

# Reality television in India

## New format and new implications

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During the last one decade, there have been many path-breaking evolutions in the content of Indian television. Reality shows are one of them. In the age of cut-throat competition, there is an acute pressure on the producers to create constantly something new and saleable. To a certain extent, this competition has 'assumed the shape of 'fight for existence'. Ratings indicate that people are now bored of repetitive fictional family dramas; nowadays they are relishing hardcore reality on the screen. Viewers enjoy watching just-like-neighboring people competing with each other for getting fame and money. This may seem quite interesting that we all live a real life and still we love to watch all that on television screen. Perhaps that reality is more interesting as there are two most prominent reasons to make the content identified with the viewers; firstly, it has to be close to the viewers realities and secondly, it should contain a certain level of fantasy also that could attract viewers and that could create fancies in their mind. Though news is purely a reality format, yet more and more channels are taking help of live telecast and limiting their role while narrating and presenting news.

The very basic question should be solved before we proceed further: what does the reality mean? The true things those happen in anybody's day-to-day life, the problems and the pleasures of a person are reality of his/her life. But the point is that why are we so

much interested in other person's life if that person is just the same as we are. So the 'mediated realities' shown on television shows are quite different from real life's reality. The television makes the reality more glamorous, dramatic, attractive, sensational and more watchable.

### Concept of reality television

The concept of reality television world over is far more different from the Indian one. In America and Britain, nowadays channels show the complete day-to-day activities of a common man's life, also many things which are intimate. Just for ratings, producers show every thing and any thing which has a 'value' in the media market. The content of these shows may include personal sex shows, live telecast of a celebrity mother giving birth to a child, betraying couples (Temptation Islands) etc.

The real formula of reality show is gathering few people on a certain basis, make them fight for any prize specifically any big amount of money and while they fight shoot every thing and show it to the audience. Audience also enjoys such fights for name, fame and money. However, in India, reality television evolved out in a different manner. Indian reality shows are more specifically talent hunt shows and game shows, which gather bunch of people and then organize a competition between them and show each and every happening of that competition to the audience 'uncensored'. The key

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concepts behind these reality and game shows are talent hunting and gaming, stimulating the desire of normal viewer, encouraging participation, the pleasure of taking risk, aspiring to become rich and famous, just for fun.

The first genre for many reality shows is talent hunting. The producers use this formula in many ways. They visit major cities countrywide for talent hunting, then select a certain number of people, train them, project them into the media and show all these things to the viewers through the hidden cameras. Just to organize any talent hunt program, the response for it in a country like India where many talented people left unknown was beyond the expectation. Any program which shows the talent of people is simply a talent hunt show but when we put the flavor of reality to it, it becomes the reality show. What to show in the frame of reality? The criteria that Indian reality shows follows are:

- They show the day-to-day life of contestants that includes preparation and learning of contestants.
- They show the emotional as well as lighter moments of the contestant(s). More specifically, they show the fear and reactions of the contestants about the competition and their views and opinion about the other contestant.
- Contestant's meetings with people and celebrities, the show's preparations and other backstage activities.
- Celebrities, as judges, also make these shows more glamorous. More interestingly, judges are to give their opinions only; the final decision about the contestant is in the hands of viewers only.
- Participation of viewers through phone voting

is another aspect that helps these shows earn millions as well as ratings.

## **Singing and dancing**

There can be two main categories in the format of talent show as television people define talent in two things – singing and dancing. Talent shows focus on these two things because these two forms of art are worth selling on television screen. Once the people started getting bored from the repetition, producers started doing experimentation with the format. First, they approached children and ladies for talent and at last towards celebrities. The show, focused on little singers Little Champs, was a big hit. Similarly, Woogie Boogie invited married women 'mamas' on the dancing floor and they performed well.

In the case of celebrities, some time single fights, some time celebrity couple fights and some time a bunch of celebrities fight with each other for the prize. The best examples of this format are Heart Beats, Nach Baliye and Jodi Kamaal Ki. Very recently, a program has been started by the Channel 9x named Mission Ustad. It invites actual popular singers couples on the stage and their performance is voted by the masses and judges comment upon the content of their songs. The new element in this show is the focus on the ideas because singers are asked to sing on a particular theme like on education and judges like Javed Akhtar and A. R. Rahman comment on the philosophy of the song.

Second, most saleable genre on Indian television is game show. The concept of game show changed the face of Indian television. Telecast of Kaun Banega Crorepati, popularly known as KBC in 2000, on Star Plus can be marked as the departing point, when television industry seemed to be coming out of gloomy

scene. Anchored by superstar Amitabh Bachhan, KBC broke all records of popularity. This single show made Star Plus number one channel of India in terms of earning. Soon after the popularity of KBC, many channels jumped into the foray with many game shows but they proved to be failure. For example, Zee TV came up with Chchappar Phad Ke anchored by film star Govinda. Deal Ya No Deal (Sony), Kam Ya Zayaada anchored by Manoj Bajpai.

Many game shows with different concepts were telecast afterwards. For example, the concept of Heart Beat was that the time for contestant was to be decided according to the rate of contestant's heart beat. S/he has to control his or her heart beats by being calm and cool and, at the same time, solving the questions too. Another game show Super Sale has the concept of earning super sale points to buy products without a single penny.

### **Origin of reality television**

It is believed that reality television began back in 1992 when MTV first broadcast The Real World. It was an experimental show that took seven people from different backgrounds and placed them in a house to live together for several months and have their interactions filmed. It wasn't even known as reality television then, more so as a documentary. Media, both in America and around the world, seem to have "discovered" that so-called "reality" shows are very profitable, resulting in a growing string of such shows in recent years. Although not all are successful, many do achieve significant popularity and cultural prominence. That does not, however, mean, that they are good for society or that they should be aired.

The first thing to keep in mind is that "Reality

TV" is nothing new - one of the most popular examples of this sort of entertainment is also one of the oldest, "Candid Camera." Originally created by Allen Funt, it showcased hidden video of people in all manner of unusual and strange situations and was popular for many years. Even game shows, long a standard on television, are a sort of "Reality TV."

On August 16, 1999, America was introduced to the game show Who Wants to Be a Millionaire? This show made its debut on the ABC network. The show was already a hit in Great Britain. With a new American host, Regis Philbin, it became a blockbuster on the American side of the Atlantic as well. Millionaire's creator was Michael P. Davies, a veteran British television producer. The basis of the show was simple: contestants, who were selected by a telephone screening process, had to answer a series of increasingly difficult multiple-choice trivia questions, with an ever-increasing cash prize attached. To help contestants along, a variety of "lifelines" were provided, including the ability to phone a friend or to poll the live audience for 'answer' suggestions.

Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?'s popularity grew by strong word of mouth and was soon attracting huge audiences. At one point during the summer of 1999, it was airing six nights a week. Even after the initial appeal died down, the show remained a solid ratings winner for ABC over the next several years. Its success inspired a revival of prime-time game shows. (Encyclopedia of Television, United Kingdom, 2001)

Even educational channels like Discovery are producing reality TV hits like The Deadliest Catch and Monster Garage. Another way reality TV has changed is that it is much more graphic now. In the first season

of The Real World, it was real people living together. Now it has become seven people who are acting as they think they should base on the past sixteen seasons. Sex has become rampant since the Las Vegas season and Roommate hookups, something only thought of the first few seasons, is now common place. Turn on reality TV show Fear Factor and you can see contestants eating maggots, worms, grasshoppers and other things they probably wouldn't think of eating if a TV camera weren't aimed at them.

It was in 2002 when CBS's blockbuster hit called Survivor finally gave reality television a name. A cast of regular people was exiled to a desert island to survive and undermine each other to win the grand prize of one million dollars. Pop Idol was first shown on British television ITV1. Interestingly, this format was not created by television producer but by a music impresario Simon Fuller. It was a contest to find best young singers in the country.

Pop Idol got popularity not only in UK but this series spun off many successful programs in other countries i.e. American Idol, Canadian Idol, Indian Idol, Australian Idol, Indonesian Idol, Malaysian Idol, Newzealand Idol, Latin American Idol, Philippine Idol, France's Nouvelle Star and Germany's Deutschland sucht den Superstar. In West, the concept of reality show has gone further to an extreme of perversion. Now channels are showing what ever sensational they get from any source. More and more sex, violence and hazards have become the part of content of reality shows.

### **Indian face of reality television**

It was in the nineties when Indian reality shows made their presence on the screen. It started with

singing talent hunt shows. The names of Antakshari and Sa Re Ga Ma can be mentioned as milestones in the history of reality shows in India. The popularity of these shows crossed the limits of India among the people of Indian origin living abroad also. These shows can be considered as true Indian face of reality television. However, later on more and more western shows were imported and copied.

"Made-in-India formats have their own charm. It is all about people's participation, journey to fame and a lot of passion and emotion," says Tarun Mehra, vice president (marketing) Zee Network. Highlighting the reality shows on Zee Network, Mehra explains that formats as simple as Antakshari have proved that India has the potential to develop and sustain such formats. Antakshari was born on September 3, 1993 and is the oldest running format show in the country with about 600 episodes. More than a million people across the world have auditioned for it.

Another success has been *Sa Re Ga Ma*, which also brought talented singers like Shreya Ghosal to the forefront at a very early age. The recent Cinestar Ki Khoj introduces young talent to the glamorous world of Bollywood. But these reality shows are not original; they are adopted from western televisions like *Indian Idol* was adopted from Pop Idol and *Kaun Banega Crorepati* from Who wants to be Millionaire?

When Freemantle Media came to India with the idea of launching Indian Idol, the company never imagined that it would take the country by storm. A remake of the famous hit, Pop Idol, which has set record in all countries, registered historical ratings in India as well. The ingredients of an ideal reality show are simple: "It must appeal to all. It is a craft, it is a

drama that unfolds in front of you," says Gavin Wood, director of production, India Freemantle Media.

"The idea should be original and entertaining. The best part of a reality show is that it guarantees success. There are valuable lessons to be learnt about viewer's tastes and preferences. The reality shows make sure that the dreams come true at the risk of shattering the dreams of many others," says Wood, who has tried and tested the format in other Asian countries as well (indiantelelevision.com). "The best thing about a reality show is that it is real, it is interactive: the viewers could decide who would be the Indian Idol. Reality shows see the dreams of millions of Indians come true. They relate to the characters that appear on the shows and this makes the shows more meaningful than any tearjerker." Sanjiv Sharma of Indian Idol maker Optymystix Productions explains. (indiantelelevision.com)

In the latest shows, NDTV Imagine's Swaymvar (literally means choosing the bride/groom himself/herself) attracted huge audiences. This show is based on India's age-old traditions of marriage wherein a choice is given to the boy or girl to choose his bride or groom. There is a mention of Swayamvar of Sita in popular epic Ramayana. In the first show, Rakhi Sawant was to choose her groom and in the Swayamvar part two, Rahul Mahajan was in the lead role. In other popular reality shows, Dance India Dance, hosted by legend film star, Mithun Chakroborty is also worth mentioning.

### **Reality television as news format**

Television news is basically a non-fictional program format that is based upon the real life footage. People watch news shows because they want to know about the happenings around them. Usually it is said that journalism is history written in hurry. As far as

## **Indian Reality Shows**

**Singing talents hunt shows :** Antakshari, Sa Re Ga Ma, Indian Idol (Sony), Fame Gurukul (Sony), Super Singer, Little Champ, K for Kishor.

**Dancing talent hunt shows :** Boogie Woogie, Nach Baliye, Kamaal ki Jodi.

**Game Shows :** KBC, Chappar Phad Ke, Kamzor Kadi Kaun (a copy of The Weakest Link) , Business Baazigar, Idea lao, Paise le jao, Heart Beats, Bluff Master, Deal Ya No Deal (Sony), Kam Ya Zayaada.

**Others :** *Cinestar Ki Khoj*, Big Boss, *Swayamvar*, Dance India Dance, *Mujhe Is Jungle Se Bachao*, Big Brother, *Shabaas India*, Fear Factor, Who Dares Wins India Special (AXN), Hot N' Wild (AXN), Celebrity Uncensored.

reality television is concerned, news is also transforming into more real spectacle. Whatever is shown on the screen is first shot in raw form, then it is edited in a sequence and a 'voice over' is overlaid on it. This process modifies the nature of reality and many times a huge gap between 'real reality' and 'reality constructed through visuals' is created. More the processing, more the chances of distortion. Therefore, more and more 'live' shows of events are being organized these days. There is an expectation from media persons not to mediate and dilute the information but deliver it as it is whereas market demands journalists to present the reality in more sensational, glamorous and saleable manner. Live telecast of matches is a good example of reality television wherein audience is left to decide and grasp the content as they like it.

There is one more new thing happening across the world called citizen journalism. Now audience is invited to participate in the process of collection of news. With the help of mini digital handcam, alert citizens also shoot and send the footage to the channels for telecast after due editing. During the disastrous rains in Mumbai on Jul. the 26, 2006, in situation of completely stopped life, many channels invited the viewers to send still visuals shot with their mobile cameras and that new idea clicked. Channel showed these visuals with the names of senders. Same way, many viewers shoot reality of corrupt activities around their locality and send it to the channels and this way they are using new technology for voicing and making things better.

### **Where's the reality?**

One of the attractions of reality television is the supposed "reality" of it - unscripted and unplanned situations, abrupt emotions and reactions. One of the ethical problems of reality television is the fact that it isn't nearly as "real" as it pretends to be. At least in dramatic shows one can expect the audience to understand that what they see on the screen doesn't necessarily reflect the reality of the actors' lives; the same, however, cannot be said for heavily edited and contrived scenes one sees in reality shows.

In the West, there is now a growing concern about how reality television shows can help perpetuate racial stereotypes. In many shows, a similar black female character has been featured -- all different women, but very similar character traits. It's gone so far that Africana.com has trademarked the expression The Evil Black Woman to describe this sort of

individual: brazen, aggressive, pointing fingers, and always lecturing others on how to behave.

Reality television shows are not documentaries. People are not put into situations simply to see how they react -- the situations are heavily contrived, they are altered in order to make things interesting, and large amounts of footage are heavily edited into what the show's producers think will result in the best entertainment value for viewers. Entertainment, of course, often comes from conflict -- so conflict is created where none exists. If the show cannot incite conflict during the filming, it can be created the way the pieces of footage are stitched together. It's all in what they choose to reveal to you or not reveal as the case may be. Indians have not forgotten the maltreatment of Shilpa Shetty in British reality show 'Big Brother'. Actually, many times such clashes are provoked and planned just to take lead in the TRP chart.

### **The issue of morality and ethics**

If a production company creates a show with the explicit intention of trying to make money from the humiliation and suffering which they themselves create for unsuspecting people, then that seems to be immoral. There can be no excuse for such actions -- pointing out that others are willing to watch such events does not relieve them of the responsibility for having orchestrated the events and willed the reactions in the first place. The mere fact that they want others to experience humiliation, embarrassment and suffering, is itself unethical.

A small research on ethical issues related to reality shows has been conducted by a media student in Makhanlal Chaturvedi National University of

Journalism and Communication, Bhopal. Researcher tried to find out whether common people are bothered about the presentation of reality shows. Are they aware about ethical issues relating to these shows? She found only 32 per cent people were concerned about this issue. Most of the respondents were of the opinion that they don't bother about ethics in these shows. That actually indicates the level of understanding of Indian viewers. (An analytical study of the Indian reality shows by Deepti Dubey, 2006, M.Sc. Electronic Media)

What about the responsibility of the reality TV advertisers? Their funding makes such programming possible, and, therefore, they must shoulder part of the blame as well. An ethical position would be to refuse to underwrite any programming, no matter how popular, if it is designed to deliberately cause others humiliation, embarrassment or suffering. It's immoral to do such things for fun, so it's certainly immoral to do it for money or to pay to have it done. After the controversy of Shilpa Shetty in Big Brother show, many major advertisers pulled back their 'ads' from the show, that gave a set back to the show and a kind of pressure also on the producer not to do anything like this in future.

What about the responsibility of contestants? Most of the contestants participate in these shows voluntarily. Most of them are after handsome money and prizes. In the West, a prior note is signed before participation in any such kind of hazardous show. For example, for the famous reality show Fear Factor it becomes necessary to get the permission before taking any one into the show. If anybody consents to face humiliation and embarrassment just for having a chance of getting a big amount, this is a matter of

morality for her or him also. And this consent does not absolve the producer of the show from moral responsibility.

Finally, what about the reality TV viewers? If you find that you are entertained by the suffering and humiliation of others, that's a problem. Perhaps a weekly schedule of such type of pleasure may be entirely a matter of serious psychological disorder. People's ability and willingness to take pleasure in such things may stem from the increasing separation we experience from others around us. The more distant we are from each other as individuals, the more readily we can objectify each other and fail to experience sympathy and empathy when others around us suffer. The fact that we are witnessing events not in front of us but on television, where everything has an unreal and fictional air about it, probably aids in this process as well. For example, during old days people had been enjoying gladiators fight till death. In many civilizations during medieval age there was a common game in which fight between goats, hen etc.

### **Do the people believe in mediated reality?**

These reality TV shows wouldn't be made if we didn't watch them; so why do we watch them? Either we find them entertaining or we find them so shocking that we are simply unable to turn away. There is a German word Schadenfreude, which is used to describe people's delight and entertainment at the failings and problems of others. If you laugh at someone slipping on the ice, that's Schadenfreude. If you take pleasure in the downfall of a company you dislike, that is also Schadenfreude. The latter example is certainly understandable, but I don't think that's what we're seeing here. After all, we don't know the people on reality shows.

So what causes us to derive entertainment from the suffering of others? Certainly there may be catharsis involved, but that is also achieved through fiction -- we don't need to see a real person suffer in order to have a cathartic experience. Perhaps we are simply happy that these things aren't happening to us, but that seems more reasonable when we see something accidental and spontaneous rather than something deliberately staged for our amusement.

That people do suffer on some reality TV shows is beyond question -- the very existence of reality programming may be threatened by the increase in law suits by people who have been injured and/or traumatized by the stunts these shows have staged. One of the reasons such programming is attractive is that it can be much cheaper than traditional shows, but that may change as insurance premiums for reality TV begin to reflect higher to insurers. Comments from various reality TV producers often fail to demonstrate much sympathy or concern with what their subjects experience -- what we are seeing is a great callousness towards other human beings who are treated as means towards achieving financial and commercial success, regardless of the consequences for them. Injuries, humiliation, suffering, and higher insurance rates are all just the "cost of doing business" and a requirement for being edgier.

### **Reality shows doing real business**

To make any show successful apart from new concept and rich content, financial viability is very important. The idea behind most of the reality shows and game shows is not Indian but adopted from western countries. So firstly, the show producers have to purchase that idea from the original makers. They have to buy the rights to produce that concept in their respective country. In case the buyers are more than two, then each time the original producers arrange bid

or sometime demand share from that show as their fees.

After acquiring the copyrights of a particular show, the concept formation starts. Here show producers can decide whether they want the original concept or they want to make changes into it. If they want the same original concept they have to mention it in credit title that the concept of show was adopted but if they change it they make a team who works on it. In concept-making, the total scheduling, meetings with sponsors, and set designing every thing comes.

Then the promotional activities start as these shows get the involvement of audience through audience awareness about the show much before the show was started through 'ads' on television, cut -- outs on streets and through press conferences in metro cities.

And one thing that the show producers do even before all this is finding sponsors, co - sponsors and the advertisers for the show. Because, after discussing with them they can only finalize the name of the show. Here the concept also gets decided by them and specifically the prize given to the winner. Like in hero Honda Sa Re Ga Ma Pa the main producer is Hero Honda and other products are co producers that's why they add the name of company with the show. But it is not with every show some time even the main producer does not add its name with show name as the show's name was individually so big, for example, Kaun Banega Crorepati- 2 was sponsored by Airtel but they did not fix the company name with the show.

Many a time the sponsor decides how the show is going to run? If it is a reality show where audience is going to decide the winner through SMS, then the show producer sells this to any mobile service providing company and then the company promotes it in his own way. Entry in any game show was sell to

any particular mobile service provider then by that the other service provide even can't participate in the show as they don't have that service in their cell phone. All these things come under the business where the producer concentrates more on the sponsors and less on the talent hunting.

Now for publicity of products of advertisers they not only sell the air time between the running shows they also promote their product during show by using them and telling that this product is best or some thing like that. Like, for example, the reality show Clinic All Clear Fame Gurukul on Sony entertainment was sponsored by clinic all clear. But LG was the co producer of the show so they show the mobile phone of LG during the show the publicity purposes.

Such promotion is done during the running and the shooting of the show. Then the time of broadcasting through 'ads' they earn money. They do the publicity of show in different media and earn more advertisers for the show. Here the media partners also decide before they sign a contract with them for the promotion of the show. As the show proceeds and TRP of that show and of that channel increases they get more business, more money. The producers of reality shows earn even after the show is off air. The makers have rights to sell the music albums of the winner and through the concerts of the winners. They do these things till the next show or next season of show starts.

## Conclusions

In India, the format of reality television has not evolved as in the West. Here it developed out of singing talent hunt shows. Instead of classical or folk music, these shows focused on popular filmi songs. Despite this, most of the popular Indian reality and game shows are adopted from West, however, Antaakshari and Sa Re Ga Ma are the exception to this. It can be concluded

that Indians copied the format but they adopted it in their own way and to a certain degree they have Indianised it. Secondly, the reality shows are showing 'mediated reality'. They are creating the myth of reality. But the truth is, they present every thing according to their convenience and market demand. The reality depicted in the so-called reality shows is 'constructed and packaged reality'.

It can also be said that reality shows are providing platform to the young talent of India. At least it seems to be like this. But these shows have reduced the talent into singing and dancing only. From the audience angle, reality shows have provided a fresh air of entertainment. These shows are inviting, entertaining, exciting, involving, encouraging, interacting, attracting, inciting, provoking etc. Reality shows and game shows rule the TRP charts and dominate the prime time.

As a result, reality shows are providing very good business to the producers of such shows. There are many ethical issues related to these reality shows which are not getting discussed in public. These issues may have diverse effect on the contestant and on viewers. These shows encourage a ruthless and inhuman competition among its contestants and convey to the society, especially in the minds of children of impressionable age, that for survival one has to be cruel, merciless and emotionless. These shows actually justify a brutal and selfish competition in the society that is totally contradicting modern human values in the age when we claim to be heading towards peaceful co-existence.

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