberties need to combat. There is certainly a need to communicate audience perceptions to the makers of media texts, but this has to be done in a manner that is pro-active and keeps open channels of dialogue.

There is also need to work towards creating discerning audiences through critical media education, which should be regarded as an integral part of the formal educational process, given the increasingly important place that the media has begun to play in our lives. The example of Viewers' Forums, started by the Delhi-based Centre for Advocacy and Research (CFAR) is an interesting experiment that should be extended. These forums, consisting of diverse groups of viewers, in various cities of the country, meet to discuss popular television programmes and to communicate their perceptions to the writers and makers of these programmes. Similarly, the attempts of individuals and groups to introduce critical media education to various groups, while sporadic and marginal at the moment, work towards empowering audiences to question and to give voice to their perceptions.

In the final analysis, given the increasingly important role of the market as a regulatory device, women's groups and media activists cannot afford to ignore these modes of advocacy for a more gender-sensitive media. Rather than regarding gender sensitivity as an absolute norm that is the responsibility of feminist media-watch groups to assert and enforce, the attempt should be to democratise the process of reflection, dialogue and advocacy on media matters.

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