

# Hard realities of Indian Reality TV

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On Saturday, 6 March 2010, Dimpay Ganguly from Kolkata was declared the winner of the reality television show Rahul Dulhaniya Le Jayega. This is no ordinary commercial entertainment programme on TV but a life-changing event for participants like Dimpay Ganguly who contested to marry the divorced celebrity, Rahul Mahajan, on TV. Several girls desperately wanted to be the bride of Rahul Mahajan. The TV show received over 16755 entries through phone, emails and SMS and ultimately 14 girls were chosen. The contestants dated Rahul on TV and tried to win over the groom. Women from all walks of life like doctors, engineers, models, teachers, students, artists, in the age group of 22-26 years, sent their entries to marry 34-year old Rahul Mahajan of Big Brother 2 fame. Even NRI girls from London, Dubai and USA sent their entries. Interestingly, this was a north Indian show attracting girls from Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata, Lucknow, Jaipur, Chandigarh, Nagpur and Ahmedabad and perhaps no entry from Southern belt of India.

Rahul Dulhaniya Le Jayega is a Reality TV show on NDTV Imagine and was shot at Udaipur's opulent Fatehgrah Palace. This show went on air on February 1 and ended on March 6, 2010. Rahul, son of the slain politician, Pramod Mahajan, has the dubious distinction of becoming a visible face on TV for all the wrong reasons immediately after his father's untimely death.

The Reality TV show, Big Boss 2 on Colors TV in August 2008, became his launching pad in the entertainment industry. The TV wedding was celebrated at the Leela Kempinski Hotel in Mumbai with pomp and show. The hegemony of commercial weddings of dominant order finds its expression through Reality TV wedding shows. These shows also ignore the aspirations of marginalized people as it outweighs the simple and meaningful marriages based on love, faith and commitment. Who can afford to wed in Leela Kempinski hotel?

The Swayamvar series of NDTV Imagine is a reality programme genre produced by SOL Productions Pvt Ltd generating massive viewership in India and abroad. Its first series of Season 1 Rakhi Ka Swayamvar edged out all the regular family soaps and the other reality shows by garnering high TRP ratings. The channel's Rahul Dulhaniya Le Jayega is the season 2 of the Swayamvar series gaining record breaking TRP ratings. Rakhi's Reality TV show became an instant hit and TV producers earned a fortune out of the programme. For the first time in the history of Indian television, Rakhi got engaged to one of the contestants, Toronto-based Elesh Parunjwala but she broke her engagement with him in another reality TV show exposing the commercial interest of these shows and its participants.

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This quest for bride or groom on TV involving celebrities has redefined Indian TV, the entertainment factor and the culture industry. Rahul, in one of the episodes, says that he is looking for three qualities in a woman, namely honesty, genuineness and a sense of humour. Intriguingly, he is paid to choose a bride and huge sums of money exchanged hands. Rahul, who talks of values, agrees to be a paid groom and dates all kinds of girls and breaks many hearts in his search for the most suitable bride.

### **A divorcee as a role model**

Rahul, a divorcee with a broken marriage and a controversy surrounding his drugs, is foisted as a role model by the media for the young girls in a society where marriage is regarded as the ultimate goal of womanhood. The court is still holding his passport as he is facing charges of using banned drugs. However, millions of viewers were hooked to the Rahul Dulhaniya Le Jayega that was aired for 5 days in a week on NDTV Imagine. The National Commission for Women (NCW) expressed serious concern about the way the women were portrayed as saleable commodities in the reality show, Rahul Dulhaniya Le Jayega and requested the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting to ensure that women are not disgraced in the programme.

A reality programming is defined as 'programming that draws on the drama of real events and occupations to attract viewers' (Consalvo, 1998). Indian society is flooded with reality TV shows like Big Boss, Fear Factor, Perfect Bride, Sach Ka Saamna, Dus Ka Dum, Roadies, Indian Idol, Iss Jungle Se Mujhe Bachao and host of dance and music shows. The Rahul's finale is claimed to have been watched by 25.4 million viewers in India gaining 7.8 TVR acclaimed as a season's highest rated reality show on Indian television. Rahul's show out beat Rakhi's groom-hunt show by getting 40% more viewers. Encouraged by the massive commercial success of both

the episodes of Swayamvar, the same channel is proposing to launch Season 3 of the series featuring a cricketer in a cricket loving country. Certainly, the bottomline is not public interest but money.

Reality shows have drawn worldwide attention and have succeeded in increasing viewership of TV which was on the decline owing to the impact of internet. The reality programmes are based on commercial interests that brought in convergence of TV channels, music industry, online media and telecommunication companies. The reality TV genre command high degree of attention because of its innovative nature and the interactivity with the audience. It has become the corridor for the globalization of media and its programmes. These reality TV shows are generating big money for the producers and is virtually the game of TAM ratings.

According to media reports, Rahul had expressed desire to remarry his first wife Shweta Singh on Swaymvar show to gain TRPs and she was offered huge sums of money to appear on the show underlines the commodification of brides and ugly commercialization of Indian TV. Unlike other reality programmes, the Rahul's show changes the life of a girl forever. His first wife has said that 'Firstly, I feel these reality shows are scripted and fake. Marriages are made in heaven and not on reality shows. Secondly, if I wanted to be a part of his life, why would I have gone in for a divorce?' Under the circumstances, how could media create idols of Rakhis and Rahuls who are anything but role models for the Indian girls and boys?

### **False sense of stardom**

The shows hurt the Indian culture and values where the girls on camera are made to romance the same guy wearing all kinds of outfits in the guise of getting to know each other well. What happened to the girls who were not chosen? Would they carry

permanent emotional scar for life? How would they face the society? Are we creating a false sense of transitory stardom to the ordinary girls?

Winning a musical competition is different from winning a bridal contest as marriage is a vital decision in the life of a girl and marriage is the language of hearts than cutting a music CD for a famed music company. Showing singing or dancing or surviving talent is different from wooing a groom on national TV in a multicultural society like India where sanctity is attached to the institution of marriage. A make believe world is created for girls with mind - boggling jewellery, expensive dresses and lavish settings and national fame. The girls are scripted to perform to the tunes of TRP ratings. Whenever the show ratings dip, the girls and their families are made to perform all tamasha and add masala with new strategies to retain interest.

In a major study on reality-based wedding program, Lewis (1992) investigated the hegemonic messages contained in wedding photography practices and products and found that the maintenance of a status quo that promoted traditional gender roles. Specifically, Lewis found that photographic poses of brides and grooms in his sample demonstrated a hegemony reflecting societal expectations of femininity for women, and the acquiescence and acknowledgment of male-based power' (Erika Engstrom and Beth Semic, 2002).

The National Commission for Women has criticized tele weddings and has called for the banning of such weddings as innocent girls get enticed to marry under the fake glamour and temporary stardom. Girls are enticed to tie the knot on account of high media attention and gain TRPs that bring massive wealth to the producers of the show. TRPs are important to TV channels as any rise in ratings will enable the channel

to increase the spot rates of the commercials. The cost per spot (advertisement/commercial) is fixed by the rating points of the channel or the programme and is called CPRP- Cost Per Rating Point. TAM is the most sought after currency that is encashed by the channel. Studies have endorsed the positive correlation between TAM ratings and consumerism targeting youth, women and children. India offers a huge market for reality TV with a massive TV viewership of 223 million. There are 134 million TV households in the country consisting of 103 million cable and satellite and 20 million digital households.

### **Commercialization of weddings**

Unthoughtfully, girls get married to make the show a big success. How could Indian media propound the commercialization of weddings instead of advocating lessons on simple and meaningful weddings is the question that needs to be answered by media houses which are already facing ignominy in the Paid Election news scandal. Here media is promoting these types of shows as it provides staple entertainment diet to the news columns. These shows are supported by high coverage of the events and its controversies facilitating enormous visibility in print and electronic media. All media houses play up these as they directly and indirectly help sustain readers / viewers attention.

The truth of reality programmes is they are scripted to show and say what their marketing strategies demand. The camera angles and editing are selective that manipulate the content of the programme defeating the meaning of reality show. Technically it is a finely edited programme and anyone familiar with the process of video production knows how anything can be touted as reality. The viewers have no access to the footage and ultimately viewers get to see what the producer wants them to see. Every scene of action is imposed on the audience. And every word uttered is carefully

selected with eyes on TRPs.

It is a misnomer to call them reality shows as they are not complete live shows. In most of the reality shows the winner is chosen by the audience. But where is the transparency? How many have cast votes and who is monitoring them? We don't get to see the number of people who have voted for the contestants. The reality shows are the direct promoters of mobile phone networks. The audience could vote via SMS or telephone but the rates for these services are deliberately kept higher than normal rates fleecing the people. The same person can send any number of messages making a mockery of public opinion. Since the response is in millions, both the TV channel and the mobile phone company share huge sums of earnings between them. Further, the audience never gets to know, who has voted, which part of India has voted and what their demographic profile is. The details of voting are never made public.

Is Indian society so fragile that it can tolerate assault on Indian culture and the value system with such banal programmes? World's largest democracy should not have allowed such programmes to go on air as they advocate false values and treat youngsters as a bunch of commodities on sale. The programmes have no talent, creativity or originality to show.

'Perform or perish' is the mantra of these programmes which puts enormous pressure on the youngsters creating tension and emotional trauma among the losers. What does the viewer learn from watching bathing by the scantily clad women in *Iss Jungle Se Mujhe Bachao*? Every action of the participants is recorded by hidden cameras and is under surveillance. We have been compelled to accept trash in the guise of entertainment. Film maker Mahesh Bhatt says, "Today, washing one's dirty linen on prime time is big business. We live in shameless times. People

do not mind becoming guinea pigs in the name of reality to amuse the nation and make a quick buck. And the audience gets high on its daily dose of 'reality' about the private lives of people like themselves."

### **Surrendering the privacy**

Reality TV has changed the concept of TV entertainment worldwide but it has also raised vital questions about its social relevance and tabloidization of its content. Reality TV has created new breed of celebrities whose fame to stardom is transitory thereby creating more social and psychological problems in the already complex social system. The Reality TV has paved way for competition basking in individualism. The participants surrender their privacy and narrate their private life on camera to the nation breaking all the social and cultural barriers creating social tensions in the family and social circles. Sadly these programmes are market driven generating emotional participation of the audience and the lives of the ordinary people become the staple media content. It can also be viewed as democratization of media content but the market driven nature is the bottom line of Reality TV.

These reality shows are copy cats of western programmes lacking in originality and creativity. They are seen as part of globalization of media that is trying to establish homogenous and mono concept programmes for people of all cultures and societies. The global franchisees of these reality shows have one common thread running globally that is to rake in huge revenue. From business point of view these shows are hugely successful but from social perspective the Reality TV has created a new breed of neoliberals flaunting individualism in a society that draws strength from unique cultural identity instead of surveillance culture propounded by the reality programming.