

THE CULTURAL SWAY OF THE MARKET: CULTURAL ADAPTATION OF
REALITY TV FORMATS AND SOCIAL-CULTURAL CHANGE IN INDIA

By

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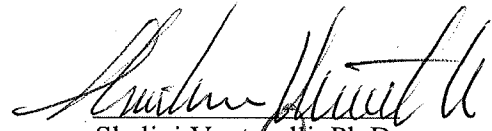

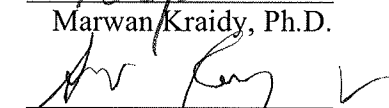

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ABSTRACT

As thousands crowd at audition sites and millions watch and vote, reality TV shows in India offer dramatic tales of transformation for those willing to take a chance, be ambitious, compete and (possibly) win. This dissertation focuses on the re-production of globally circulated formats of reality TV shows in India and asks: what are the narratives of reality, participation and change embedded in the global formats and what are the terms of cultural translation? The study illustrates the integration of the Indian television industry with transnational television industrial flows and mechanisms exemplified by practices of reality TV format adaptation. Research involves production ethnography, including embedded, non-participant observations of reality TV format re-production practices in Mumbai's television studios and in-depth interviews with domestic and global industry professionals. In particular, observations from the making of three shows (*Who Wants to be a Millionaire-Kaun Banega Crorepati*; *Pop Idol-Indian Idol*; *Celebrity Sleepover-Desi Girl*) inform analysis; along with empirical material gathered from secondary data. The concept of "performative encounters" proposed in this study facilitates a theoretical framework that highlights the dynamics between social power (both material and ideational) and practices: illustrating the structured encounters and industrial logics introduced by transnational television as it reshapes the conditions and practices of cultural production and the scripted norms imported via reality TV formats, while alerting us to the performative stances and gestures deployed in the

creative agency and localized cultural practices of format adaptation by Indian producers. Analysis reveals how thematic emphasis on competition, individualism, ambition and self-management skills embedded in reality TV shows signal the cultural sway of the market in post-liberalized India. But the focus on practices of cultural translation and television production also demonstrates, crucially, how global capital and media forces contend with different social, historical and cultural actors, perceptions and practices in different settings – revealing the multiple realities of living in a neo-liberal global economy. In contrast to textual readings of reality TV’s ideological underpinnings or structural analysis of global capitalism and its cultural impact, this study offers industry and production ethnographic research and integrates political-economic approaches to cultural analysis.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

This dissertation focuses on the cultural adaptation of globally circulated reality TV formats in India and examines the embedded ideas, appeals, aspirations and attitudes unleashed into the cultural domain by the widely watched entertainment forms. Reality TV formats have emerged as a mainstay on entertainment television in India but the cultural resonance of reality TV formats spills beyond the television screen onto other social-cultural spaces. “Breaking news” on news television networks update viewers on the latest happenings on popular reality TV shows; newspapers feature bold headlines, editorials and feature segments on reality TV related topics; blockbuster Hindi films¹ incorporate reality TV into plot lines; social commentators debate its normative effects on public life at various forums; crowds riot in protest², thousands queue at auditions to participate or fill the streets to campaign for favorite contestants; while Parliamentarians³ seek to ban (at least some) such shows on grounds of public morality. This “reality rage” (as newspaper headlines often refer to the popularity and controversies stirred by the reality TV trend) is not exceptional to India. Rather the popularity of reality TV formats in India is important for our consideration precisely because it is part of a wider, global phenomenon: the flow of transnational capital - of both materials and ideas - that transforms the conditions and practices of television production, introduces new

¹ *Dilli 6, Rab Ne Bana Di Jodi, Chance Pe Dance*

² As in the case of *Indian Idol 3* in 2007, when an ethnic slur on a radio show against the *Idol* winner set off riots in the North-East of India.

³ For example, furor over Star Plus’s *Sach ka Samna* in Rajya Sabha, leading to a show cause notice issued by the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting

symbolic-cultural forms (such as reality TV formats) and reorients our social-cultural imaginations.

The television industry in India has witnessed a radical transformation and rapid growth since the Indian state began pursuing policies of pro-market, economic liberalization in the 1990s. State monopoly over the broadcasting space was replaced by a number of private, non-state ventures as both national and transnational media companies began investing in the television industry. New television networks broadcast over cable and satellite (C&S) connections began providing multiple news and entertainment television channels to paying subscribers (as opposed to free-over-the-air public broadcasting). Multiple networks and round-the-clock programming offered an array of choices in a booming commercial broadcasting system. And, in a relatively short span of two decades (1990 to 2010) television has emerged as an immensely lucrative sector in the Indian media and entertainment (M& E) industries – overtaking (in 2002) the famed goliath of Bollywood or Hindi commercial film industry (Singh, 2008) that churns out films and profits at stupendous rates to become the leader in the M&E industry. The overall television industry in India, which accounts for 329 billion rupees, is nearly half (45%) of the M&E space, which is valued at 728 billion rupees (Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry-KPMG report [FICCI-KPMG], 2012). With a reach of 126 million households connected to a 24X7 C&S television networks, out of a total of 148 million TV owning household (Television Audience Measurement [TAM], 2012),⁴ the television universe in India is the third largest market in the world today, after the United States and China (Hindustan Times, 2007).

⁴ These figures are based on 2001 census as the TAM Media Research 2012 report was issued before the 2011 census. TAM is a joint venture between Nielsen (India) and Kantar Market Research.

Within this thriving television industry, the Hindi language and national “*general entertainment channels*” or GECs⁵ (as opposed to smaller, regional language or niche, news networks) account for the largest slice of the market, both in terms of revenue and the number of viewers they attract⁶. As a result, many of the global media companies (News Corporation, Viacom, Sony, Turner Broadcasting Company etcetera) have invested in the GEC space, either by starting new “sister networks” in India as part of vertically integrated transnational corporations or setting up domestic offices or even entering into joint-ventures with smaller domestic companies in need of capital provided by the global corporations. The presence of transnational capital may be found at different levels in the *structure* of television industry (from broadcasters, production houses, format owners, advertising/media agencies to television audience measurement agencies). But the entry of transnational players has also introduced new *practices* in the business of television, including new commercial considerations and norms, new symbolic-media forms and new creative ideas and values that inform television production. In exploring the cultural salience of reality TV formats in India this dissertation locates the popularity of the media form in the industrial contexts and practices of television production – tracing the integration of the Indian television space into a global cultural economy and exploring the cultural imprints of the phenomenon in terms of the ideas re-produced and popularized via globally circulated reality TV formats.

The focus on television *production* in general, and reality TV format *re-production* in particular, is significant because despite drastic restructuring, the impact of

⁵ GEC is an industry term

⁶ In 2007 GECs accounted for 40% share of the market (Turakhia, 2007); while the numbers vary GEC continues to corner the biggest share because India is a one-TV-per-home market and GEC television viewing caters to the entire family (rather than niche networks which appeal to individual interests).

transnational capital on entertainment television and the import of reality TV formats remain surprisingly under explored in Indian media/television and cultural studies. Seminal scholarships investigating the representational regimes on entertainment genres provide us helpful insights on how television shapes our collective and subjective agency (Mankekar, 1999) and the “historical conjuncture” (Rajagopal, 2001, p3) between television-inflected language for nationalist politics and economic liberalization. But such studies have focused on fictional forms (soap operas and religious mythologies) appearing on state television in the 1980s. The television experience today is very different (as noted above) but the need for studies examining the interpretive frameworks available on contemporary television is more than a question of updating our understanding; it also refers to crucial methodological issues of studying media texts and its constitutive power in an era of global capital and television-cultural flows. The initial years of C&S television in India has been explored in terms of how media frames cultural, national identity (Butcher, 2003; Gupta, 1998), middle class morality (Shah, 1997) or social attitudes of viewers (Jensen & Oster, 2007) but do not account for the changes in the industrial contexts and market imperatives that determine content production practices or *how* specific texts, meanings and interpretations become available for viewers (who is the imagined viewer and how has that changed; what do network executives identify as “market potential” and what are the strategies they deploy to expand their market reach; what are the new (globally) structured norms, rationalities and favored “functionalities” that determine creative productions; what are the commercial and cultural calculations with which producers respond in the new television space to resonate with new viewers; and so on). The “growth story” of C&S television in India is

widely known and noted but the trajectory and dynamics of growth itself is rarely examined. This study is an intervention in that direction and looks specifically at the period between 2000 and 2010 – marked by the first reality TV format launched in 2000 and the beginning of a new trend of adapting global reality TV formats that has dominated the airwaves in the decade since then; the ubiquity of reality TV shows featuring ordinary viewers (and sometimes celebrities) propelling themselves to fame and fortune on national television; and the expansion of C&S transnational television networks airing reality TV formats beyond the urban, upper middle classes and metropolitan centers (Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata) into the “interior” small towns and “heartlands” of India (particularly since the mid 2000s) in search of new markets.

The popularity of the reality TV format *Pop Idol* in India in 2007⁷, in particular, has prompted sporadic academic interest around issues of reality TV’s power to mobilize viewers (Punathambekar, 2010) and ethnic fractures that the season (*Indian Idol 3*) specifically brought to the fore (Sen, 2012), but again, such forays provide interpretive readings without accounting for the production contexts, viewer engagement mechanisms or even the viewing practices (for example, how producers actively strategize, stir, manage and mediate the mass mobilizations around viewer-voting; or how and why viewers feel motivated to watch, vote and/or audition to become a contestant; etcetera). Failure to account for the social-industrial scenarios (or sustained research on the reception contexts) and limiting ourselves to the textual plane for interpretive findings can produce inadequate understanding of the different forces at work in reality TV’s social-cultural play. More recent studies that do account for the impact of structural-

⁷ *Indian Idol* season 3, which featured finalists from the North-East of India and invoked issues of regional politics, strife and fissures in the national identity narratives surrounding North-East’s relationship with the Indian nation-state.

industrial changes on media texts (Mehta, 2008; Rai and Cottle, 2007; Roy, 2011; Thussu, 2007a and b) have, on the other hand, all looked at news television and not the entertainment sector. This is an important gap because entertainment television, especially Hindi “general entertainment channels” (GECs), are (as noted earlier) the largest revenue generator within the television industry and has the widest market reach; while news television accounts for only 10% of the total television market (Ram, 2010). There are more people watching reality TV on GECs for instance, than those watching news bulletins.

The growing universe of people who regularly tune into television in India makes it important to ask, what are the conditions, imperatives, incentives and strategies of production that shape the highly popular reality TV shows on nightly entertainment television? What are the ideas that percolate through the trans-national corporate offices and television studios to underpin the popular appeal of reality TV formats; which aspirations are stirred by its global-local cultural swirl; and how do the ideas and interpretive frameworks popularized by reality TV reshape social-cultural imaginations in contemporary India? This dissertation is an exploration to that end.

The research question focuses on excavating the set of ideas and practices that gain precedence and prevalence through the reality TV formats, particularly, the terms of reality representation, norms of participation and aspirations for change popularized by the global circulation of reality TV formats. The analytical approach is to uncover the underlying logics – the ideas, values, meanings and motivations – that structure the reality TV formats and are used in the cultural adaptation in order to reveal the set of

ideas that become accessible and meaningful, indeed necessary and commonsensical, in everyday life via reality TV shows (while making other ideas invisible and irrelevant).

Research on television production practices focuses on the social logics, rationalities and strategies used in format adaptation as selective organization of cultural material. Cultural adaptation or format re-production is therefore understood as more than a formal and technical maneuvering. Instead, uncovering how a format is adapted for a given cultural market reveals how transnational capital flows (of materials and ideas) coalesce at certain junctures to inform our interpretive frameworks, facilitate new ideas and practices and provide new cultural competencies. Analytically, format re-production provide us a point of entry into the dynamics of dispersed forces involved in global capital and media flows from the vantage point of localized experiences. The analytical design is based on thematic significance – identifying the repetitions, recurrences and forcefulness with which key themes appear in the collected data (that is, what producers identify as key elements of the show and how they spend their time and effort in producing the show). Primary data presented in this paper draws from embedded, non-participant observations of the re-production of reality TV formats in Mumbai's television studios along with in-depth, unstructured interviews with national and transnational executives (representing global format owners (Singapore and Mumbai offices), production companies who reproduce the formats, broadcasting networks) as well local producers engaged on the creative side at different levels of the production chain (from head of productions to assistant producers, costume designers to contestant managers, and so on). Review of secondary data from industry reports, press releases and news articles support analysis.

To clarify then, this study is not intended to create a registry of global-versus-local cultural indicators; rather the aim is to explore how reality TV formats render particular ideational frameworks meaningful in ways that are both locally specific and globally shared. The “global” circulation of reality TV formats is not understood here as an aggregate or a catalogue of local varieties. The “global” thrust of industrial flows does represent a homogenizing phenomenon but one that calls for our attention at historically and culturally particular “points of articulation” (Kraidy, 2003, p53), while the use of the term “local” is conceptualized as a set of everyday practices that are socially-historically specific and contingent.

Furthermore, while the study is focused on *reality TV* formats (as opposed to fictional formats⁸, for instance) the objective is not to generate genre specific understanding; rather to understand why specific symbolic-cultural forms (such as reality TV shows) gain prevalence and what does it signal about the set of ideas, values, meanings and practices that are then imported into the social-cultural domain. While “texts” are considered important as media-cultural forms, the study does not rely on textual analysis. Not all texts (as formats) “work” well in all cultural market (which makes it important for us to look at the television shows that gain wider cultural currency) but the objective here is to zoom into the *deliberations* over which texts *will* “work” and *how to make the show* to make it “work” (that is, production strategies), beyond the textual features. Doing so enables us to elicit the industrial imperatives, rationalities and conditional practices of television-cultural production and investigate the

⁸ Although fictional formats too have been adapted in India; for example, *Jassi Jaissi Koi Nahin* on Sony Entertainment Television (SET) in 2003, adapted from the originally Colombian drama *Yo Soy Betty La Fea* (also popular as *Ugly Betty* in the U.S. market). Fictional formats are however very seldom adapted in India.

production of texts in terms of the ideas, values, logics and gestures that gain primacy in particular scenarios of transnational television flows. Also, there is a categorical difference between “genres” and “formats”. While “genres”, broadly conceptualized, refer to the textual features and rhetorical or narrative conventions the term “formats” (discussed further in following sections and chapter six) signifies industrial practices – of packaging of television shows into specific set of licensed and branded ideas, production and programming strategies, narrative focus and structure of show’s progression, character profiles etcetera that may then be adapted to local cultural needs (of languages, actors, norms, gestures and so on) in different television markets around the world. The focus in this study is on the industrial production scenarios and practices and as such on the format aspects (instead of genre or textual aspects) of reality TV’s global-local cultural salience.

Locating Reality TV Formats in India

Most reality TV shows in India are adaptation of “formats” as opposed to “homegrown” or indigenous television shows (and those that are not licensed formats are usually “inspired” imitations). To consider the popular resonance of reality TV shows in India is therefore, inevitably, a discussion of the popularity of reality TV *formats*, which represents one of the growing sectors of trade in the transnational television industry. But the trade in television formats is also an offshoot of the globalization of the television industry itself. End of public broadcasting, privatization of airwaves and deregulation of markets, in keeping with pro-market, neo-liberal policies adopted by nation-states across the world, have led to an increasing flow of capital (Moran, 1998). The result has been

the rise of a structurally integrated transnational television industry. In India, for example, with the exception of one domestic-based enterprise (Zee TV) all the major networks in the thriving Hindi entertainment television sector are either owned or joint ventures with global media conglomerates (Star part of News Corporation; SET and Sab part of Sony; Imagine TV⁹ part of Turner Broadcasting Company; Colors part of Viacom; and so on). The in-flow of capital has created new television networks and provided the deep pockets necessary to survive in a highly competitive television market (whereas cash-strapped smaller ventures often fail to sustain themselves). But beyond the structural alignments and corporate linkages, association with transnational capital has also fostered a flow of professional rationalities, know-how and shared sensibilities that guide creative and commercial choices of globally connected television producers. Indian television producers have increasingly turned to western markets and take cue from programming schedules of A-level markets such as the United States and western Europe, along with

⁹ Turner Broadcasting System decided to shut down Imagine TV in 2012, during the writing of this dissertation, due to less than expected and unsteady performance in the intensely competitive GEC market. The channel was acquired by Turner from NDTV in 2010 and was a second attempt by Turner to establish itself in the GEC sector (after an initial investment in 2008 as a 50-50 joint-venture with Miditech for Real, which too was shut down). Imagine TV was originally launched by NDTV, a domestic media enterprise, in partnership with NBC Universal, another global media company. While NDTV was trying to diversify into entertainment from its mainly news networks/programming business, NBC was trying to expand into the Indian market as a sought after “emerging market” (Business Standard, 2012). The financial crisis of 2008 limited NBC’s investments on the network and Turner acquired NDTV’s stakes in Imagine TV, making it a part of Turner’s holdings in 2010 (at the time of my fieldwork in India, on the sets of Imagine’s popular show *Desi Girl*). I highlight these turns of events to emphasize that irrespective of which company invests and which company withdraws at any given juncture the interest and intrusion of global media capital into the Indian television industry and lucrative entertainment sector is undeniable. Also, it should be noted that Turner International, part of Times Warner Group, is the fourth largest global entertainment conglomerate (after Walt Disney, News Corporation and Viacom) and *already* has a long and significant presence in the Indian television market (from children’s networks such as Cartoon Network, Pogo and Boomerang to movie channels like WB, HBO, TCM; from news networks CNN and content-sharing and branding agreements with CNN-IBN, a domestic news network to distribution deals with Zee Network, another domestic enterprise, through which it distributes 35 channels in India in the Zee-Turner bouquet, which in turn is part of a joint venture between Zee and Star (part of News Corporation) to distribute channels through Mediapro. In other words, the tentacles of the Turner media empire run deep in the Indian market and the shut down of Imagine TV is only one blip in the constant upheavals and changes in the Indian television industry.

frequenting international trade fairs to determine which shows to put on air in India. Global media companies specializing in formats (such as Endemol, Fremantle, Celador etcetera) have simultaneously turned their attention to the vast Indian television market in lure of lucrative opportunities, set up domestic operations and started pitching (and increasingly producing) a variety of formats for both pan-Indian or Hindi language networks and smaller regional language networks¹⁰.

Reality TV formats have emerged in this transnational dynamic as a particularly logical choice. Compared to fictional shows, reality TV formats are relatively less limited by culturally defined characterizations, plotlines etcetera. But as with all formats, reproducing globally circulated reality TV formats allow producers to replicate “tried and tested ideas” that garner good ratings in one market and therefore “likely” to do well elsewhere. Formats eliminate risks in the business of television and introduce an element of predictability as formats are provided with detailed viewer ratings and advertising revenue data along with production details (such as camera, sounds, set designs etc). As such, formats provide “hygiene” (in the words of an Indian television executive; Rohatgi, personal interview, 2010) by filtering messy creative urges of local producers – cleansing local cultural gestures of (potentially) disruptive elements that distract from the reliable “standard operating procedures” *while allowing* local cultural attributes to be coherently re-articulated within the bounded norms and logics of symbolic-cultural production in a transnational television scenario. The pervasiveness of reality TV formats across networks in India therefore reflects, as argued in this study, the incorporation of the

¹⁰ While the focus of this study is on the Indian market it is important to note that the networks are widely watched outside the cultural, geographical and political boundaries of the India nation-state – by both the Indian diaspora in different parts of the world and other South Asian communities within and outside South Asia.

Indian television space into transnational industrial processes and the assimilation of Indian viewers into a global circuitry of transnational cultural production.

While there is no attempt to prove a necessary and causal correspondence between global television networks and the import of global reality TV formats in India, this study helps us understand how reality TV formats begin to appear on Indian television landscape as a consequence of the entry of transnational television networks. The first reality TV format adapted for Indian viewers appeared on Star Plus, part of News Corporation, in 2000 with the show *Kaun Banega Crorepati* (KBC) adapted from *Who Wants to be a Millionaire* (explored further in chapter six). The strategy of replicating formats soon became the new norm, adopted by all other global networks operating in the Indian entertainment space. For example, formats such as *Fear Factor* and *Big Brother* appeared on Colors/Viacom; *Pop Idol*, *X Factor*, *Dancing with the Stars* debuted on Sony; *Celebrity Sleepover* was remade by Imagine TV; and so on. Zee TV, the only major domestic network (with transnational operations of its own) has, in relative contrast, tended to either develop its own “homegrown” reality TV shows or blatantly imitate the formats available globally. But in-flow of global media capital introduces new industrial and competitive strategies (such as importing formats) and sets new norms for cultural production, making it necessary for all other networks (including Zee, a domestic network or Doordarshan, the state broadcaster) to respond by emulating the strategy, filling the airwaves with reality TV shows (whether adapted from licensed formats or imitated versions).

Reality TV and (Neo-liberal) Imaginaries in India

Reality TV shows, in India or elsewhere, tend to offer dramatic tales of transformation for those willing to take a chance, be ambitious, compete and (possibly) win. This tantalizing promise of reality TV – investing the humdrum lives of viewers with thrilling prospects – has placed reality TV shows at the center of India’s booming entertainment television industry. Reality TV shows are “big ticket” ventures that “drive” audiences¹¹ and advertisers to broadcasters; tend to be scheduled for weekends to target the entire family gathered around the television; and have become a necessary item on programming schedules across all GECs. As reality TV shows mobilize everyday viewers (to watch, vote, contest or campaign for favorite contestants) this study focuses on the new imaginaries on or off television that interrupt ordinary lives and invoke extraordinary futures? In doing so, the analytical approach contextualizes the ideational appeals that are embedded in the formats and then reproduced in India in terms of a wider social field of television and cultural production.

The transnational structural connections and import of reality TV formats witnessed in the Indian television industry is inextricably linked to India’s historical shift towards neo-liberal social policies. Beginning in the 1980s but more aggressively since the 1990s, the Indian state adopted a pro-market, consumer driven economic vision for national development, replacing its earlier infra-structural emphasis and state planned economic model. A “structural adjustment program” adopted after a debt and currency crisis in the 1990s, as part of the conditional requirements set for World Bank loans, advocated unleashing private entrepreneurial zeal, allowing private capital and foreign investments in all sectors of social life. This move towards privatization, liberalization

¹¹ Reality TV shows are particularly appealing to young viewers (between 18 to 28 years) with 53% share (Amarnath, 2008), which is important because majority of the population in India is below 35 years today.

and de/re-regulation enabled transnational television networks and global media capital to enter the Indian television space. While there was no direct legislative action spurring the entry of global media/television capital, there was a tacit silence when transnational networks, such as Star TV, part of News Corporations, started beaming to Indian viewers (in 1993). At a time of deregulation and privatization it was ideologically necessary and politically expedient for the state to allow, if not embrace, the transnational networks - especially in the entertainment space - to enter the Indian television market. While certain limits were placed on news television, as the site of politics proper that the state must control with some measure to protect national sovereignty and stability, the realm of entertainment television was largely unclaimed by the Indian state (except for occasional debates over public morality). As urban, metropolitan and mostly upper middle class consumers turned to the new glitzy entertainment fare on transnational networks, the commercial television environment could grow uninhibited by state regulation.

In *con-textualizing* the production of reality TV formats, we may then find a larger social, historical process at work: how global (media) capital forces enter new markets, pushing wider and deeper into new territories, popularizing new symbolic-cultural forms (such as reality TV) and remaking our social-cultural orientations, in the process. In asking which ideas get embedded in the social-cultural domain this study is an enquiry on how the cultural space of reality TV formats fulfill (as research findings reveal) an important social function for the neo-liberal state – by introducing pro-market themes (of individual ambition, competition, entrepreneurship, end-goal orientation and so on) in everyday life in India. Analysis of the underlying ideas and values in reality TV formats illustrate how television helps mediate the decline of the state/public and the

advance of the market/private, in and through the new sense of the self-directed, self-motivated and self-responsible individualized subject promoted on popular reality TV shows.

Historically situated critical examinations of reality TV, as a media form, have also placed reality TV in the domain of social instrumentality or what Hay (2010) identifies as “technologies of governance”. The origin of reality TV is often traced to a show called *Candid Camera* that first appeared in United States in 1948 (Clissod, 2004). The show used hidden cameras situated at public places to capture how common people react to specific (uncommon) set-ups. The spontaneous responses of people, unaware of being filmed/observed, were then reconfigured as comic content for television, and implicitly, entertaining morality tales for civic behavior. This “spectacle of actuality” (Jermyn, 2004) popularized by the show has been reformulated in variety of ways since then to create entertainment programming. The specific scenarios for action may change (creating a range of hybrid texts such as quiz-game; adventure-travel; talent-hunt-music/dance show; life-style-makeover shows; etcetera) but reality TV, in general, relies on “real people” (non-actors) and “real (unscripted) re-actions” to produce entertaining tales of modern day morality.

In a study of a popular courtroom-reality TV show called *Judge Judy* (which too has been replicated in India as *Aap ki Kachehri Kiran ke Saath* on Star Plus, with Kiran Bedi¹² acting as the judge) Ouellette (2009) reveals how “real life” disputes are resolved (in a setting imitating the small-claims courts in the United States) by promoting “responsible personal choices”. The low-income, socially marginalized women who tend to be the primary participants on the U. S. show are instructed, for example, on the perils

¹² Social activist, senior officer of Indian Police Service and winner of Ramon Magsaysay Award

of lending money to friends without guarantees or having babies out of wedlock without ensuring spousal support for child-care costs and so on. Such shows gained cultural presence in the United States, Ouellette illustrates, in the midst of 1990s neo-liberal discourses of small government role and self-regulating markets, and seek to replicate market values in personal lives – initiating viewers into a self-management schema of self-responsibility, self-motivation and self-discipline. The self-directed individual emerges as the principle site and means of resolving the problems of life, irrespective of the social-historical conditions of inequity (McMurria, 2008). This “compulsory individuality” (Wood and Skeggs, 2004) of choices and consequences is recreated in reality TV shows irrespective of genre-textual differences. Lifestyle-reality TV for instance “tutor” individuals to develop “better tastes” to remake one’s self, sometimes remaking the body quite literally with plastic surgery (Franco, 2008) whereby physical beauty/perfection validates the emotional self (as husbands/wives, boy/girlfriends, family members begin to “appreciate” the subject) and initiates changes in attitudes and life choices. Home-improvement-reality TV, on the other hand, promote a “moral economy” (Hay, 2010) by cultivating a homeownership culture of self-enterprise, self-actualization and self-investment in the pre-2008 days, but then again placing the individual in the center of the narratives in the post-2008 environment of financial crisis by encouraging participants on the show and viewers at home to take responsibility for failed mortgages.

Critical examination of the symbolic-cultural form has, however, focused primarily in historically liberal societies (such as the United States and parts of Western Europe) without accounting for the social-historical specificity of (broadly conceptualized) “non-western” societies that have been more recently liberalized as an

imperative of joining the neo-liberal global economy. This gap is particularly important because the popularity of reality TV derives largely from its marketability as a television format, which can be sold and reproduced in different cultural markets around the world. The global resonance of reality TV shows makes it imperative to ask: how is neo-liberalism via reality TV experienced in “non-western” societies? Do western experiences with the genre transfer equally? Or do we find contestations and negotiations embedded in the encounters facilitated via reality TV formats? The question motivating this dissertation is therefore: what are *the terms of cultural translation, assimilation and participation in the global cultural economy?*

This study also marks a point of departure from existing scholarship on reality TV and its social implications by focusing on the production practices. Though critical assessments linking the ideological underpinnings of reality TV to a neo-liberal social thought provide penetrating *readings* of the symbolic form yet studies on reality TV have rarely ventured beyond the textual plane (with notable exceptions, such as Andrejevic, 2004; Grindsaff, 2009; Kraidy, 2010) to engage with the *production* contexts and practices. This is another important gap because it tends to limit our understanding of the “cultural technology” (Ouellette & Hay, 2008) of reality TV, identified in terms of how reality TV fosters an “enterprise culture” (Heelas & Morris, 1992), into an abstract force that shapes individual subjectivities and may be (critically) interpreted to reveal its “governmentality” (Ouellette & Hay, 2008). If in contrast we look at the production of ideas on reality TV shows we are compelled to account for the conditions in which (neo-liberal) ideas on reality TV gain traction (how specific structural alignments in the transnational television industry introduces new formats; the specific conditions and

imperatives within which producers create particular television shows; how ideas take shape in contingent ways and inform the appeals circulated via reality TV shows; and so on). Doing so also highlights, importantly, how ideas may mutate in historically and socially-culturally located acts of meaning making; how neo-liberal governmentality operating through reality TV may be implicated in specific social-cultural dynamics and get complicated (as opposed to the singular meanings produced by interpreting the reality TV texts). As a result, what may emerge in research, as this study reveals, is the everyday and often performative nature of living in an age of global capital, as producers (and contestants/viewers) encounter new structural demands, acquire new competencies, adjust to new norms and react, reinterpret and rearticulate in the process.

Structure and Agency in a Global Cultural Economy

The ubiquity of reality TV formats in television markets around the world foregrounds questions of structure and agency in how we conceptualize global cultural economy. On one hand, reality TV formats have gained currency amongst television executives as formats enable corporate linkages to operate smoothly in a transnational television industry. Formats not only standardize creative ideas and values into a pre-branded “property” that breeds familiarity and therefore makes (localized) productions relatively easier but also facilitates risk-revenue calculations at the heart of the television business. In a highly competitive television market, both television executives and advertisers (of global consumer goods) vying for viewer/consumer’s attention find reliable choices in the globally recognizable, and popular, television formats. For instance, executives from a global media house such as Viacom or News Corporation

(who run television networks in different cultural markets) and executives from fast-moving-consumer-goods (FMCG) company such as Proctor & Gamble (who buy advertising airtime on the television networks) have a shared familiarity and sense of reliability with globally known brands of television shows and therefore prefer format shows (rather than having to speculate over “unknown properties” and possible success of homegrown shows). Reality TV formats are thus deeply embedded in the operating logics of a globally connected television industry and reveal structural and industrial processes at work. On the other hand, reality TV formats are not only supple, elastic forms that can easily lend to local cultural needs but, importantly, formats *require* local cultural agency as formats *must be* adapted and re-produced in local cultural-television markets. In other words, focusing on the global structural, macro-level processes tell us little about the cultural encounters, negotiations and accommodations that facilitate such *global structural processes in and through the “local” cultural agency* (whether in India or elsewhere). To do so we must consider not only the material and capital forces necessary to enter new markets and the structural linkages that facilitate new cultural formats, such as reality TV formats, but also the minutiae of cultural acts, gestures, ideas and idioms that render the reality TV formats locally recognizable, acceptable and commonsensical.

Methodologically, this study approaches both the structural factors and the cultural agency implicated in the global circulation of reality TV format by locating research in the television studios in Mumbai, India, to explore the contexts and practices of reality TV re-production. Embedded (non-participant) observations of the production processes, as well as in-depth interviews, focus on industrial contexts, imperatives,

rationalities and strategies that frame cultural production but also look at the myriad cultural practices, tactics, negotiations and accommodations. In other words, in this study we look at the linkages (and possible slippages) between the global-structural circulation and the local-practical iterations that makes the “glo-cal”¹³ (Kraidy, 2003) flow of ideas, images and practices in contemporary media/television scenarios.

Empirically, research focuses on the commercial-creative choices of television producers as they identify the essential themes, ideas and values of selected reality TV formats and then culturally translate the formats for local viewers (while deselecting other themes, ideas and actions). This approach builds on Caldwell’s argument that in the current, deregulated world of the multi-channel flow and the global distribution of television programs it is not entirely clear as to what exactly constitutes a text and if anything “...current textual formats are, in fact, overt and explicit *institutional performances of context*” (Caldwell, 2006, p104, emphasis added). Reality TV format re-production is understood in this dissertation as a performance and practical enactment of the global-structural conditions of the television industry. A research approach built on cultural practices of format adaptation while locating the cultural re-productions in the structural, industrial contexts of production allows us to move beyond a structurally deterministic view of cultural production as per a strictly political-economic account or risk interpreting cultural acts as discrete and unanchored from the material, economic realities of production. Instead, the research design enables us to explore how the

¹³ The notion of “glocal” used here refers to Kraidy’s heuristic use of the term signaling the “global-local” dynamic as “relational, reciprocal processes, (that are) mutually formative” (Kraidy, 2003, p38) (rather than binaries or dichotomies). Such an approach allows us to articulate the glocal hybrid constructions in terms of both “dialectical” and “dialogical” interactions, that is, the relations of power at both the material (economic, institutional, technological) and cultural (ideas, idioms, gestures, cues) realms of textual meaning making.

global/structural and material flows are enmeshed and enacted through the local/cultural and ideational spaces.

Analytically, data is organized around dominant ideas and practices for reality TV format re-production and analysis is driven by thematic significance – the repetitions, recurrences and forcefulness with which key themes appear in the collected data. In studying format adaptation the goal here is not to investigate the limiting principles of the format, that is, how much local producers are contractually allowed to change or modify the formats and how much local producers resist the format's limits on cultural-creative productions¹⁴. Rather, this study looks at the structure of ideas and feelings that are replicated and reproduced via formats. This methodological approach is supported by a theoretical framework premised on Bourdieu's dialectical framework for cultural practices as socially conditioned acts and Gramsci's theory of hegemony, which links practices to historically negotiated, constant and contingent struggle for power – produced through consent and common sense rather than structurally coerced or determined. Reality TV formats and the focus on the terms of cultural adaptation undertaken in this dissertation is therefore intended to illustrate the interconnectedness of different forces and forms of power - material, symbolic, social, historical, cultural – and illustrate how different forces intersect to render specific realities meaningful in everyday life. To look at how television producers in India adapt the reality TV formats is to capture the commercial *and* creative, economic *and* cultural, structural *and* practical

¹⁴ Such a focus of investigation is moot because apart from basic elements (logos, opening montage shots; music cues, etcetera) the format is, in general, open to negotiation and mutation; local producers and global format owners share a common interest in making the format successful in a given market without compromising on its branded appeal.

dynamics of television; beyond the dichotomies of “economism and textualism” (Hay, 2001, p212).

Primary data presented in this dissertation draws from four months of embedded observations of the production of reality TV shows in 2010, as well as more than 33 in-depth, unstructured interviews with national and transnational executives representing format owners, local broadcast executives and television producers and other productions staff (costume designers, talent managers, contestant managers, music teachers and directors, studio floor managers, public relations managers working with networks, make-up artists, assistant and associate producers, editors, research teams etcetera). In addition, empirical material gathered for study includes secondary data from industry reports, press releases and news articles. Three reality TV formats are selected for research and analysis: *Kaun Banega Crorepati* (seasons 1 to 3, from 2000 to 2007) adapted from *Who Wants to be a Millionaire*; *Indian Idol* (seasons 1 to 5, from 2004 to 2010) adapted from *Pop Idol* and *Desi Girl* (2010) adapted from *Celebrity Sleepover*. These three shows have been selected as examples of different types of formats. Further, all three shows illustrate changes in reality TV programming trends in India; from the game-quiz types in the initial years starting with *Kaun Banega Crorepati* (KBC)/*Who Wants to be a Millionaire* (first broadcast in 2000) to music/dance/talent-hunt type shows that started with *Indian Idol/Pop Idol* (first broadcast in 2004) and the more “idea based” (rather than repeatable series) shows such as *Desi Girl/Celebrity Sleepover* (broadcast in 2010) that have appeared in recent years. All three shows have been popular in terms of viewer ratings and discussions generated in the press (further selection criteria discussed in chapter four).

Chapters

The dissertation is organized around the following chapters.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

The literature review is organized in three thematic sections: one, on production of reality TV shows as media texts; two, on re-production of reality TV formats into culturally specific content in transnational scenarios of cultural production; and three, on the production of meaning and social power via television. In section one, the focus is on reality TV shows as a symbolic form in order to understand: 1. how we may classify “reality TV” as a genre and identify its key textual characteristics; 2. what is “real” about reality TV, that is, how may we conceptualize “reality” projection alongside creative controls and mediations exercised in production; and 3. what are the concepts and structure of ideas that frame “participation” of common everyday viewers on the reality TV shows. The second section expands the discussion of reality TV to questions of (reality TV) “formats”, to explore how productions of reality TV shows are implicated in transnational industrial practices. The aim is to clarify the concept of television formats and the transnational processes that frame cultural adaptation-production of television formats. The third and final section in this chapter develops the concept of cultural adaptation in relation to television’s social role, specifically the ‘encoding-decoding’ model, which identifies the production of meaning in the context of media processes and social relations of power.

Chapter Three: Theoretical Framework

The theoretical-analytical approach adopted in this study relies on two key conceptual anchors. One, the notion of practices as socially conditioned acts, borrowing Bourdieu's formulation of all social-cultural practices as dialectically related to social power; and two, the notion of power as domination through consensus and common sense, based on Gramsci's formulation of "hegemony" which enables this study to theoretically connect television production to large-scale social organization of power. This chapter develops these two conceptual points of focus and clarifies how we may explore television production as enactment of power and control on the cultural domain. The following discussion is organized in terms of three specific sections. The first section clarifies the conceptual usage of "practices" and "power" in this study as it pertains to television and cultural production. The focus is on explicating the theoretical relationship between practice and power, with reference to the theoretical sources (of Bourdieu and Gramsci) and explains how it underpins the theoretical approach to the study. The second section focuses on how concepts of practice and power may be applied to transnational television systems, especially when conceptualizing historically accumulated power in transnational cultural scenarios and global media processes. The final third section outlines the conceptual elements that help us understand cultural adaptation of reality TV formats, that is, the work of television producers as *cultural mediators* and the *performative-participatory practices* of both producers and contestants on reality TV shows.

Chapter Four: Methodological Framework

This chapter explains the qualitative and exploratory research approach adopted in the study to understand how social power operates on the cultural domain, specifically, in the production practices used in cultural adaptation of reality TV formats. The chapter clarifies the benefits of ethnographic route to study of television production practices and the use of embedded, non-participant observations along with in-depth interviews with producers and participants for primary data collection. A discussion on the analytical design clarifies the phases and stages of inductive analysis based on thematic repetition, recurrences and forcefulness found in the data. The final section clarifies the sites and criteria used for the selection of specific reality TV shows and the focus on related production contexts and experiences that guided fieldwork.

Chapter Five: Markets and Mindsets: The Social Life of Television in India

This chapter contextualizes the dynamics of television's expansion in India, highlighting the transition from a public broadcasting space to a commercial broadcasting environment with multi-channel, transnational networks in the cable and satellite television industry. The goal is to illustrate the expansion of market forces and transnational capital in the television space, starting with urban middle class viewers in metropolitan cities to lower socio-economic categories and different socio-cultural regions, in more recent years. The chapter identifies the market dynamics and its expansion to understand what it may mean for the business of television – that is, how network executives identify and categorize the market, decide the target groups (TGs) and how such decisions determine the programming and production choices intended to appeal to television viewers. A historical contextualization of the development and

transformation of the television space – focusing on the particularities of the Indian market and the influence of national-transnational capital that has restructured the television industry – are intended to illustrate the conditional imperatives and rationalities that frame production practices and choices (that the following chapters focus on).

Chapter Six: Reality TV Formats: Cultural Production in Transnational Scenarios

This chapter focuses on the first reality TV format, KBC/Millionaire, to be adapted for viewers in India. The show started the new trend of reality TV format adaptation on Indian television. By exploring the terms of cultural adaptation of KBC, this chapter identifies how a set of underlying ideas, practices, meanings and values are replicated and rendered meaningful in local social-cultural conditions. By exploring the social and industrial context of KBC's entry and adaptation in the Indian television market we locate the cultural and commercial rationalities that make format adaptation a common industrial practice and the embedded social-cultural ideas, meanings and practices that are then popularized in the social-cultural terrain in India.

Chapter Seven: Re-Producing Reality: The Cultural Sway of the Market

This chapter focuses on the cultural adaptation of the *Idol* format to explore the narratives of reality, participation and change popularized by the show. The chapter draws from existing media studies that have shown how reality TV shows provide “cultural training” and produce “neo-liberal individuals” and contextualizes such insights in the social-cultural specificity of Indian television. The goal is to provide contextually specific understanding of the power of reality TV texts to reshape social-cultural practices and

also to develop upon the existing literature that relies primarily on textual analysis by including contextually driven empirical insights from the world of television production in India. The themes identified and discussed include: 1. competition as the core concept that provides structural logic to the reality TV shows; 2. focus on the individual as the legitimate actor; 3. the notion of universal opportunity at the heart of *Idol*'s branding; 4. the external/physical attributes of transformation (clothes, gestures and so on) popularized on the show; and 5. the internal/abstract attributes of transformation (attitudes such end-goal orientation, risk-rewards calculations and emotional management) that are projected as necessary cultural competencies on the show.

Chapter Eight: Production and Performance of Self

This chapter focuses on the show *Desi Girl* adapted from *Celebrity Sleepover* to illustrate how the underlying themes, ideas and practices identified in reality TV shows in terms of KBC and *Idol* in the previous chapters recur even when the participants/contestants on the shows are celebrities (instead of ordinary viewers as in the case of KBC and *Idol*).

The goal is to show how reality TV shows often invoke “real” issues (such as rural-urban divide as shown in *Desi Girl*) but reframe the issues and events in terms of the neo-liberal values of competition, individualism, end-goal orientation and so on.

Chapter Nine: Conclusion

The concluding chapter summarizes the arguments presented in the dissertation and situates the transformations in the television industry, illustrated by the reality TV production practices, in the larger terrain of on-going social-cultural changes in India.

Analysis of reality TV shows is thus used to establish the productive and “inter-animating” (Rajagopal, 2001) relationship between the material and ideational forces. It is argued that as the mediating form, reality TV shows refer to the cultural organization of power and highlights the cultural accommodations necessary to make sense of the neo-liberal political-economic processes unfolding in the country. As such, it is argued that the culture terrain is where political-economic realities are, and will increasingly, be shaped.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

This dissertation focuses on the production of reality TV shows in India. Specifically, it explores what governs television production – the goals specified and means pursued; the rules of inclusion (and exclusion); range of possibilities (and limitations); order and grammar of choices. Television production is contextualized in terms of the conditions and creative-commercial practices of the transnational business and explored to understand how industrial-structural logics intersect with tactical responses and culturally specific practices in the production of reality TV shows. The analytical interest is to understand the framework of ideas embedded in the production of reality TV shows, in order to understand how the shows featured night after night on prime time entertainment television unleash new ideas, values, actions and meanings into the social-cultural spaces. To that end, the literature review is organized in three sections: one, on production of reality TV shows; two, on re-production of (reality TV) formats into culturally specific content and three, on the production of meaning and social power via television.

In section one, the focus is on *reality TV as a symbolic form* in order to understand: 1. how we may classify the generic characteristics of “reality TV” texts; 2. the production of “reality” on reality TV, that is, how may we conceptualize “reality” claims alongside creative controls and mediations exercised in production; and 3. what are the ideas and logics that frame participation of common everyday viewers on the reality TV shows. The second section expands the discussion of reality TV to questions

of (reality TV) “*formats*”. The objective is to specify how productions of reality TV shows are implicated in transnational industrial practices and clarify the concept of television formats. The third and final section in this chapter develops the concept of *cultural adaptation of reality TV formats* in relation to television’s social role. The discussion draws upon Stuart Hall’s Encoding-Decoding model, which identifies the production of meaning in the context of media processes and social relations of power, and highlights the conceptual and methodological issues of theorizing power in a global cultural economy.

Reality TV: Representational And Participatory Spaces

Genre Definitions and Hybrid Texts

Defining reality TV shows in terms of a discrete genre has proved to be rather elusive. Studies on the form have noted its plastic, mutative and hybrid nature which tends to borrow from multiple genres and inter-mingle creative-textual traditions (Grindstaff, 2002; Gitlin, 1983; Mittell, 2004); and in many cases “resurrect” (Gillan, 2004, p55) older genres or conventions with more contemporary cultural touches. Study on a popular Music Television (MTV) reality-drama show *The Osbournes* for instance revealed how conventions used in sitcoms were incorporated to create comic-dramatic moments out of “real” domestic life (of the popular musician featured on the show) (Gillan, 2004). It is not uncommon therefore for reality TV shows to be mangled and hyphenated texts: adventure-game show, talent-entertainment show, quiz-game show, cooking or life-style-competition show, etcetera. Methodologically this poses a problem:

how do we account for the different types of content within a single analytical category, or classify the symbolic form to explore it as a social-cultural phenomenon (as this study does)?

Generic inter-textualities are, however, not new (Neale, 1990) and television has often cannibalized itself by drawing upon and merging different genres to create new ones¹⁵ (Hill, 2005) as well as take content from other mediums for reproductions¹⁶. In conceptualizing the construction of reality TV texts, studies have therefore approached it in terms of shifting styles (Corner, 2002a; Nichols, 1991), a continuum of sorts, rather than a unitary definition. Early work on identifying reality TV took a textual path, examining the formal-textual characteristics of the symbolic form (Corner, 1995, 1996; Kilborn, 1994, 1998; Nichols, 1994) with growing attention to the changes in conventions of audio-visual documentary practices (Corner, 2002a, 2002b; Kilborn 2003) while later scholarship on reality TV have looked more and more at the range of social-industrial-contextual factors (such as market conditions and culturally specific practices) as defining factors that give form to reality TV (Hill, 2005; McCarthy, 2004; Murray, 2009; and others).

The central logic for text production that characterizes all reality TV types (game/adventure/quiz etcetera) is the use of un-scripted content, non-actors or “real” people (as opposed to scripted characters) and a broadly defined commitment to reality projection. In studying the historical development of the documentary form and its association with popular mass media, John Corner (2002a and b) however unpacks the

¹⁵ For example, ‘infotainment’ (*America’s Most Wanted*, *Cops*); ‘docu-soap’ (*An American Family*) etcetera (Hill, 2005, p24).

¹⁶ Kjus (2009) for instance refers to the show *The Major Bowes Amateur Hour* (1934-1952) on radio in United States and its reproduction as *Ted Mack and the Original Amateur Hour* with the arrival of television.

reality rendition on reality TV shows as a “decisive shift towards diversion” with a “performative, playful element” (Corner, 2002b, p263). Studies show that reality TV texts mark a departure from the “discourse of sobriety” (Nichols, 1991) associated with documentary treatment of factual-realism. What is distinctive about reality TV’s association with realism, in that sense, is its explicit commitment to frame *reality as entertainment* (as opposed to information). Corner argues that reality in reality TV is reflective of a “post documentary culture” (2002b, p257) or an expanded “range of popular images of the real” (Corner, 2001b), whereby the “look” of factual programming is now available across entertainment forms, complete with musical cues, camera work, sound design and editing intended to excite and amuse, rather than inform and educate. The “post-documentary” phase, Corner clarifies, is meant to illustrate the transformation of documentary from a noun (with fixed attributes) to an adjective (which emphasizes the practices). But his study retains the focus on formal and textual features to identify reality TV in relation to other texts while emphasizing the capacity of the form to evolve. A similar attention to textual features can be found in Hill’s (2005) conceptualization of reality TV texts in terms of three overlapping strands of tabloid journalism, documentary television, and popular entertainment (p23-39). If documentary is seen as “observational realism” (recording an ongoing event) or “expositional realism” (projecting the rhetoric of accuracy and truth) while “popular entertainment” is almost exclusively about amusing its audiences by relying on specific narrative strategies, scripts and professional actors, then “tabloid journalism” is understood to be about the interplay between ordinary people and celebrities to create a fusion between information and entertainment. Reality TV, it is often argued, lies somewhere in-between these webs of textual features, however one

names them – in an indeterminate and inherently fluid space between fact and fiction, documented information and produced entertainment (Bondebjerg, 1996).

Ironically, a textual approach to identifying reality TV as a genre is counter-productive because it highlights how the production of reality TV defies generic logics and fixed perception of how the text should be. Corner's insight linking reality TV to documentary and realism in terms of textual points of departure are instructive precisely because it suggests reality TV may have less to do with genre specific traditions or textual features and more about the "*treatment* of realities" at the intersection of fact and fiction (emphasis added, Corner, 2002b) – shifting the attention from the text to the production of texts¹⁷. It is then important to ask what motivates the treatment of reality; how does the broadcasting environment dictate reality construction; what are the underlying assumptions and choices that frame our perception of reality; and how are such embedded ideas informed by the social-cultural conditions?

In contrast to textual approaches, others have suggested that proliferation of reality TV programming is not indicative of developments in television texts - rather it illustrates the industry's reliance on "reality" as a promotional marketing tool. What separates the spate of contemporary reality-based television is the "the open and explicit sale of television programming as a representation of reality" (Friedman, 2002). A range of industrial and market conditions and needs are called into attention as necessary considerations in conceptualizing reality TV texts. This approach to conceptualizing

¹⁷ Conversations with television producers during fieldwork reinforce this point. Producers regularly dismiss the notion of reality TV formats as a "genre" and instead insist that what matters more than the specific textual conventions are: 1. Casting of interesting "characters" or individual contestants to allow viewer identification; and 2. the "*kahani*" or projected story which would also define the mood of the show (thrilling in *Fear Factor*, upbeat music that the entire family may enjoy in *Indian Idol*, risqué and personal frictions aired later at night in *Big Boss/Big Brother* and so on).

reality TV prioritizes the *practices* of text production and the *contexts* that frame the practical decisions – allowing us to empirically access the evolving and mutating form of reality TV, rather than ground analysis on (presumed) textual unity. A production oriented conceptualization of reality TV shows is critically important, I suggest, specially because reality TV as an un-scripted text¹⁸ is shaped in the chaos of studio floors, contingencies of editing rooms and unpredictability of human interaction. There are patterns we may anticipate - and must investigate - but conceptualization of the symbolic form must also allow us to find the unexpected, creative gestures. Reality TV production, as fieldwork reveals, often surprises the producers themselves with startling turn of events which must then be managed-and-produced into a formal television text. There may be logics, needs and orientations but there is, seldom if ever, any predetermined textual method to the madness of producing of reality TV.

Contextualizing reality TV shows in terms of broadcasting environments led Margaret Gomes (2006) to identify three main programming “waves” that trace the development of the form in western media markets¹⁹. The three waves refer to: one, the infotainment programs based on crime and emergency services, in the late 1980s and early 1990s in United States and its move to Europe; two, observational documentaries or docusoaps, where the action unfolds in front of camera, in mid 1990s Britain, and its move to other parts of Europe; and three, social experiments that put people in controlled situations to create dramatic conflict (for example, *Big Brother*) that developed in

¹⁸ unlike fictions which is shot and edited (for the most part) according to a pre-scripted text that outlines both “action” and “reaction” shots/dialogues etcetera. In non-fictions or reality TV shows however the pre-filming script only specifies the “actions” and the contexts (stage, location etcetera) in which action takes place – leaving the “re-action” shots necessary in creating dramatic sequences to the spontaneous responses generated in-the-moment.

¹⁹ primarily Western Europe and United States

Northern Europe and moved to United States. The historical mapping of the transnational flow is instructive because it highlights, on one hand, the market's need to innovate or do something that can distinguish the television show (or any product) from its competitors and at the same time, the market's tendency to imitate or borrow ideas from other markets to minimize risks. In conceptualizing the textual construction of reality TV texts we must then account for how the market provides energy and logic that is integral to the shape the show takes. Analytically this approach ties the question of *what is reality TV* to *why reality TV* and *why now*, that is, what is it about the market that makes it particularly receptive to reality TV and/or the types of reality TV texts. It must also be clarified that the broadcasting environment in India is significantly different in its history and structural organization than western counterparts²⁰. So to ask how does the market select and shape reality TV texts we need to look at the specificity of the (local) market conditions and its connections and disconnections with global industrial practices, rather than import knowledge based on U.S. and European market experiences. Most studies in the rich body of work exploring how broadcasting environments shape reality TV texts focus on U.S. and European markets and there is a need for more situated understanding in other television industries – especially because the shows themselves are imported to the non-western markets bundled up as reality TV formats but then reproduced with local specificity.

Further, studies have noted that extra-textual factors can sometimes determine the textual characteristics because genres are often culturally defined, interpreted and

²⁰ For example, reality TV shows are a cost effective programming in western markets with lower production budgets than fictional shows but in India reality TV shows are mega-productions requiring significantly higher budgets than the low cost soap operas that are otherwise on offer on prime time schedules on GECs. In other words, the reality of producing reality TV in India is exactly the opposite of western markets.

evaluated to assign social weight and cultural value to a program (Murray, 2009). For example, different networks in United States (Fox Television and PBS) positioned the same show (*American High*) as different genres in keeping with their network's brand image so that viewers access the show's meaning and text through the specified generic lens. Murray argues that the generic definition is at the end based on a conjunction of textual, contextual, industrial/reception contexts. The show *Who Wants to be a Millionaire*, for instance, may be known as a "game show" (as it is in most television markets around the world) or a "quiz-show" (as it often is in India). The producers of the Hindi adaptation of the show made a deliberate market based decision to frame the show as a quiz-show in India because quizzing and general knowledge were perceived as culturally valued (more than the idea of playing a game)²¹. Holmes and Jermyn point out "...one of the reasons that issues of definition, description and terminology²² cannot easily be solved is... because such categorizations are also necessarily an act of discursive construction which is enmeshed with a range of other factors – not least perceptions of cultural values where popular factual programming is concerned" (2004, p7). It is more important in that sense to explore the social-cultural specificity of contexts and practices of production (the productive relations, needs, actors, ideas, logics and strategies) that inform reality TV, without generalizing textual features.

Reality Production, as Real or Produced

²¹ In each case, quiz or game, what remains common however is the notion of providing unscripted reality; participation by 'real' people/non-actors; and a participatory-competitive framework to show how ordinary people may win extra ordinary rewards.

²² With reference to reality TV

The question of what may be considered authentic has emerged as a provocative issue in media studies, especially as media technologies spiral into the nook and crannies of everyday life and engage viewers/users in multiple ways with myriad social, political implications. Scholarship alerts us, for instance, “authenticity” of “produced talk” which allows viewers to accept television’s depictions as truthful and reliable (Scannell, 1996); the “synthetic personalization” of talk (Fairclough, 1992, 1995) on radio and television that shows interpersonal discourse as a performance of the informal rather than “the real thing” (Thornborrow, 2001, p460); and so on. The notion of actuality or reality is also central on reality TV, both in terms of narratives (of rags-to-riches victories; stories of finding fame, fortune, love/marriage partners or of self discovery; of individual ambition and will triumphing over adversity and seizing opportunity; etcetera) and dramatic-emotional appeals (experiences of dilemma as one must compete in a survival of the fittest world, often against friends and by betraying loyalties; of loneliness resulting from single minded pursuit of goals; of exhilaration on winning or exasperation on losing; etcetera). It is vitally important for reality TV shows to maintain a sense of credibility with its viewers, and formats usually specify as well as require auditing processes²³ since the essence of reality TV shows is based on the idea that “real”, ordinary people may appear on the shows, compete and possibly win “real” money and acclaim to transform their everyday reality – from an anonymous individual to a celebrity, a homemaker to a millionaire, a struggling small town dance troupe to a national representative in international media events. The centrality of reality in reality TV shows therefore make the questions of what is “real” and how is “reality” produced important qualifiers in how we may conceptualize and methodologically access the production of reality TV. In

²³ though details of such oversight mechanisms are kept contractually confidential to involved parties only

general, studies have treated the notion of reality on reality TV shows either as ontologically distinct from production practices (Dovey, 2000; Kjus, 2009a; Palmer, 2003; Scannell, 1996) and accessed by separating the craft from the construct, or discursively, that is, as a construct inherent and embedded in the production itself (Bratich, 2007; Thornborrow, 2001).

In a study focusing on the production of Norway's *Pop Idol*, Kjus (2009) cites the encounter between producers and everyday participants as indicative of the show's orientation to reality projection. He stresses the importance of examining the craft of producing reality TV and illustrates how producers use casting to manage the non-professional participants and work as a "key interface" (p282) between the ordinary people who appear on the show and the finished broadcast-ready program. Such production strategies are common to all cultural markets and are often embedded in the format itself in order to ensure the show's appeal. For instance Kjus's findings on how producers often "channel" the contestants into "engaging roles" to increase the dramatic quotient were repeated in my fieldwork on how the *Idol* format is produced in India. While selecting contestants for the show (even in seemingly open call audition used in the *Idol* format) producers tend to cast according to specific personality traits and group dynamics. In general those who appear confident, charming, good-looking and are capable of engaging with the camera (or studio settings) are preferred. However diametrically opposite personalities might also be picked to provide a foil to others, create dramatic conflict or highlight specific characteristics intended to resonate with viewers and make the show popularly accessible. In other words, there are no formulas

(as there never are in creative ventures) and it is important to look at the crafting strategies, as Kjus's approach to reality production does.

Conceptualizing reality as something that is discretely accessible if we examine production strategies however meets with methodological limits. When and where do production practices stop and reality begins? When the studio lights are shut off? When contestants find themselves alone in their hotel rooms? How can we understand the “real” interaction between the participants and the producers during the course of production when such interactions are also “produced” and featured as part of the behind-the-scenes “reality”? The backstage/off-studio encounters between participants and producers are an important aspect of creating the privileged spaces of participation and peep-into-reality – alluring viewers into the world of the *Idol* that is within view, and possible reach, of ordinary viewers like themselves. This methodological problem of how to access the “real” without the production mediations stems from an ontological and epistemic assumption that there is a “real” reality that may indeed be articulated if we can disentangle the many webs of production practices or dig deeper. Kjus does suggest that in the final analysis it is more important to understand the ideological underpinnings in reality production but his study focuses on clarifying what is “real” and what is not, and how the crafting of reality impinges on the really “real”. But conceptualizing a “reality” as distinct from “produced reality” assumes that there is a reality outside of social construction. The problem with such excavation of production practices intended to uncover a pure reality is that we might hollow out the practices that make meaning and render them meaningless in the process.

In contrast Thornborrow's (2001) examination of the production of "authentic talk" when members of the general public participate on broadcast shows is illustrative²⁴ because it conceptualizes "reality" as meaning in action. She examines how ordinary people *produce* talk, "...which authenticates their public role as *ratified* participants in relatively spontaneous, unscripted, unrehearsed, mediated events" (emphasis added, p460). The emphasis then is not on who the participants really are, whom they pretend to be or are directed to be. Rather to understand reality of their identities and actions we must look at how they create relevant identities for themselves by picking up the (production) cues they find around them and (in reality TV) how producers supply cues intended to represent the reality of their experiences (on or off the show). Reality of their identity (and their self-projection on the show) is a matter of their self-perception and subjectivity formed in-mediation – what participants think is required of them on the show and what producers qualify their roles to be, in the making of the show. Thornborrow therefore argues, "authenticating talk, in this case, thus becomes something that participants *do* rather than a conceptual description of something as real, sincere or factually true" (emphasis in original, p461). The study provides an important conceptual tool to clarify reality production – emphasizing the interaction between contestants and producers, the relations of power positions embedded therein and the specific acts used to legitimize, lend credibility, or look and sound authentic and real. "Reality" in such a scheme is *performative* – not a fabricated (fake or "un-real") tale but an improvised ("real") stance that producers gesture towards and participants learn to adapt to.

²⁴ Even though her study looks at talk-shows and radio phone-in programs, rather than reality TV shows, the approach to conceptualizing production practices is still applicable on reality TV shows because the additional televisual elements on reality TV shows amplify, rather than undermine, the production cues Thornborrow refers to; for example, camera movements; stage/dress/sound designs; studio audience cues and so on).

A variety of editorial controls, strategic supervisions, mediations and administrations are deployed in the making of reality on reality TV shows. On one hand, action is allowed to unfold before the camera for viewers, yet on the other hand, there is careful development of action sequences, background stories of contestants, obstacles produced to test contestants or create competition for promised rewards. Discursive approaches to examining the reality renditions and truth claims on reality TV shows have emphasized the idea of “instability” and “open-endedness” built into the symbolic form (Murray and Ouellette, 2004). There is a sense that anything-can-happen inherent in the narrative but simultaneously contained within the narrative structure – to be cast and directed in any number of ways as per programming and production needs. Viewers too, it has been observed, rarely care about what is a fact and what is not (Corner, 2002b) and are mostly aware that what they find on reality TV may not be how events transpired (Dover and Hill, 2007). What matters more then are the spaces that exist in-between reality and fiction, and the transformative possibilities scripted into such mediated reality construction that provides the narrative and dramatic hook on the reality TV shows - will he win the million rupees or will he be the loser; will she become the next celebrity or will she be voted out and back into anonymity.

Community, Common Sense and Participation

Scholarship on reality TV has highlighted, time and again, that the idea of a community is a key element in the production of the shows. Irrespective of thematic or formal differences between different types of shows, there is always a sense of a community before which, and with reference to which, action unfolds on the reality TV

shows (Cavender, 1998)²⁵. Many studies have looked at the construction of the community, which frames participation of common people on the reality TV shows, and provide helpful methodological tools to investigate how producers use imaginative sleight of hand to signal towards a community and use the notion of a community to motivate viewer involvement. For instance, the use of the studio audience to create visual and aural cues for viewers (Peters, 1999); treatment of time and editing styles (Kavka and West, 2004) to suggest the action on stage is instantaneously accessible to viewers; or celebritization of ordinary people and thereby the communities they represent (Holmes, 2004); mediation between a community and a celebrity in ways that foster the sense that television personalities and viewers exist within a common universe of experience (Langer, 1981, p363) and the idea that the “individual on the screen could be me” (Palmer, 2002, p300); or the moral and communal understandings of how a society and its citizens should be (Cottle, 2006); and incorporation of physical spaces and markers of communities (such as prayer halls, sporting stadiums, school grounds etcetera) (Kjus, 2009) to promote the idea of a community as what underlies all action on the show.

The emphasis on community construction on reality TV is important for our consideration from two distinct, though not unrelated, perspectives. First, in terms of the business of television, construction of the community is important because most (though not all) reality TV shows involve voting, that is, viewers are asked to vote for their favorite contestants on the shows, voice their opinion or participate in general. Voting is facilitated via telecommunications, and television networks and telecommunication companies share revenue generated through voting mechanisms. Though it is not a key

²⁵ Cavendar shows for instance how two very different formats – *Survivor* and *America's Most Wanted* – both make the community central to how they engage with viewers.

source of revenue for networks in India yet voting²⁶ is important because it engages the viewer beyond watching the show on television. Viewing is no longer receptive-interpretive but also interactive-participatory as viewers get a chance to vote in favor (or against) particular contestants, and are given a hand, ostensibly, to decide a contestant's fate, express their opinion on what is acceptable (and what is not) and decide the direction of events on the show. These interactions open up multiple promotional avenues; advertisers not only buy airtime during the show's broadcast but also sponsor such direct interaction with viewers. But apart from the commercial motivations, the second reason the focus on community is important pertains to the particular notions of community generated on the shows and the terms of community engagement naturalized in the process. Does the two-way or interactive telecommunication mediums (phone, Internet etcetera) empower the public sphere, allowing everyday people to interact and speak back at the television (Jenkins, 2006), opening up the mediated spaces to the masses, contesting "established paternalisms" and releasing "everyday voices into the public sphere" (Dovey, 2000, p83)?

A technological approach to viewer engagement and community construction is helpful to the extent it reminds us how reality TV shows engage with viewers not only on interpretive terms (of viewing and making sense of media messages) but also in more practical ways. But the central limitation to such an approach is that while privileging interactivity (which is important) it tends to undermine examination of the embedded subjectivities and what motivates such interactivity; what are the specific notions of community, or which aspects of community life are reiterated (and which are not); and

²⁶ The interactivity generated through viewer voting also creates a popular 'buzz' or interest around the show.

how does interactivity re-signify our understanding of our social-cultural life. In that sense it may be more important to explore the underlying ideas and practices that inform participation (rather than the modes). To do so we may find more useful cues from studies that have explored how technological developments in camera have reshaped the private-public boundaries and our self-projections along with it (Clissold, 2004; Jermyn, 2004; O’Sullivan et al. 1994). Invocation of community and viewer interactivity is then connected to questions of subjectivity, power and control.

If *Candid Camera*, as the “first reality TV type programming” (Clissold, 2004, p33) set the historical and aesthetic precedent for reality TV by using hidden camera to create comic content (as noted earlier in chapter one) then following developments in video technologies (like ‘closed circuit television’ (CCTV), hidden camera circuits, telephony, Internet as well as ability to telecast ‘live’) have also been ingeniously incorporated into reality TV to produce “reality”. But more importantly the camera technologies and viewer interaction on reality TV also suggests social relations of surveillance and power (Andrejevic, 2002) – making it necessary to think of technology and how we interact with technology as a socialization process. As “more and more programs rely on the willingness of “ordinary” people to live their lives in front of television cameras. We, as audience members, witness this openness to surveillance, normalize it, and in turn, open ourselves to such a possibility...part of what reality TV teaches us...is that in order to be good citizens, we must allow ourselves to be watched as we watch those around us...” (Murray & Ouellette, 2004, p6).

Critical studies on how reality TV frames community, viewer interactivity, participation and technologies of participation centers on the political imaginaries and

social-historical relationships of power. Anna McCarthy's (2009) historical approach traces the roots of reality TV and how it frames community, common sense and participation of common people to the liberal cultural reformers and cold war social scientists. Her study reveals "obedience experiments" in social psychology, once regarded ethically compromised and politically notorious, have been reinvented on entertainment television as the shocking, scandalous or controversial ideas often floated on reality TV shows. A 1960s Yale University psychology experiment²⁷, which McCarthy writes about in 2004 (1st edition) for instance as an example of social science experiments has been replicated on French television in 2010 in a reality TV show (*Zone Xtreme*) in a rather eerie instance of academic cultural studies echoed in reality programming. Imitating the scientific experiment in which participants were asked to apply electric shocks to other human subjects, the television show features contestants (drawn from general public) apply near fatal doses of electricity to fellow contestants, with cheering studio audiences in the background – in "reality".

A historical approach to conceptualizing participation on reality TV, following McCarthy's study, provides valuable tools to explore the use of viewer interactivity, community values and prevailing social, ethical and moral debates²⁸ in terms of the underlying ideologies of power. A historically conceptualized approach to the construction of community (or "mass" viewers), modes of interactivity, terms of participation and embedded political imaginaries can therefore show, as McCarthy's study reveals, how the shift to scandals and controversies associated with reality TV

²⁷ conducted by Stanley Milgram

²⁸ that tend to surround reality TV in public discourse, and often become rallying issues for political forces including agitated debates in the Parliament and legislative actions to ban certain shows (for example, *Sach Ka Samna*)

shows today is not so much a radical shift to sensationalism and moral corruption but a historical continuation and transformation of television's pedagogical role in tandem with the "right turn" in politics, all over the world. The show *Sach Ka Samna* (SKS)²⁹ adapted from the format *The Moment of Truth* (originally a Columbian show *Nada mas que la verdad*) is a case in point. SKS, as per the format, prompts participants (drawn from everyday viewers) to reveal increasingly intimate personal secrets (live, on-air and in front of family members) to win increasingly large sums of money. As demure housewives or nervous brides spilled secrets, stories of incest, rape, extra-marital affairs tumbled out on national television along with the tantalizing sound effect (*chiching!*) of winning a jackpot. Reality TV's penchant for stirring up scandals is however more than an upsetting of established (community/family) values (such as, suppressing gender based violence to protect family's honor) – it also tags the social limitations imposed by the community/family with the unlimited potential of the individual will, if one is willing to speak up, act and assert one's will. There is no one-to-one correlations between reality TV and liberal politics that we may argue for but reality TV supplies, as McCarthy shows, a liberal framework for the social constructions of community, participation, interaction and responsible citizenry.

Others in media studies have looked at how television socializes us in terms of "events" (Scannell, 2007) or "rituals" (Couldry, 2002) and such conceptual language applied on the production of participation on reality TV shows also reveal how reality representation and participatory spaces on reality TV shows tend to normalize specific behaviors, patterns, norms and common senses. Nick Couldry's study of the reality TV show *Big Brother*, for instance, looks at the daily chores (as glimpses of common

²⁹ broadcast on Star Plus, 11pm late night slot; first aired in July 2009

domestic life) to which those in *Big Brother* house must conform. The ritualization of social norms reveal how participants (and viewers) are subjected to particular patterns of actions, thoughts and words that generate categories and boundaries of common sense and acceptable everyday life. Examining media rituals can uncover the un-reflexive naturalization of particular social-cultural sensibilities, rationalities and logics. Rituals offer a powerful conceptual tool because rituals always mean more than the act itself making it possible to understand the range of actions, ideas and words that reflect increasing organization of social life around media, and more importantly the underlying power relations that become naturalized in the process.

Television Formats: Technologies of Exchange and Cultural Production

Creative ideas often transgress cultural and commercial boundaries. It is not surprising then that television programs have often been adapted from one television market and reproduced for other markets. But since the 1970s increasing structural controls and licensing regimes have brought the improvised and ad hoc arrangements of content sharing under the “gambit of organizational and industrial structure” (Moran, 1998, p18-19). The trade in television formats (of reality TV or fictional forms) is an offshoot of such industrial arrangements, and represents a growing financial sector in the transnational television industry (as indicated by Bellamy, McDonald and Walker, 1990; Pearson and Urricho, 1999; Thompson, 2003).

A growing body of literature has highlighted different aspects of the format trade. For example, budgetary benefits of joint ventures and collaborations (Hoskins et al., 2003); niche audience bases or “fandoms” created and circulated by formats all over the

world (Havens, 2003); distribution structures (Harrington, C. L and Bielby, D. D, 2005); reiteration of dominant economic and cultural values through sales (Holmes and Jermyn, 2004); impact of structural imbalances on marketing and distribution decisions (Moran and Keane, 2006); changing trends in international markets as formats replace earlier trade in British drama (Freedman, 2003); etcetera. Such studies on the trade of formats are significant to the extent they clarify formats as a trade based concept and specify its material basis (who owns a format; what are the means of control; what are the financial and economic interests; how are such interests facilitated in trade practices and so on). But a focus on trading practices do not tell us about the salience of formats in the social-cultural spaces that television, as medium of social communication, also represents. This study focuses on the production of reality TV shows in terms of its cultural significance in India and hence it is particularly important to locate reality TV formats in terms of how it may (or may not) shape the creative-cultural production practices. To do so, this review focuses on literature that helps us conceptualize formats in terms of the practices of television production.

In contrast to trade specific approaches to conceptualizing formats, Keane and Moran (2008) provide a more macro view to highlight how the processes enabled by formats reveal structural integration of different television markets and a “stage of development in the evolution of television” (Keane and Moran, 2008, p158) that developed in anticipation of a series of changes in television industries across the world. Deregulation and privatization of the airwaves as a result of end of public service broadcasting and pro-market reforms in most economies around the world led to capital flows and investments in new television markets. This in turn has led to increased

number of television networks available in a given market and the airtime open for programming. The advances in information technology have also allowed round the clock or 24-hour television channels, and thereby an overall increase in the advertising revenue to be earned in a booming private television industry. The flipside of growth is, however, increased competition. The television industry is known to operate by the nobody-knows principle (Craves 2000; Gitlin, 1983) and tends to gravitate towards whatever-works at the moment, including “the tendency toward imitation and reluctance to promote innovation that underlies commercial broadcasting” (Waisbord, 2004, p364). Formats play a particularly useful function as it allows formalization and standardization (though not homogenization) of production in a transnational organization of a commercial television industry.

Different aspects of creative ideas are locked into a licensed product - from production details (such as people/contestant management, stage layouts, shot sequences, narrative development, and budgetary considerations) to programming issues (such as potential advertisers, ratings history, ratings and revenue projections, network branding etcetera). Moran therefore argues that instead of a unitary definition, it is more useful to think of formats in terms of their *functionality* - *what they do*. It is common, for instance, for industry professionals to think of formats in terms of “technology of exchange” or transfer of “know-how” (Moran, 1998, p18). This approach to conceptualizing formats is helpful because it links the commercial rationales that sustain the trade in formats and structural linkages in the transnational television industry with more grounded understanding of how it works, in different television markets. The market research and data included in the sale of a format is understood as its functionality – that is, what the

format might deliver for its licensee. When a format is sold and new markets are added to its roster, the accompanying data also increases for prospective buyers. In other words, formats provide a tried-and-tested formula for broadcasters and are equipped with the trialing process³⁰ and are considered the “ultimate risk-minimizing programming strategy” (Waisbord, 2004, p365).

Waisbord’s formulation of the functionality of formats, following a similar approach as Moran’s, is instructive because it emphasizes how formats work as *processes* – serving both *structural* logics and *practical* needs – in contemporary conditions of global economic capital and transnational television flows. Formats, according to Waisbord, refer to “McTelevision” (Waisbord, 2004). The business model characterized by the global brand of McDonald’s fast food chain subsumes cultural considerations within it to ensure efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control over production and service (Ritzer, 1998). In post-Fordist economies of decentralized production systems, McDonalds menus are built on the idea of being malleable to local cultural tastes. But the notion of a ‘burger’ (or other items on the menu) remains synonymous with the brand McDonalds. It may have a beef *patty* or a chicken *tikka* inside the burger’s buns, but it is always packaged and served in a specific manner to retain the McDonald’s branding. Further, there is a “new international division of cultural labor” (Miller et al. 2001) whereby industry professionals from New York to New Delhi are connected in a corporate model for professional networks and cultural production is standardized and updated according to the current trends, production values and creative/aesthetic choices in the stronger or “A-level markets”, of United States and parts of Europe (Waisbord, 2004, p364).

³⁰ though there is no guarantee that all formats work everywhere

The McTelevision metaphor aptly outlines how different national-cultural markets are strung together in the transnational structural whole. But industrial structures and commercial managements must also be reconsidered, and specified, in terms of television medium. There is a difference between the functionality of producing a burger and that of producing a television program. Television, as a medium of social transmission, works in an inherently contradictory way (Thompson, 1995; Rajagopal, 2001). On one hand, it links together different spatial and temporal realities under one circuit of production and consumption. It links the private and the public, the personal (individual) and the social (collective). Viewers have access over other's lives through the screen and find a sense of proximity with participating. Anonymity and intimacy are offered simultaneously. On the other hand, there are gaps – both spatial and temporal – between the moments of production and consumption. The absence of any necessary relationship between the moments of production and consumption poses a specific challenge for producers: how to capture the associative-imaginative processes that viewers use to fill the gaps? In other words, producers must create content that appeals to both collective sensibility (that underlies our social associations) and individual identification (that often fuels our imaginations).

This need to pitch at two different levels of the social and the individual applies to television production in general, whether adapting a format or creating original content. Different production dynamics may yield to different processes of 'mediation' (through time-space/individual-collective/distance-proximity/anonymity-curiosity etcetera) but refers to similar creative demands. Adapting a format is no less rigorous in terms of creative and production requirements than producing an original programming. Format

shows are not analytically distinguishable or unique in that sense. In both domestic productions and format adaptations we may ask: which aspects of social life are selected as familiar and commonly accessible and what are the cues that evoke individual aspirations? But adaptations of formats also involve self-conscious cultural claims. Producers must necessarily identify what “works” for an “Indian” sensibility and what does not; what allows easy associations in the “Indian” national-cultural market and what does not; what is familiar to an “Indian” and what is not? Simultaneously, producers must unscramble an individual appeal: what inspires, motivates or engages the individual and allows for new ideas to be accepted as appealing. The functionality of formats (both commercial and creative rationalities) are thus pronounced and deliberated at the interstices of national-trans-national cultural economy. To understand how formats, as transnational processes, may re-signify social-cultural lives, we must therefore explore the practices of television producers who act as *cultural mediators*. The (transnational) processes represented by television formats are revealed, arguably more accurately, by specifying the social-cultural contexts and practices of *cultural adaptation* – by asking, which aspects of the social-cultural translation are already familiar, which are becoming so, and which remains alien. What are the terms of such *cultural translation* and *cultural slippage* in the mediations allowed by the cultural form of (reality TV) format shows?

The processes and practices of television production must also be considered in terms of structural orientations, especially since formats as processes render transnational structural alignments meaningful in practical terms. Raymond Williams (1975) offered the concept of “flow” to refer to the economic engine behind television’s distinctive form of technology and culture. Television schedules include a “flow” of unrelated programs

but what motors the programming schedule is the unpublished “flow” of advertisements. This makes advertisers the real consumers of television and audiences the real product (when viewer attention is delivered to advertiser’s products). An economic and technological process that is designed to serve commercial sponsors thus creates audiences. Williams draws our attention to the commercial process that underpins the structure of television business. It thus becomes important to ask the following questions. How do commercial interests enter the work of culturally translating a format into the domestic avatar (or even in producing a domestically conceptualized reality TV show)? How do the productions or re-productions/adaptations create specific audience profiles to deliver to the economic sponsors of the television experience, or determine who and what will be included in the space called local or national or domestic? How do the economic-commercial interests enter the work of identifying and representing what “works” in the Indian/domestic context and what does not; or what is part of the Indian sensibility and what is not? How are specific cultural patterns, practices and representations privileged that depict certain ways of life? And, how are adaptations of reality TV shows, as socially-culturally determined (discursive) constructions implicated in social relations of power that shape and govern our social-cultural lives.

The notion of flow compels us to think beyond the television screen - through the commercial and creative impulses entangled in the business of television – and ask how do the commercial rationalities of formats refer to transnational structural power on one end and locally-nationally meaningful cultural practices on the other end? McTelevision is an apt and important metaphor of the processes that characterize transnational cultural encounters via television formats but it provides a partial guide if we do not specify the

processes by exploring how *structural* power is negotiated and enacted in *practical* terms. As processes that connect different realms and contexts of activity, formats allow us to focus on the dynamics in-between (the national/local-transnational/global; economic-cultural; structural-practical). On one hand there is increasing structural integration and standardization, yet on the other hand there is operational decentralization and cultural-practical fragmentation. On one hand we are connected to global structures that determine our social-cultural experiences and yet on the other hand such realities can be clarified only in terms of deeply intimate encounters and practices of meaning making. The *commercial and creative functionality* of formats – as technological processes in transnational television industry – provide us a point of entry to explorations of such social-cultural conundrums, at the interstices of structural and practical; economic and cultural; global and local. This dissertation focuses on television production to explore how transnational television structures intersect and interact with historically and culturally specific realities of the Indian television market; what are the practices that characterize such structural encounters; what are the terms of cultural encounter-translation (and/or slippage); and what are the relations of power that mediate such television inflected social-cultural encounters to reshape social life in India. The following discussion is therefore specifically related to how meaning and power is implicated in television production.

Encoding-Decoding in National and Transnational Spaces

Formats as processes highlight how structural orientations meet with practices of television production at the intersection of global and local television industries at one

level, and commercial and creative logics at another level. This study focuses on the production of reality TV shows, culturally translated from the globally shared formats into locally meaningful cultural forms, in order to explore the range of meanings, ideas, choices, values and actions embedded therein. The focus is therefore on how we may theoretically and methodologically relate the structural determination of creative practices of format adaptation-production with the variety of culturally specific acts that come into play in television production. Stuart Hall's Encoding-Decoding (1980) model provides a point of entry into the cultural terrain and suggests how we may theoretically connect television production with the social-structural contexts of meaning making. Hall's model allows us to explore everyday bases and subjectivities that frame the production of meaning within a communication chain while accounting for social relations of power and is therefore useful for consideration. But its relevance is perhaps also revealed in its limitations – as it highlights the specific challenges of theorizing television production in a transnational television industry.

The Encoding-Decoding model proposed by Hall identifies four distinct but related “moments” in a mediated communication: production, circulation, consumption and reproduction. Meaning is articulated and connected through each of these “moments” of practices. Each “moment” is necessary “to the circuit as a whole”, but it does not guarantee what happens next. That is, there is no “necessary correspondence” between the moments even if the moments are “determinate”. Producers or professionals “encode” meaning within determining conditions of structural power and industrial contests, while audiences “decode” in the context of lived experiences. The Encoding-Decoding model provides a powerful methodological tool to study power relations and identify mediated

meanings in its social context – it allows us to address the question of structural determination and agency in empirical terms.

The expansion of information technologies and transnational television industry have led to increasing fragmentation at different levels of the media landscape (narrowcasting instead of mass broadcasting; niche audiences and personalization of content; viewer interactivity; etcetera) and there has been a growing need to explore the local experiential specificity and complexity of our interaction with media – both on production and consumption ends. The “local” has been regarded as a category of interest in transnational media studies as “the source of particularities and variety” (Braman, 1996, p27) where the large-scale processes are “resignified” (Mattelart, 1994, p222). However, Hall’s model is handy if we are interested in exploring locally bound meaning making. The model runs into trouble if we are to account for transnational processes, as we must in the case of television formats. How does one track the global diffusion of a set of ideas and structural controls? How should one connect situated empirical cultural material to transnational power struggles and social actions? How can we delve deeper into the thick description of the localized interaction with media without thinning and hollowing out the macro level structural scaffolding that connects different and distant locales of experiences and actions?

Reality TV formats foreground this methodological and conceptual challenge. The production of format shows undergoes at least double (and possibly multiple) mediations – once when producers who develop the show-format encode meanings into it and again when it is re-produced and re-encoded by producers in local cultural markets. For instance, the television program *Pop Idol* is originally produced for/in U.K. and then

sold around the world as a format. In Mumbai local producers re-encode the *Idol* format into *Indian Idol* so that it may be decoded by viewers in far reaches of the country – connecting, for example, Lakhimpur, Uttar Pradesh a small town in India, metropolitan Mumbai and London studios within a circuitry of television mediation. Examination of the embedded meanings as produced and reproduced in the social context must therefore account for the *terms of translation* between the moments of production-re-production-distribution-consumption. In most cases licensees receive different versions of the format and are free to pick and choose elements from its different iterations. So *Indian Idol* may include aspects of *American Idol* but also from its reproductions in Germany, Vietnam, Japan and so on – which further complicates the practices of encoding and resists any linear analytical relationships. How do we then account for the punctuated process of encoding – decoding-(re)encoding – decoding in format adaptations? The treatment of encoding-decoding as discrete acts or moments does not account for the interactions that produce hybridized program content. In order to understand the range of meanings generated, and enquire about the “structures of dominance” that characterizes the social conditions within which meaning is encoded, we must account for the moments of cultural translation that marks the moment of adaptation, within the circuitry of transnational and sub-national media practices.

The Encoding-Decoding model has been mostly applied (and is better suited) for a nationally bound media environment with specific attention to state’s role in crafting media messages. The role and force of the state as the locus of spatial and political power has however itself been transformed in transnational scenarios – withdrawing from some areas of social life while regulating others to manage increasing transnational flows of

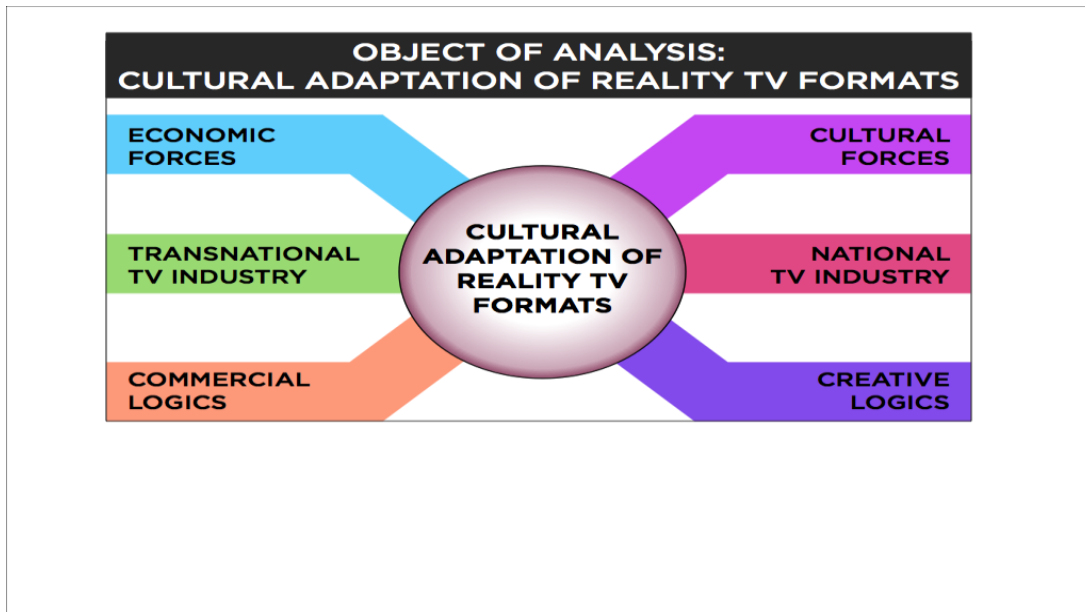
culture, capital, finance, etcetera. Transnational television is a case in point – the satellite transmission can override territorial borders of nation-states thus challenging its regulative powers in many cases. As the culture bearing institutions (nation, family, village or individual and media) encounter globalized fields Appadurai (1990) has suggested that the “national” must be remapped across different scales. The national bracketing must then be reconsidered not only along the horizontal lines as media enabled “imagined communities” (following Anderson) or trans-national linkages therein (as Appadurai’s mediascapes suggest) but also along the vertical lines that inform sub-national spaces or the “nation and its fringes” (Chatterjee, 1993) that are drawn into the national-transnational expansive yet fissured circuitry. That is, how are the transnational, sub-national and national spaces implicated and rendered together in the mediated reality of reality TV formats?

Conclusion

This study focuses on the production of reality TV formats to understand how the symbolic and cultural form can be globally circulated and yet be locally meaningful. A review of the literature on reality TV suggests that studies have tended to isolate aspects for examination, often in binary frameworks (real or fake; informative or entertaining; spontaneous or produced/mediated) while research on formats have looked at either the structural determinations and commercial logics that dictate production choices or in contrast, emphasized the creative and cultural agency behind format interpretation, without accounting for structural and contextual imperatives. The production of television inflected meanings and narratives in that sense are limited to the presumed

categories (structure versus agency, culture versus economy, global versus local, national versus transnational and so on) without exploring the spaces in-between and asking, what are the terms of mediation between the different forces at play in transnational cultural scenarios.

In contrast to such approaches, this study proposes an alternative approach to studying reality TV formats by placing the cultural adaptation of reality TV formats at the center and exploring the different pulls and pushes, the mediations, negotiations, accommodations and arrangements between forces of power.



By focusing on the television production practices used to culturally re-produce a reality TV format I illustrate how transnational structures and processes are rendered meaningful at different contexts and levels of action. Rather than pit one force against another we may then account for the points of connection, inter-action and the terms of translation to understand how everyday life is re-signified at the cross-sections. That is, how structural-material-economic logics shape stylistic conventions and creative acts (as

evidenced in the trade in reality TV formats) but also, how structural arrangements may be interjected by creative strategies - so that, the transnational structural power is not reified but rendered meaningful in locally specific and practical means (as revealed through the practices of cultural adaptation of reality TV formats).

The following two chapters outline the theoretical and analytical approach used to study production of reality TV shows in India. The conceptual framework is based on a dynamic relationship between practices and power – so that, power is understood as the strategic accommodation of different forces and interests (in a moment of relative stability, though open to contestations). The focus, in that sense, is not on pre-determined categories (material/ideational, economic/cultural, national/transnational and so on) or logics (structure or agency) of power. Instead, analysis focuses on the television production practices and the rules of inclusion/exclusion that reveal how forces of power operate on the cultural domain of popular entertainment television.

CHAPTER THREE

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical-analytical approach adopted in this study centers on exploring the dynamics between (television) media, culture and power, that is, how television shapes our social-cultural lives and refers to the cultural organization of power. To allow a broad analytical scope that accommodates the dynamics between different scenarios and contexts of actions (global-local; national-transnational and sub-national; cultural-economic) while allowing a necessary flexibility to attend to both the industrial-structural imperatives and the minutiae of television production practices that reveal the social-cultural specificity of symbolic forms, the theoretical framework adopted here relies on two key conceptual anchors. One, the notion of *practices* as socially conditioned acts, based on Bourdieu's formulation that all our social-cultural practices emerge from and are in relation to different forms of social power; and two, the notion of *power* as domination through consensus and common sense, based on Gramsci's formulation of "hegemony" which enables this study to theoretically connect television production to large-scale social organization of power. This chapter develops these two conceptual points of focus and clarifies how we may explore television production as enactment of power and control on the cultural domain.

The following discussion is organized in terms of three specific sections. The first section clarifies the conceptual usage of practices and power in this study as it pertains to television and cultural production. The focus is on explicating the theoretical relationship between practice and power with reference to the theoretical sources (of Bourdieu and

Gramsci) and explaining how it underpins this study. The second section focuses on how concepts of practice and power may be applied to transnational television systems, especially when conceptualizing historically accumulated power in transnational cultural scenarios and global media processes. The third and concluding section outlines how the conceptual focus on practice and power is used in this study to analyze reality TV production, and the structure of ideas produced therein. A brief explanation of the central assumptions on how we may locate television's social role is provided, initially, to clarify the general orientation of the theoretical framework undertaken in this study.

Television and Social Life

In his essay on “two paradigms” (the structural and the cultural) Stuart Hall identifies a “critical paradigm” that engages with media's social role: “...no longer (as) specific message-injunctions, by A to B, to do this or that, but a shaping of the whole ideological environment: a way of representing the order of things which makes them appear universal, natural and coterminous with ‘reality’ itself” (1982, p65). Media is recast at a broader social level of meaning construction; and television studies following Hall's insights have indicated that television provides us a socially embedded and unique point of entry into everyday life. Television's quotidian presence in domestic spaces (Schlesinger et al., 1992) allows us to understand how media shapes and signifies our social-cultural lives from the perspective of day-to-day realities and experiences (rather than macro level, institutional or structural analysis). Today, in India, television is everywhere; from the big screens hung up on street corners and bazaars to the tiny old black-and-white sets playing inside grocery stores in neighborhood alleys, from the hotel

lobbies to the family living rooms, from the urban offices to the sub-urban, small town (and often rural) homely courtyards. The images, phrases, gestures and practices flickering on the ubiquitous television screen makes it an important space to explore the dominant ideas and actions that qualify social-cultural lives. That is, the imaginations, aspirations and interpretive-participatory frames that energize and mobilize our lives.

This approach to television as a socially enmeshed medium does not seek to prove (indeed, cannot) causal correlations between television and social life. The analytical objective is not to measure television's impact in changing social-cultural behavior or enumerate its effect on social life. Television, though ever-present, is only a fraction of our complex lives. Reception studies have noted for instance that the import of meanings triggered by television is fractured and entangled in the different contexts of material, spatial, temporal and social-ideational realities, since viewers "live in different overlapping but not always over-determined spaces and times..." (Silverstone, 1994, p132). Methodologically it is awkward, if not tenuous, therefore to try to isolate television as a social variable or meet the necessary and sufficient correlations required for assertions of causality. And yet, it is this character of television to seep through different social categories, connect diverse social-cultural-historical contexts and mediate different material-ideational realities that makes television, to borrow Abu-Lughod's phrase, one of the "salient institutions" (2005, p4) in contemporary societies. Television's social character may therefore be conceptualized in terms of how it fosters "imagined communities" (Anderson, 2000) – not as a social-cultural unity but in terms of how it pulls different actors, actions and ideas, multiple vantage points and (unequal) capacities to access and participate within a shared language, logic of interaction and power play.

The social character of television, as a medium of mass communication, is premised on three key theoretical assumptions in this study. First, the notion that television prepares us to become social subjects by “hailing” us into subject positions and providing us with socially meaningful frameworks for interpretation and participation - teaching us who to be and how to become. In re-conceptualizing the relationship between media and social power (and distinguishing it from Marxist functionalism) Hall (1982) drew upon the theory of interpellation proposed by Althusser, which suggested that multiple forces may be at work (and not only material/economic manipulations) in how we interpret both the media messages and the social world at large, but our interpretations are shaped by our subjective positions – and media, as an important social institution, plays a key role in how we acquire such subjective positions.

The second theoretical assumption *expands* on the notion of media inflected subjectivities to highlight our engagement with television as not only interpretive but also expressive and re-constitutive. In her ethnographic study of television reception Gillispie (1995) refers to “re-creative consumption”, and though this study focuses on the production end (rather than television consumption) the underlying assumption echoes Gillispie’s thesis that in so far as we reproduce television triggered meanings we do so along practical lines - in terms of what we imagine as worthy of pursuing (the goals and aspirations) and how we pursue them (the means to the goals, strategic logics and practices). If we think of television’s role not only in terms of casting us into subject *positions* but also in terms of the scripts it supplies that allow *positioning* and practical (re-creative) improvisations then television’s social character is better understood as

pedagogical, and not manipulative (as it does in Althusser's formulation of interpellation³¹).

When re-producing the subjectivities and interpretive perspectives learnt from television we *re-create in the re-play* - developing socially negotiated posturing; self-conscious enactments; and performances of self-projection deployed both on and off television. In studying how television initiates, familiarizes and socializes us into a shared world of ideas, actions, gestures, words, images etcetera we must then look not only at the interpretive frameworks reflected in the end-texts but the *terms of participation* and *re-active practices* that qualify the production processes and reveals the forms, relations and dynamics of power at work. In exploring the cultural adaptation of reality TV formats this study, therefore, looks at the *terms of cultural translation* (and slippage) – what are the commercial and creative compulsions, values, strategies and rationalities that are called into play in the re-making of the reality TV shows; which processes and practices are prioritized and what are the motivating forces; which goals and aspirations are invoked to engage viewer participation³²; which ideas and actions are deployed to define the “ordinary” viewers and the “extra-ordinary” opportunities highlighted on the reality TV shows; which attitudes, gestures, phrases or manner of speech win the spectacular end prizes promised on the reality TV shows and are thus unleashed into the wider social-cultural domain as meaningful practices for strategic re-enactments.

³¹ Althusser retains the economic and the material as the ‘last instance’ of social determination and the notion of ideological as something other than ‘real’. This is problematic, as Hall notes, because it suggests that there is an un-ideological position to be retrieved that is outside social construction and is real/true/natural. This study follows Hall's theoretical departure from Althusser's formulation.

³² Through voting, campaigning for a favorite contestant, joining the promotional events or auditioning to become a contestant oneself (beyond merely watching the television show)

Finally, the third assumption that orients exploration of how television mediates social realities in this study is that so far as television socializes us into commonly held ideas and actions the social-cultural communities it refers to possess different capacities of access and participation. We negotiate the terms of participation (on and off television) with different set of resources; including differences in material assets, symbolic familiarities, connection to social networks, cultural competencies and so on. The social-cultural communities that television refers to are, in that sense, identified in terms of different sets of resources intersecting, accommodating and realigning (rather than binaries of global versus local forces; transnational cultural forces versus national cultures; structural controls versus cultural agency; material versus ideational force). Power derived from relative force is therefore practically articulated. Analytically this means the attention on television production and cultural adaptation of (global) formats of reality TV shows is focused, in this study, on the *dynamics* between practices and power. The following discussion clarifies the theoretical sources and usage of practices and power as the conceptual foundation for the analytical design (outlined in the methodological framework in chapter four).

Practice and Power

Practices, as conceptualized in this study, are socially acquired competencies and reveal the logic of social power and hierarchy at work. We learn practices by way of being integrated and shaped in particular social environments; by developing intuitive understanding of what kinds of behaviors are expected and acceptable; what to anticipate (and what is beyond the realm of commonsensical expectations); which responses are

meaningful (and which are not); how to behave (and how not to); and so on. Social structures that create and typify social spaces allow or restrict the range of practical anticipations and dispositions. This definition of practices is based on Bourdieu's theoretical formulation of "social distinction" (1973) where all cultural symbols and practices refer to systems that endure across space-time limits and are shared by groups of people (or, "habitus" in his extended theoretical vocabulary). The emphasis in such a formulation is in the durability of learnt actions/habits but significantly, practices are not automatic rendition of social orientations. Rather the non-coercive forms of socializations (sentiments, habits, customs, etcetera), that are reflected through practices, are important precisely because they display our "*feel for the game*" (and not just the "rules of the game") as we instinctively make our moves and/or calculations (whether successfully or not) "*in the heat of the moment*" (Bourdieu, 1990). So any practice usually requires the actor to operate both with a specific habit and to act creatively beyond the specific injunctions of its rules. Practices occur when socially located understandings, traditions, expectations, intuitions, aspirations and knowledge intersect with new structural limits. The structural demands are filtered through traditional dispositions and actors adapt to the new constraints and opportunities. In that sense, practices are always dynamic (even if dialectically related to social conditions) and unpredictable (even if they reveal the social logics at work). For example, a television producer adapting a format must work within the (new) industrial-structural norms that introduce formats as the favored technology of cultural production and recalibrate creative strategies with reference to the format's specifications. But at the same time, the television producer must also deploy her own

locally specific skills, intuitions and market understandings to culturally adapt the format for local viewers.

The advantage of conceptualizing the relationship between television production, cultural lives and social power in terms of practices is that it emphasizes how cultural actions can be plural and often tactical. Strategies, such as cultural adaptation of global formats, participating on the reality-game shows, learning to advance oneself on the show or learning to do so in life by watching the show and acquiring cultural idioms (from appropriate dress styles to evocative emotional expressions) are informed practically - as whatever motivates action toward consequences that matter to localized understanding. The attention to practices highlights the negotiation-struggle over which values will get priority or which will be normalized and internalized; and illustrates the processes by which we may understand how power operates through the negotiation-and-accommodation to re-shape and re-signify our practical dispositions. Power in that sense is not universally meaningful, absolute or limitless. There is no presumption of circumstantially unqualified or unconditional abstract force (such as global media, world systems, ideological controls, etcetera), which is inherently powerful. When *practically* understood power is expressive only in localizable, tangible and tactical ways; and meaningful only in terms of its interaction and ability to influence the terms of interaction in a given context.

When transnational enterprises enter local/national industries we cannot assume such “global media forces” to be intrinsically powerful. Rather its power can only be understood by looking at the practical negotiations and enactments, its ability to influence a field of action and reshape the habits and dispositions that qualify all ideas and actions.

The notion of competition as a key element of a music show was, for instance, first introduced in India by the *Idol* format but quickly adopted as the norm for music-talent hunt shows by all other (rival) networks thereon (discussed further in chapter seven). The work of making a show, such as *Pop Idol*, into a globally branded format, sold in countries around the world, requires a range of material-structural resources and forces (economic capital; professional expertise and experience; financial resources to set up production and sales teams in different parts of the world; cultural power to negotiate and set the terms of transaction; etcetera). It is no surprise then that *Pop Idol* is owned by Fremantle Media (a global television company) which itself is structurally and vertically integrated with RTL Group (Europe's largest television and radio broadcast company) and Bertelsmann AG (a global media conglomerate). Such material-structural forces determine the global transmission of the symbolic form but it does not, arguably, clarify how it is rendered *meaningful* or how the material, structural, global force symbolized by the *Idol* format is translated for local lives. To do so we need to focus on the practices of re-production, adaptation, translation, re-articulation and re-enactment. Delving into the practical nitty-gritty may yield surprising findings on the piercing and nimble power of global forces that may otherwise be obscured if we look only at the material-structural power. The power of the *Idol* format (and the global media forces it symbolizes) is perhaps better understood in terms of what evolves in its long shadows – not just the *Indian Idol* (or other national-cultural manifestations) but in *U.P. Idol* (a non-television singing contest organized in the state of Uttar Pradesh, a central Indian state) or other similar small town/regional and sub-national contests that mimic the *Idol* television show and reenact-rearticulate-perpetuate its global-local swirl.

Gramsci's conceptualization of power as 'hegemony' (1971) reinforces the analytical focus on practices while specifying practices within a complex and historically specific set of interactions. Power as hegemony highlights the process by which social consent is secured – through constant negotiations, contestations and strategic alliances between different groups (leading to “historic blocs” in Gramsci's theoretical language). Such a conceptualization of power underscores the practical and tactical actions, moments and sites (from the family to the school to the television) in the struggle over how reality is articulated and produced as common sense. If power is about creating a popular consent then the analysis of power can no longer be limited to state mechanisms; nor is it inherent to a class; or exclusively a function of material clout or political-economic muscle. Rather the cultural domain emerges as a crucial space for the negotiation, articulation and enactment of power. Media is in that sense not an instrument of power but a realm where power is contested and formulated. As such the project of media analysis shifts from revealing how media *reflects* social consensus to how media *produces* common sense – that is, the practices that produce the dominant articulations of reality and frame specific ideas and actions as meaningful and commonsensical.

Power conceptualized as production of consensus (around a specific framework of ideas and actions) is expressed in the ability to incorporate and represent the universal interests of the whole society without having to address the differences between different actors/groups. The hegemonic or dominant construction does not satisfy all interests of the dominant social group, nor is it an amalgam of different interests of different groups (as in a pluralistic formation). The basic issue at stake, as highlighted in the concept of hegemony, is how specific forces come to acquire positions of leadership and influence

(and not merely a matter of legitimation in the Weberian sense, or false consciousness from a Marxist sense of indoctrination). To study power we must then attend to the practical ways that strategic alliances are established between different groups/actors and explore the *terms of interaction* by looking at the underlying principles that are prioritized and the set of interests it advances.

Practice, Power and Transnational Media Systems

In conceptualizing the transnational television processes and practices (such as format trade and cultural adaptation of a format) this study does not define power in terms of the historically stronger (and mostly West based) transnational television forces. Conceptually this refers to the determining logic we may (or may not) assign to the structural advantages and material capital of the (Western) media forces that have expanded over time to acquire transnational character and enjoy relative sway over nationally defined forces. If positions of power may be contested, as outlined in the dynamic relationship between practices and power discussed above, then how do we conceptually tackle the relative advantages of historically accumulated power and its ability to influence all other forces. The analytical strategy adopted here distinguishes different types of capital – not only material or economic but also social, cultural, symbolic, national and so on – that defines relative advantages and power relations. In keeping with the theoretical framework built on practices and power we do not, in that sense, disregard the material and economic clout or structural advantages, nor do we grant them overwhelming determining logic.

Hegemonic power, though dominant, is not static – it is active and mutative because it is conceptualized as practically enacted and often contested. This means power as conceptualized in this study is subject to different *forces* and the accommodations between forces. Stuart Hall's (1991) observations on the movement of economic capital in global cultural scenarios is a helpful reminder that it is an error to assume economic capital as a totally integrative force with capacity to simply assimilate everything else within it. Capital accumulated over time in that sense gives structural advantages but does not automatically translate into power because different *types of capital forces* may compete, contest, inhibit or be accommodated. Conceptually we must therefore clarify the different types of capital forces that are at play to understand how power is manifested or reproduced *practically and dynamically*. For instance, social capital refers to the power emerging from social networks, membership in social groups/associations. Cultural capital, on the other hand, includes the symbolic, cognitive and aesthetic competencies acquired through the socializations (family, schools, books, films, etcetera). Symbolic capital is different in that it is abstract and operates through the social recognition of others. The different types of capital are related but cannot be taken as analogous to one another, and no one form of capital (not even economic capital) follows an automatic logic of convertibility.

When transnational media enterprises enter a new market there is rarely a hostile take-over of local ventures. Rather transnational companies often invest their material, structural power and global linkages to align themselves with local forces, acquire local cultural, aesthetic, social, national and other capital resources and re-articulate themselves in terms of locally relevant terms and conditions. As “local” cultures connect

with the “global” – “not to repeat the West but to speak in a new tongue, to speak of the new conditions and aesthetics” (Hall, 1991, p38-39) a focus on practices – not as coercion but common sense, not forced but as a habit, not only economic or material but also symbolic, cultural and so on – is helpful because it enables us to look at the diffused, dispersed and mutative forms of power in the transnational television industry. Power in this new and unfolding regime of capital can be identified as a “peculiar form of homogenization” as Hall notes: “...very powerfully located in the increasing and on going concentration of culture and other forms of capital. But it is now a form of capital which recognizes that it can only, to use a metaphor, rule through other local capitals...” (Hall, 1991, p28-29). Satellite television, he points out, is particularly illustrative because we can not understand satellite television without understanding its grounding in a particular advanced national economy and culture and yet its whole purpose is to transgress and delimit the national boundaries (Hall, 1991, p27).

In conceptualizing power and practice in transnational media systems there are two conceptual-analytical strategies underpinning this study. They are as follows.

First, *structural power of transnational media systems is disaggregated in this study in terms of processes and practices* that render it meaningful and commonsensical in everyday lives. The advantage of disaggregating structures, and exploring the processes and practices, is that it makes the analytical design more flexible and adaptive to the embedded and everyday understandings of macro, structural and transnational formulations of power. The conceptual strategy is to (analytically-theoretically) account for the different and multiple sets of capital resources, which may work with (or against) the structural, material or economic capital, to inform power. By focusing on the

practices of contestations and accommodations we may understand which set of capital resources and forces become more (or less) relevant and how power is redefined *in the process*. Power as hegemony focuses our attention to understanding the ability to accommodate, mediate and connect different forces, ideas and actions (while excluding and disconnecting others).

To clarify then, the focus on cultural practices is therefore not analyzed here in terms of a pre-existing and essential cultural core; the “local” is not a descriptive category (that is, ready, available and stagnant in time and space) revealed through interpretive observations of how it changes in a global-local encounter. In examining the cultural translation of global formats for domestic audiences we do not, therefore, look for replication of the format as a measure of increasing cultural connection to its Western origins, and “Westernization” of “Indian” society. Nor do we look for lingering and resistant cultural differences that distinguish the domestic/local renditions from the global and “Western” format as a uniquely “Indian” show. Cultural adaptation of reality TV formats *as social-cultural practices* is instead conceptualized in terms of how different forces (economic, cultural, social, symbolic etcetera) connect vastly different realities and social cultural experiences – so that reverberations from the executive offices of London or Singapore which serve as corporate headquarters for many global format owners, the studios in Mumbai where the formats are reproduced for the national market in India and the blaring rooftop loudspeakers on a roadside temple in Agra, a small town (urging passersby to vote for the local boy who appears on the reality TV show) are conceptualized as mutually constitutive.

The second (related) conceptual-analytical strategy is to focus on *the terms of cultural re-imagination and translation*. Most reality TV shows produced in India are adapted from formats that are used as templates by producers but creatively re-interpreted for local viewers – making producers *cultural translators*. In my conversations with producers and observation of production practices, in Mumbai, I found them categorizing in terms of what might “work” in U.S. or “western countries” but not for “our *janta*” (Hindi word for mass of people) or viewers in “one *lakh*³³-five *lakh* cities” (such as Raipur or Bhopal, which are the new markets for cable and satellite television networks and are understood to have values or “mindsets” distinct from the more globally oriented, urban centers of Mumbai or Kolkata). The role of imagination has been considered important in facilitating the development of transnational telecommunication networks and global media systems. Appadurai has noted that social spaces may be culturally redefined – re-cast and re-scripted from multiple vantage points in a world that is increasingly connected and yet simultaneously marked by distances, differences and disjunctures (Appadurai, 1990). In exploring the production of reality TV formats, as an example of cultural forms circulated in global media systems and re-imagined in local cultural scenarios, this study focuses on the *terms of cultural re-imagination and translation*. What is the preferred script and narrative? What are the motivating impulses and range of possibility allowed (or disallowed) in the scripts? Which characters are relevant (or not) to the imagined plot and sequence of events? And, what are the material requirements that allow us to practice-participate-enact the imagined scripts? In short, explore the order of inclusion and exclusion and the logical unity of the imagined narratives (beyond descriptions)?

³³ The Hindi term *lakh* refer to 100,000.

Study of transnational television and cultural production operates through exploration of the motivations, strategies, rationalities and practices that defines an actor's interaction with the format (whether as a producer/cultural mediator or viewer/participant/contestant). In that sense the conceptual framework is not built in terms of a macro-structural versus micro-practical dichotomy; or comparative analysis between different culturally situated or spatially demarcated scales (national, transnational, city etcetera). Rather, the reality TV format may be conceptualized as a moving magnet of sorts – which casts its own orbit and pulls different actors and forces but is also simultaneously informed, acquires new shapes and is rendered meaningful by what it draws into its field of gravity. Analytically, this does not (or should not) translate into commodity/format fetishism because the format itself can be understood only in terms of the particular interactions, at particular sites, with particular actors that give it meaning. There is no *presumed* determining logic, following a commodity chain conceptualization operating in a world economic system (Wallerstein, 1990) but the operating logic emerges as a function of “following the thing”³⁴ (that is the format) through its relational, experiential and structurally determined spaces/contexts and explored in terms of action-reaction-inter-action.

Conclusion: Practice and Power in Performative Encounters

This study explores the structure of ideas produced and popularized via reality TV format adaptations by focusing on production practices (as social conditioned acts) and power (as commonsense rather than coercion). Practice and power is linked in a

³⁴ Though I do not conduct “multi-site ethnography” that George Marcus (1998) offers as a new research imagery intended to tackle the needs of transnational research, I find his dictum of “follow the thing” helpful in conceptualizing this study.

productive dynamics; power works through, not against, practice. Rather than thinking about power as set of constraints, limitations, domination and repression we may then witness relations and acts of power in the practical choices, capacities and deployments. This conceptual linkage is analytically identified in terms of *performative encounters* between the producers and participants-contestants on the reality TV shows, which emphasizes how meaning is produced through the social posturing, positioning and actions. Conceptually, performative encounters refer to the interactions between the different actors and different levels of reality TV production (including television producers at both local and global levels, the participants-contestants, the families of the contestants who mobilize votes for the contestants and so on). Here meaning is necessarily a social production and cannot be read through the form or structure of signs alone.

The notion of performative encounters emphasizes how reality TV narratives and meanings are conditional - built upon and in response to what is going on in the setting/context and implicated in the values, norms and relations between actors. Here meaning (accessed practically) is not treated as an outcome of an abstract system of signs but as lived reality; meaning is derived from dynamic social use of particular forms of language in different contexts and for different purposes. The context in which an act or statement occurs is therefore important to its meaning and research-analysis focuses on the relationship between the different actors, how they anticipate each other, intuitively re-act and relate in order to understand the dominant/shared criteria for use or the “common sense” that governs choice of words, gestures, body language, dress sense, phrases or statements. “The social is not in the sign; rather the sign is social” (Wetherell,

2001, p16), which makes it necessary to focus on production practices as enactments of power and social processes.

Unlike fiction where producers control both “action” and “re-action” as scripted and hence enacted by actors, in reality TV shows producers can only write (that is, pre-determine) the “actions”. Yet “reality” rests on the “re-actions” – to the extent that responses from the contestants seem plausible or connect with viewers as “real” emotions and opportunities (of fortune and fame) on stake. Focusing on the interactions between the producers and the participants reveals how participation is performative and re-active - how it involves anticipating and playing to a script (which directs and determines actions) but also improvising in tactical ways. For example, contestants try to reproduce what they perceive producers expect from them, in order to remain relevant and attractive candidates and retain their position on the show. If producers look for participants with flamboyant personalities and camera-friendly looks then contestants also re-orient themselves, learn how to look, smile or speak to the camera, acquire new dress and hairstyles and so on. If producers cast a contestant as representative of a particular community or emphasize the characteristics that make him/her “ordinary” then the contestant too learns to perform to the archetype of “ordinary” or the community. The *participatory-performative practices* of the contestants on the shows are in that sense responses to and management of assigned roles/characters navigated by the producer’s craft and interpretation of the format. In exploring production practices we must then look at how producers identify and provide the narrative cues (as strategic production practices) intended to produce desired (and formatted) narratives of “reality”, “participation” and “change”. Study of production practices – the participatory

performative acts and encounters – in that sense reveal the television refracted imaginations and aspirations not only as ideas and interpretations for viewers but also as cues for action, that is, teaching and calling upon us to act within specific framework of actions and re-actions to make and transform our lives.

The concept of performative encounters also helps us understand how producers, like the participants/contestants, *re-act* to the given social-cultural scenarios. The production choices are determined in terms of what producers think will resonate with the local viewers. But the specific strategies (from selection of contestants at audition sites to the “actions” or triggers used to create dramatic moments within the show) depend on a range of contextual factors out of which producers “put reality together” (including the profile of and responses from participants/contestants, pressures from global format owners, perceived market needs, social-cultural norms and so on). Producers are circumscribed by a variety of contextual considerations and their practices may be (should be) understood as reflexive, performative responses to such conditions and contingencies; rather than designate them as all-power/independent creative actors. In the equation of real people (non-actors) and real encounters (unscripted content) the notion of “performances” highlights how producers are constantly responding to given contexts, needs and compulsions while reiterating the unpredictability and improvised character essential to performative practices. The notion of “encounters” on the other hand is important because it highlights the moments of negotiations, conflicts, alignments and slippages and how meaning is produced through the practically enacted accommodations.

The advantage of performative encounters as a conceptual lens for the television production practices is that it connects the dynamic relationship between practices and

power outlined above to the world of television production and cultural adaptation of reality TV formats. It allows research to move back and forth between a focus on the structures of production and a focus on the actions of production. Analysis concentrates on the shifting articulations as a mutating and evolving dialogue between the context and the text, the social interactions and the re-actions, rather than define production practices in terms of narratives of transition (as for example, traditional practices replaced by modern; Indian changed by Western/American; global adapted to the local; and so on). Thinking of practices in terms of the performative encounters helps us explore how people participate in different, unpredictable, irreducible, multiple ways though always bounded in contexts. Further, performative encounters emphasize how there are multiple practical ways of characterizing, describing, asserting, depicting, and interacting in a given condition. Analytical attention is therefore focused on the selection and choice to construct or act in one way (over another), which entails design, deliberation, activity and labor. This allows us to ask what are the underlying motivations, incentives, expectations and rationalities that frame production choices (both in terms of what producers chose to do and how participants-contestants chose to act). We may then ask, what do the producers choose to highlight; what are the goals and rationalities that motivates their actions; how do they order the actions on the shows to provoke specific re-actions; what “reactions” do they hope to elicit; what do they intend to produce out of the multiple responses possible; and how do they shape the contestant to produce the desired outcomes in and for the reality TV show. Similarly, we may explore the ambitions and aspirations of the participants-contestants in terms of how they respond – and choose to respond - to given conditions, needs and compulsions while reiterating the

unpredictability and improvised character essential to performative practices. Thinking in terms of performances highlights both the structurally driven script that our practices respond to and the agility, intuitive, creative responses that it necessarily entails.

Research and analysis of production practices in that sense is concerned with the contexts and practices of both producers and participants - and the interactions between them – rather than investigate the truth claims or falsity of comments, gestures etcetera. The focus is on understanding the constructions and the process of construction itself – the projections, depictions, declarations, assertions and so on, around which, and with which, social reality and identities are built.

CHAPTER FOUR

METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

This study takes a qualitative and exploratory research approach to understand how social power operates on the cultural domain; specifically, in and through the cultural adaptation of reality TV formats, in India. The study focuses on the television production end - that is, the contexts, processes and practices of reality TV format re-production - to understand the narratives of reality, participation and change that re-signify everyday life via popular entertainment television. A qualitative mode of enquiry was deemed appropriate because it allows us to focus on the embedded meanings, cultural idioms, expressions, practices and experiences. An exploratory approach on the other hand is important because it allows us to investigate a social phenomenon in its routine and naturalistic setting with minimum a priori expectations (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) which is necessary to develop explanations that capture the “complex, holistic picture” (Creswell, 1994).

Analysis engages with television as a discursive space, that is, a domain in which many representations, arguments, metaphors, interpretations and usages jostle with each other and are woven together (even if tentatively) to produce specific frameworks of ideas and actions. Research is therefore targeted towards the processes and practices of television production – as acts of meaning-making - to identify the points of interaction, mediation, the emerging order, logic and terms of articulation. Meaning-making refers to a recognizable interpretive framework consisting of statements, gestures, symbolic usage etcetera that cohere together to create model of thought and social meanings that people

draw upon, both collectively and individually, to make sense of and conduct their lives. The analytical focus on the “social” requires us to think of meaning-making as more than formal construction of “language in use” or textual constructions (whether written or audio-visual); rather meaning-making, as socially conditioned practices, include the array of gestures, body language, visual signals as well as speech acts or written formulations that constitute our social-cultural terrain. The analytical design therefore incorporates a concurrent focus on the practices embedded in the narratives and the ideas, postures, performances and actions observed in the practices of narrative construction – linking the “text” with the “contexts” of its production. The analytical design (outlined below) focuses on the specific practices (or strategies of talking/acting/looking etcetera) and organizes them in terms of thematic codes that are repeated, reoccur and are forcefully rendered to create and support particular models of thought embedded in reality TV narratives.

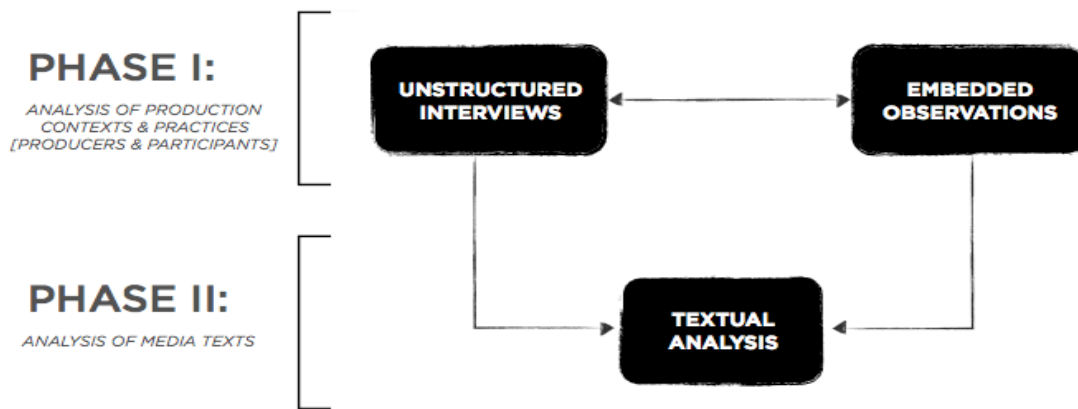
This study does not engage with the audience or the consumption end of television in terms of reception research. And yet, reality TV production inevitably engages with viewers by turning them into participants – as contestants (actual, aspiring or jaded); those who vote or call-in to support the contestants they watch on television; or campaign more actively in the streets; and so on. As such the data collected from contestants on the reality TV shows (many of whom I met during embedded observation of *Indian Idol*, in Mumbai but others outside production studios as well) refers to the larger social-cultural world of viewer engagement with reality TV texts. Conversations with reality TV contestants (and/or potential, aspiring contestants; those who participated in the past; and their families) in that sense provides a point of entry into the wider terrain

in which reality TV shows are watched; how its meanings are interpreted; and how the framework of ideas and actions it offers get mobilized in everyday life.

Phases and Stages of Analysis

There are two phases in the analytical design. The first phase focuses on the analysis of production contexts, processes and practices, based on field notes of embedded observations of reality TV production and in-depth interviews with producers and participants-contestants. The second phase targets the media texts, that is, selected episodes of the reality TV shows and secondary sources of textual references to reality TV shows (including news reports, public commentaries etcetera). Both phases refer to the same analytical process and steps but are organized in different phases because it allows for convenience in data processing and more importantly, enables triangulation by method – that is, the analysis emerging from the first phase is verified in the second phase by asking if the findings from the data on production contexts and practices are replicated in the textual matter.

TRIANGULATION BY METHOD OF DATA COLLECTION & PHASES OF ANALYSIS



Phase One: Analysis of Production Contexts and Practices

In determining the underlying logic of ideas and actions prioritized in the production/cultural adaptation of reality TV formats we begin with an inductive search for *relevant themes*, followed by a deductive re-arrangement according to thematic codes.

Themes gradually emerge as a result of combined process of becoming familiar with the data and making logical associations between the different parts of data (that is, production contexts and strategies adopted by producers; interaction between local producers and global format owners; interaction between producers and participants/contestants, as well as their families; the expectations and strategies of participants-contestants; and so on). The objective is to identify patterns in the data by means of thematic codes. At each successive stage themes move from low level of abstraction to major, overarching themes rooted in concrete evidence provided by data. This initial list of thematic codes is listed as the *first-order concepts* (following Maitlis

and Lawrence, 2007 cited in Mitra, 2010). For example, small town, middle class “mindsets” as imagined and assigned by producers can be practically coded in terms of a morally “proper” skirt length for contestants on *Indian Idol*, as producers determine what is neither too “glamorous and promiscuous” nor too “shabby” (discussed further in chapter seven). The first-order concepts are empirically related to the specific practices of meaning-making (defined and discussed below), and hence the development of the first order concepts involves referring back-and-forth to the data. On one hand review of empirical data (from field notes, observations and interviews) leads to an initial organization of illustrative themes – that is, the first-order concepts – and on the other hand, alongside, each of the initial minor themes are compared to the data to ensure they are representative; and revised, added or deleted accordingly. Themes maybe (and are often) combined to create a new one for analytical clarity and ease. For example, expressions of gratitude for the sacrifices made by parents, family obligations and declarations of trying to win *Indian Idol* to fulfill parental dreams and financially support one’s family may be combined into one broad theme of “family responsibilities”. Other examples of first order concepts include following themes: attention to appearances (including hairstyles, clothes); physical “make-overs”; family obligations; sense of sacrifices made by family; surrendering to wisdom of elders/experts; claims of innate talent (“born-talent”); portraying confidence; not displaying fear; struggling against odds and lack of opportunities; responsibility to community/city; value of hard work; acquiring new experiences; English speaking skills; and so on.

Themes are identified using Owen’s (1984) strategy of thematic analysis focusing on *repetition*, *recurrence* and *forcefulness*. If a theme is repeated, tends to reoccur and is

manifested with force then it is identified as a relevant theme for further exploration. *Repetition* looks for the explicit and superficial use of the same wording/gestures; *recurrence* addresses the reiteration of the text's latent meaning (through different words/gestures); and *forcefulness* refers to the "vocal inflection, volume, or dramatic pauses, which serve to stress and subordinate some utterances from other locations" (Owen, 1984, p275).

The advantage of looking for *repetition*, *recurrence* and *forcefulness* is that it accommodates both the commercial-contractual imperatives (for example, the brand logo has to be included, repeatedly in shots or set design) as well as the creative sleights of hand (for example, spot lighting, inserting "video diaries" within live shoots, dress designing, events or actions scripted to provoke certain reactions, specific selection of topics that guides set design, song selection and other aesthetic decisions for specific episodes, and so on). While certain production details are contractually obligatory yet format adaptation involves constant commercial negotiations and creative-cultural improvisations. Trying to parse out what is a format requirement from what is a creative transgression in the technical sense of cultural adaptation would therefore be misleading and result in superficial distinctions. Instead, it is more useful to look at the thematic codes prioritized in the process of adaptation, which are partly embedded in or required by the format and partly responses to or interpretations of the format. To look for the *repetition*, *recurrence* and *forcefulness* in that sense reveals the dynamics between structural, contextual compulsions and creative maneuverings – not as opposing and competing forces but as complicit and complementary logics of construction and creative re-articulations. Also, to clarify, there is no attempt to measure the frequency with which

a theme may occur, since purposive sampling is followed in identifying the themes and the analytical objective is to understand the inter-connections between different themes that combine (even if contingently) to create meaningful, interpretive frameworks (rather than presence/absence or rate of occurrence).

Since thematic analysis is an interpretive methodology, no effort is made to separate the data presentation from the data analysis. Instead, constructing the thematic codes and placing them within a conceptual framework requires making connections, drawing conclusions and investigating-evaluating lines of discussion and argumentation. The interconnection and interaction between different themes in everyday life has been noted by other researchers (Gunaratne, 2005; cited in Mitra, 2010) and are not taken as discrete and absolute. Focus is on how different sentences, gestures and themes are “put together” – the logic of inclusion, combination, arrangement and alignment – to reveal meaning production in terms of what producers choose to highlight or not; what contestants decide to project or not; of what viewers/potential contestants aspire to or not and so on.

Thematic revisions are considered complete at the level of first-order concepts when thematic saturation is noted; but till the point of completion the development of these thematic categories require a constant back-and-forth movement between the data and organization of data.

The first-order concepts are further organized and mapped as *second-order concepts* for analytical clarity - to understand which thematic codes are tagged together; repeated and highlighted; merged to form a new one; and silenced and/or contradicted. The advantage of this second/follow up regrouping of the thematic codes is that it allows

us to understand how meaning-making practices tend to, often, accommodate seemingly contrary ideas and how the framework of ideas and actions need not (or does not) operate in linear logical flows. For instance, continuing with the example cited above, when a contestant moves towards the final stages of contest in *Indian Idol* and is close to becoming the Idol (celebrity) there is a need to remake the “look and feel” of the contestant from an ordinary, small town middle class young woman (dressed in a skirt with a conventional knee length or traditional attires such *salwar kameez*) to a glamorous, style icon, fitted in designer mini-skirts befitting of the glossy magazines she would soon be seen in, endorsing fashionable consumer goods. Shedding (clothing and small town “mindsets” favoring more conventional clothing) signals shedding the anonymity and embracing the professional needs (of revealing dressing) that a celebrity must adjust to. Such accommodations are not assertion of gender consciousness and reclaiming the body or the right to dress as one pleases; and nor do such transformation flout or revolt against traditional moralities. Rather it is presented as a need to adapt, remake one’s self, and play oneself in accordance with the social mobility (into new material and cultural capital) that comes with winning *Indian Idol*. The seemingly contradictory (*first order*) themes (adhering to family morality and small town values gauged by skirt lengths) are accommodated into larger (*second order*) themes, within a single narrative of reality, participation and change. The emphasis is on the modes of participation (ambition, competition, goal orientation, need to adapt, etcetera) and the values that make such participation meaningful (that is, becoming a rich and famous music star, of going on world tours, of owning fashionable clothes/homes/cars, etcetera). In that sense the second-order concepts reveal what is given primacy, what is silenced and what is held in

tentative adjustment in the framework of ideas and actions underpinning the reality TV shows.

Owen's strategy of identifying themes in terms of repetition, recurrence and forcefulness does not mention silencing strategies. However, Mitra (2010) adds silencing to the framework used by Owen to highlight how the lack of voice or absence is itself an important strategy in discursive constructions, where access to meaning construction is taken as an expression of power play. I follow Mitra's lead because producers are tasked with choices to delete or "cut" during editing, which silences aspects, elements or ideas. The acts of silencing in that sense are not only that which is "not said/done" but also that which is directly "stopped from saying/doing". For example, what is "cut" on the editing table by the producers are shots of the contestants crying uncontrollably on losing or of other competing contestants sitting in stunned silence, in face of their shattered dreams - with the relief of not being eliminated this week and the fear of what will happen next week holding them still in their seats. Producers rarely linger on the shocked faces of the contestants (caught in a moment of respite but also in the emotional turmoil of watching "one of them" dealing with devastated dreams) even if they show them, very briefly, in reaction shots. What is also not captured on camera or shown are the producers and production staff walking away to hide their own tears, disappointments and untamed emotions, adjusting in the name of professionalism and rational acceptance of a survival-of-the-fittest world. Producers, living and working in close contact with the contestants, inevitably become emotionally attached to (at least some of) the contestants. When the contestants are eliminated from the show, the producers have to hide their own emotions and disappointments; and return to the editing table to create a "positive mood" – by

deleting shots that reveal the emotional trauma and dampen the mood. Instead, they highlight the attitudes and declarative statements (“I will not give up”; “I will continue struggling to reach my dreams”; etcetera) that create hope and a forward looking stance. This management of emotions is tied to management of talent and professional ambitions and suggests a shifting orientation from the human-to-human connection to a means-to-goals orientation. Interaction orders are reframed around themes of ambition, determination, talent and professionalism to create a narrative of reality and change – silencing the perceived “negative” (irrational emotions) and emphasizing the perceived “positive” (rational choice for material goals and professional advancement).

Phase Two: Analysis of Textual Material

Two types of textual matter are considered for analysis. One, selected samples of the reality TV shows (final cut or broadcast texts) and promotional videos, where the analytical approach is similar to phase one analysis of production contexts and practices, that is, by identifying thematic patterns in terms of repetitions, recurrences and forcefulness of thematic codes. The data is organized in terms of specific strategic practices, mapped as first-order concepts and further developed into second-order concepts. The second body of textual matter looked at is audio-visual and printed news on reality TV shows. This is conducted to understand how similar themes, ideas and narratives resonate in inter-textual references and in different social-cultural realms.

The smallest *unit of visual analysis* considered in textual analysis is the shot. The “shot” is defined as uncut camera action wherein if the camera’s position changes due to panning, tracking, zooming and so on (and not edit cuts). The smallest *unit of audio*

analysis is a sentence. Though both audio and visual components are considered in conjunction, in general, yet in an audio-visual text the different audio and visual parts may not occur simultaneous (for example, fade in/out with other reaction shots) and often includes variety of other creatively important elements that supplement or give meaning to the actions in the shot and dialogue (for example, costume/dress, background music, set design, physical properties that aid in character development etcetera). To accommodate these variations the emphasis is not on the audio-visual component per se but on the *thematic treatment*. In that sense sample texts are not coded according to shot division or dialogue flow but according to themes (for example, single minded ambition, family values, competitive spirit, commitment to community etcetera). Initial notes developed from preliminary viewing refer to shots and dialogues as the basic unit of analysis to identify the themes; but once the themes have been identified, selected sections of the media texts are transcribed to illustrate how the theme is repeated or forcefully reiterated throughout the episode/series.

The thematic-narrative approach to analysis expands the unit of analysis beyond small segments/fragments of dialogue or action (used in thematic analysis, though not treated as discrete units disconnected to what comes before or after) to examine the entire story as it develops and impacts the actors. This is important specially because reality TV shows, unlike fictional narratives, are produced from a series of improvised actions-reactions that may be initially scripted by producers but ultimately dependent on what happens “live” on the studio floors while filming. Dialogues or actions are therefore not always cohesive and contained within one scene, sequence or shot; and tend to be foreshadowed in earlier segments/episodes or referenced in latter ones. Therefore it is

valuable to consider the entire narrative that is developed and featured rather than individual audio-visual units. Narratives are the stories that are told or used to tell and construct specific ideas (for example, ambition, hard work, struggle, competition etcetera). This focus on narratives is important because it helps organize different textual-generic conventions of “types” of shows (quiz, game, talent hunt, travel etcetera). Since the focus is on the narratives (rather than generic conventions) different types of shows can be accommodated within the same analytical framework.

Further, the emphasis on thematic and narrative development in the reality TV shows allows us to apply sampling strategies that are appropriate to the structure of the show as a whole (rather than apriori, externally determined sampling strategies that do not address the variety of structures reality TV narratives may follow). Of the three shows considered in this study (and clarified in further detail in the following sections) two of the shows (*Indian Idol* and *Desi Girl*) are considered in terms of an entire season (rather than a sample of episodes or smaller increments) because the structure of the show is built towards a *finale episode* which declares the winner of the series and the narrative thrust is towards the episodic development to a climatic end. The third show KBC however does not follow such a build-up to the end and therefore texts are sampled according to random episode selection, across the three seasons of its broadcast.

Selection of Specific Reality TV shows

In studying the production of reality TV shows this study focuses on three shows in particular. The three shows include:

1. *Kaun Banega Crorepati* (KBC) which is an adaptation of *Who Wants to be a Millionaire* and was broadcast on Star Plus (seasons 1 to 3);
2. *Indian Idol* (*Idol*) adapted from the format *Pop Idol*, broadcast on Sony TV (season 5); and
3. *Desi Girl* developed from the format *Celebrity Sleepover* and broadcast on Imagine TV.

The selection criteria for the three reality TV shows are specific to the shows, rather than the broadcasting networks or the formats they represent. An inductive logic was considered more appropriate for the selection of the specific shows because formats (though codified in the “production bible” provided by format owners) are constantly modified in response to a variety of localized factors – and hence require a contextually grounded approach to determine which reality TV shows, out of the many produced in different GECs, should be included. The selected shows are not case studies³⁵ but provide points of focus in this exploratory study and were chosen on the basis of the following rationale.

1. *Whether the show is broadcast on any of the top ten GEC networks that tend to be most widely available.*

The GECs have wider viewership; are watched nation wide (as opposed to regional language networks for instance) and hence important for consideration³⁶. However, in India a complex distribution system (further discussed in chapter five) often means

³⁵ That is, the analytical interest is not to develop an explanatory study of a ‘phenomenon’ by means of a ‘case study’, on the basis of causation and correlation (as clarified in the chapter on theoretical framework); rather the objective is to explore the social-cultural meanings embedded in the reality TV shows and map the different connections (or disconnections).

³⁶ There are, however, no verifiable or reliable data on viewers. Industry ratings, collected through the global company Nielsen, was provided to me by the network research teams (which suggest how widely the shows are being watched), but such rating figures are also often disputed and rarely provide the definitive word on what viewers watch or prefer to watch.

that only few top ones are available for viewers. It is therefore important to consider the top ten GECs and the programming they offer. Also, GECs have bigger share of advertising and are the bigger revenue earners, which indicates how commercial considerations shape creative and production related decisions that are viewed by the largest and most coveted section of television viewers. Finally, top ten GECs set the trends that other networks imitate. The three networks selected here can therefore be considered representative of the industry as a whole.

2. *Whether the show marked a definitive moment or “new idea” in the industry.*

Such shows are important for consideration because they tend to capture the viewer attention and imagination; and hence, trigger new trends or deluge of similar (imitative) shows. I relied on industry professionals and media reports to identify such shows.

3. *Whether industry reports and news features highlighted the show.*

Such shows are important for consideration because they produce inter-discursive texts and references, thereby foregrounding the embedded appeals, imaginations and aspirations in a wider context of social-cultural circulation. For example, many people insisted that they do not watch reality TV shows, such as *Desi Girl*, and yet follow up questions invariably revealed that they knew – in exact details - about the show’s main theme/idea/structure/characters and latest developments (who got eliminated and who is still on the show). Whether one is a viewer or not (in the conventional sense of the term) becomes irrelevant in the media saturated life where news networks, magazines, events at the local temple or other non-entertainment spaces create an inter-referential world.

4. *Whether the show engaged with social issues (broadly conceptualized), through promotional materials and/or references within the broadcast episodes.*

This aspect is important for consideration because many reality TV shows directly invoke contemporary social, cultural, economic problems and highlight how reality TV inflected discourses tend to re-signify and re-define everyday understanding. For example, *Indian Idol* is promoted as providing opportunities to small town aspirants who are otherwise marginalized in the national mainstream and do not have access to the opportunities in metropolitan big cities. Similarly, *DG* was promoted as a show that reflects the increasing social, cultural and economic chasm in India between the urban and rural sectors.

5. *Whether the show generated interest and was included in other entertainment mediums.*

This criterion suggests how inter-textuality is an important indicator to determine which shows and narrative themes gain precedence. For example, music/dance talent hunt reality TV shows are often part of the plot lines in popular commercial Hindi films which replicates the underlying ideas on a different (and bigger) medium, revealing how reality TV inflected ideas and actions gain currency at a wider scale.

It is important to note therefore that the selection criteria for the shows included in this study are not based on viewer ratings but whether the shows are available for viewing, talked about, create cross-referential practices and are hence part of the social-cultural resonance around reality TV shows. The three selected shows were included because they meet all five criteria listed above.

KBC was the first show to be developed from a global format. The popularity of the show (first launched in 2000) introduced the trend of adapting format shows and allowed cable and satellite television networks to become viable in the television market. Research focuses on seasons one to three because these three seasons mark a significant difference in production strategies (including change in host, manner of speaking, formal usage of language etcetera) and reveals the malleable nature of format re-production/adaptation. A random selection of episodes provides the basis for textual analysis. Interviews with KBC producers and network executives were conducted between 2007 and 2010.

After KBC the next reality TV show that galvanized popular imagination was *Indian Idol* (first launched in 2004-2005). The show was highly rated, widely discussed and referenced in popular culture and routinely identified by producers as the “big ticket show”. *Idol* was therefore selected as a second show for closer exploration. Embedded observations of the production of *Idol* were conducted in 2010 for season 5, though interviews have been conducted with producers responsible for previous seasons as well. Both embedded production observations and textual analysis of the show focused on season five. The focus on a particular season in entirety in *Idol* (as opposed to random selection between seasons one to three for KBC) is not inconsistent because the shows were produced at different time and social-cultural contexts, and are not intended to produce comparable analysis.

Desi Girl was selected as the third show (launched in 2010) because it marks a new trend in the types of formats being selected or considered viable for the Indian cultural market. The show features urbane celebrities and divas competing to adapt to the

rough-and-tumble of rural life (without the comforts and lifestyles of upper class, urban India such as air-conditioners, cold drinking water or refreshing showers etcetera) for the final crown (and cash prize) of *Desi* (Hindi word for country) *Girl*. The show provides a unique opportunity to explore how reality TV production engages with social-cultural fissures and the framework of ideas and actions, the interpretive strategies and the meanings used to mediate the social-cultural divisions, within the parameters of prime time entertainment programming. Unlike the quiz-game formats (such as KBC) or the music/dance-talent hunt formats (such as *Idol*) DG focuses on life situations and drama emerging from interpersonal and social conflicts. The show illustrates the market shifts that have taken place in ten years (when KBC was first launched in 2000 to when *Desi Girl* was telecast in 2010) as C&S television has moved beyond metropolitan middle classes into the small towns (discussed further in chapter seven and eight). Further, *Desi Girl* provides an analytical counter-point to both KBC and *Idol* because *Desi Girl* involves celebrities as participants (rather than members of ordinary viewers) and reveals how, if indeed, celebrities participating in a reality TV show may be treated/produced differently.

Research Plan for Data Collection

The study engages with the following related but separate data fields.

I. Production contexts and practices

Data collection relies on in-depth, unstructured (often multiple) interviews with executives from global format companies, broadcasting networks and production houses in India; in-depth, unstructured (often multiple) interviews with participant-contestants on

production sets (of *Indian Idol* in particular); as well as embedded (non-participant) observations of the production processes (including filming, rehearsals (technical and talent), producer's management of participants, editing etcetera) to understand the participatory practices, cultural-commercial rationalities and industrial contexts of reality TV production (for both producers and participants/contestants).

II. Media texts or sample episodes of selected reality TV shows.

Copies of telecast episodes were collected directly from the broadcasting networks and production companies for *Indian Idol* (season 5) and *Desi Girl*, while telecast episodes of KBC and other seasons of *Indian Idol* were collected from a variety of sources, including home recordings and online uploads.

Methods of Data Collection

Two primary methods/tools of data collection were used: one, in-depth, unstructured interviews; and two, embedded observations during production of selected shows. The following section focuses on the strategies for interviewing and embedded observations followed by an explanation of why such strategies are appropriate/helpful for the research objective. The next section outlines the inductively built data collection process and highlights the types of data collected.

Method 1: Interviewing Strategies

Qualitative, unstructured and in-depth interview strategies were used to facilitate the qualitative and exploratory enquiry. The unstructured nature of the interview allows us to probe *deep* with follow up questions, opens new lines of enquiry and/or

unanticipated data (as per the exploratory approach), permits us to focus on *thick descriptions* which are important to contextualize and develop *rich* nuances/details of the values, motivations, feelings, experiences of the interviewees. A core list of questions were developed but the conversational approach allowed the interview to ask follow-up questions and focus on the interpretive and discursive frameworks of respondents - what interviewees consider remarkable (or not), what is noted/observed by them (often in self-reflexive observations) and how they frame, specify or articulate their understanding.

Further, it must be noted that the rapport established during the in-depth interviews often allowed me to pose follow up requests to the key industry professionals who act as gatekeepers to the production process. For instance, initial interviews conducted with a conversational approach (though formally announced as an “interview” at the start) allowed the respondents to ask me questions about my personal and professional backgrounds. This allowed a trust formation and eventually the senior “gate keeping” professionals were more inclined to grant me permission to enter the recording or editing studios to conduct embedded observations³⁷. This was important because to gain entry into a given setting I had to gain the permission of the “gatekeepers”, and often multiple gatekeepers in the circuitry of format adaptation that entails different actors and levels of production. For example, permission from the head-of-productions responsible for all Asia markets for the format owning company (based in Singapore office) had to be followed with permissions from the India office and the broadcasting network as well as collaborating production houses; or to be embedded in the daily schedule of the

³⁷ However, in many other situations I had to go through lengthy process of getting clearances from multiple actors (including format owners at their global or regional headquarters; broadcasting networks and production houses in India; public relations departments; studio owners; and families and community leaders, when I visited the contestant’s hometown and families to explore the participatory contexts of contestants).

participants on the show I had to get the permission of the head of production but also of the contestant manager.

These in-depth, unstructured, qualitative and conversational interviews last between one and two hours (though in many cases it exceeded that) and were conducted in variety of settings, from corporate office rooms, production staff rooms in the studios, dressing rooms, rehearsal halls, cafeterias, etcetera. 33 interviews were conducted in total; including various levels of producers and production staff.

Method 2: Strategies of embedded observations

Embedded observations are used as a strategy for data collection because they emphasize the practical nature of television production and social-cultural lives. To observe producers “at work” for instance reveals the producer’s intuitive understanding of what “works” in India (and what does not) while adapting a global format, which is important particularly in the context of reality TV production as it entails unscripted reactions. The objective is not to extract the cognitive process but to situate the production practices of cultural adaptation in the chaos and compulsions of production scenarios and understand the intuitive and contextual practices – the “feel for the game” produced in the “heat of the moment”, to repeat Bourdieu’s words. Another advantage of collecting data on production practices through embedded observations was that it allowed me to verify and cross check many of the responses I received during formal interviews; conduct follow up interviews; and gather particularly self-reflexive responses from producers (which reveal the interpretive modes). The data gathered during unstructured interviews while on a cigarette or *chai* (tea) break invariably provided richer and more spontaneous

responses than those provided in the office/corporate rooms. It tended to provoke more meaningful responses from producers as they often referred to their personal backgrounds, experiences and expectations (or frustrations) and how they are implicated in the production process – while interviews conducted in a office setting tended to be inhibitive of personal insights. The personalized commentaries and responses are important for this research because it provides insights into the “performative” stances and embedded ideas that frame the discursive practices in conjunction with the contextual needs/imperatives. Embedded observations of the production process during filming (of *Indian Idol* in particular) also allowed me to interact with the participants (on a daily basis) during production and learn about their motivations, anticipations, strategic thinking, rationalities, fears and personal biographies that guide their participation in the production. The embedded observations allowed me to trace the patterns of thoughts, ideas and actions that informed their participation.

Embedded observations were conducted by positioning myself initially as a “fly-on-the-wall” observer in a given scenario - in editing rooms; studios during filming; rehearsal studios; voice training sessions; editing team meeting/conference rooms; dressing rooms; and so on. Most of the time I took handwritten notes, though on many occasion I also audio recorded (on a digital Dictaphone) longer conversations or background sounds to add specificity to my handwritten notes. Being a “fly-on-the-wall” observer meant not directly participating in the events or conversations taking place at the given scenario. I was often introduced to the people at the setting, though not always (for example, to be present in a staff meeting I had to be introduced to the staff as a researcher in general but in the rush of unfolding events and people walking in and out of meetings

many individuals may not have known who I am). As a result I could often blend into the background and observe the events or conversations without inhibiting the “natural setting”.

Positionality

My initial “position” as a non-participant embedded observer (as a “fly-on-the-wall” without commenting or participating in any manner) was helpful in establishing familiarity and eventually gaining trust of the individuals involved. However, as I blended into the background I was also increasingly called upon – whether in jest (as production assistants complained about their bosses and asked me if I would report them as “badmouthing” the boss) or in earnest (when production heads in Singapore asked me what I thought about the production practices in India, and if I could submit a memo on my “findings and assessment”). In time I also found myself (often) called upon for personal advice, confessions, emotional support and so on which revealed the embedded hopes, ambitions and aspirations of the participants, how they make sense of the emotional upheavals and the transformative journey that participation in the reality TV show entails. I maintained a non-participant status (often directly declaring and asserting my distance or not responding to questions/suggestions as indirect gestures of distancing), and yet the notion of participation itself seemed to become more and more ambiguous, as embedded observations tend to do.

With reference to positionality of embedded research there are two points that must be highlighted. First, my efforts to retain professional and emotional distance from the respondents (as per ethnographic research protocols) were, curiously, aided by the

production team's keen eye on my presence, in general, to ensure no rules, contractual obligations (between the participants and the producers) and codes of secrecy necessary in reality TV production are not broken even inadvertently. However, the second point is, that I also realized that many of the producers were in the same "position" as I found myself in – trying to maintain a professional distance and not be entangled in the emotional life of participants, and often failing to do so in face of the inherent force of human interactions to sway us. A contestant manager, for instance, must not become emotionally close to a contestant even when part of her (and it is usually a woman) job is to provide emotional support to pull contestants through the trauma of competition (and possible elimination) week after week. Oddly, my positionality as a non-participant researcher (a professional category) was turned inside-out and made me part of the scene – and a participant in a sense, as I found myself trying to mediate the same lines between emotional and professional behavior in the course of my embedded observations as the television producers and participant-contestants themselves. As such, my experiences in embedded observations inevitably drew out and focused on the deeply layered experiences that are triggered by the world of reality TV production and the webs of imagination, aspirations, ambitions, hopes, disappointments, rationalities, struggles, strategies, compulsions, conditions and so on.

Method 3: Collection of Textual Data

Final broadcast episodes were collected to facilitate textual analysis. Broadcasting networks and production houses gave me permission to collect the entire series of Idol (5) and DG, and take notes of the promotional videos for the shows (though I was not

allowed to take copies of promos outside the studio). However, the production company for KBC refused to share copies (or even allow me to review) without the permission of the broadcaster (Star Plus) and repeated requests to the broadcaster were not addressed. As a result a randomized selection of KBC episodes and promos, collected over time by recording live from television broadcasts or downloaded from the Internet, have been used. As explained above, the lack of the entire KBC (1 to 3) series however does not pose a limitation to the sampling strategy because the KBC show is not structured as a season length competitive contest that is decided at a grand finale episode at the end of the season. Rather, KBC features different contestants reaching different levels of prize money throughout the season³⁸.

In addition to the selected shows, promotional videos and specific segments or entire episodes of other popular reality TV shows were also collected for textual analysis, especially if highlighted by producers (during interviews) as illustrative of production strategies. For instance, a producer explained how a reality TV show targeted to younger viewers might also engage an older audience, if produced skillfully. *Khatron Ka Khiladi*, the Hindi adaptation of *Fear Factor*, for example features young men/women perform a series of daredevil stunts (such as jumping from a helicopter onto a narrow platform suspended in precarious balance over a deep sea) or stomach churning challenges (such as swim with snakes or eat live cockroaches). Such adventures and dangers are targeted to appeal to younger viewers but by filming the beginning of each adrenalin driven stunt with the recital of the *Gayatri mantra* (a Hindu prayer which is performed to ward off evil and ensure well being) producers also appeal to older viewers. Mothers,

³⁸ The 'grand finale' episode for KBC in that sense is more of a ceremonial closing of the season rather than a cliff hanger resolved by declaring the winner of the entire season (as is the case in *Idol* and *DG*).

grandmothers, wives, parents are thus engaged to also watch, approve and identify with the physical stunts at an emotional level based on the drama of danger and destiny.

A range of secondary data has also been collected including industry reports, business news, viewer ratings (sourced from research teams at broadcasting networks and not Nielsen). These include:

- * television and advertising industry reports on programming strategies;
 - * news on programming choices and reports on reality TV shows;
 - * magazine articles (*India Today*, in both English and Hindi editions) and general news reports on reality TV shows from two newspaper groups (*Times of India* in English, *Nav Bharat Times* in Hindi published by the Times Group, part of Bennet and Coleman, Ltd and *Indian Express* in English and *Jansatta* in Hindi published by the Indian Express Group). Both publication groups enjoy wide readership. The articles were selected based on relevance sampling, that is, if they address cultural and media related topics.
- Since the time period under study ranges between 2000 and 2010, the secondary data is particularly useful in contextualizing the primary data in terms of the developments and trends in the industry.

Data Collection Days

In phase one I collected data on the contexts, strategies and practices of television production using the two primary methods used in this study – 1. embedded observations, during production of selected shows; and 2. in-depth, unstructured interviews, with producers, network executives, production personnel, and participants. The embedded observations (for the shows *Idol* and *DG*) took place in summer of 2010 in the television

studios in Mumbai. However, interviews, particularly for KBC, were collected starting in 2007 and continued till 2010.

I conducted interviews with a range of professionals involved in television production:

- * production heads;
- * creative directors;
- * network producers/executive producers;
- * business heads of production houses;
- * programmers, editors, costume designers etcetera.

The in-depth and unstructured interviews were audio recorded to allow for precise transcription, except in cases where respondents refused to be recorded. Few respondents also preferred to send their responses via email in written notes. For the most part respondents did not mind being cited by name, though in certain interviews respondents preferred to remain anonymous or mark select portions of the interview that should not be attributed to them by name. I also conducted interviews with entertainment desk editors from news television networks to understand their editorial choices and reasons in reporting on reality TV shows – which provides insight into the inter-discursive practices and reveals how certain themes are fore-grounded, repeated and reiterated in the public sphere.

Simultaneously I conducted non-participant observations of the production process (filming and editing), which allowed me to explore the interaction between production personnel and the participants and observe the range of improvisations, gestures, meditated and/or spontaneous actions that inform the production process.

Observations of this interaction between producers and participants is important because it provides insights into the contestations, juxtaposition and accommodation of different perceptions, expectations and dispositions within a broader interpretive framework produced in and for the reality TV show. Trying to understand the production process in terms of what producers want to highlight, how they come upon their decisions and selections cannot be captured/engaged in post-facto interviews, though interviews are a useful method of eliciting their reflections on their thought process.

Embedded observations were conducted during the production of two shows specifically: *Indian Idol* (2010) and *Desi Girl* (2010). In both shows the objective was to collect data on the production strategies, rationalities and practices, specifically from the producer's perspectives. There was however a difference in the strategic focus of data collection between the shows, since each show (KBC, *Idol* or DG) follow a different format and hence allow or limit research in terms of the format specific data. Analytically this is not a limitation because analysis relies on the thematic repetition, recurrence and forcefulness; and the core themes identified within each show are mirrored in all the shows – which illustrates reiteration of themes across all types/genres/kinds of reality TV shows and provides the basis of arguments developed in this study. However, to clarify, the embedded observations of *Desi Girl* focused on the post-production stage. The production schedule of *Desi Girl* segmented the production into continuous shooting/filming, and editing or postproduction stage began at the end of all filming, unlike other shows such as *Idol*, which was shot and edited simultaneously on a weekly basis. In exploring the production of *Desi Girl* therefore it was strategically and logistically more important to focus on the post-production or editing phase when the

show is “put together” and producers decide which elements of the initial script/narrative to include (or exclude) and which aspects, moods, ideas to emphasize (or not). The embedded observation of *Idol* however followed a different strategy because the show was filmed and edited simultaneously and provided an opportunity to explore different aspects of the production process – the training of participants, rehearsals, dress fittings and other production practices as well as the day to day life experiences of the participants as they go through the transformative journey of being on a reality TV show.

In addition, I would like to highlight that between 2007 and 2009 I was in India for prolonged stretches of time and gained embedded insights that I consider valuable to the research process. Officially, I was on medical leave from my doctoral studies and had gone back home to India to address the medical emergencies. As such I was not a researcher following a methodologically premeditated plan for data collection. However my personal circumstances and experiences allowed me to gain a deeper embedding into the everyday social life and often participate in conversations or be a non-participant observer of social-cultural interactions (from talking about reality TV dreams with nurses at a post-surgery hospital recovery ward to overhearing gossip on the same at a small town hotel lobby; from observing an young man’s expressions of self-confidence imitating that of reality TV contestants at a job interview for a store manager’s position in a shopping mall to a roadside *dhaba* (eating place/restaurant) below a shining hoarding that features a reality TV contestant smiling to the passing traffic and asking them to vote for him and make him a “winner”). Conversations, gestures, events, anecdotes, phrases echoed the themes and phenomenon I had proposed to study in my dissertation proposal (in 2006). I spent my time as a patient recuperating – and not a researcher – but also

acquiring a deeper, thicker and more embedded sense of reality TV's social-cultural resonance than I had conceptualized in my dissertation prospectus. With the research question ringing in my mind and perhaps the anxiety of watching the dissertation plans collapse in the face of life's eventualities, I found myself watching reality TV shows at night; taking notes, mostly in the form of field journal³⁹ (audio recorded); and being mindful about what was going on around me in terms of my research topic. But crucially, what I noted in my field journal during those two years were not coincidental or about my being at the right place at the right time. The absence of design or conscious strategic thinking as a research had liberated me to observe as social-cultural life unfolded around me. Though I spent most of my time seeking medical help in different parts of the country and interacting with people from different areas/cities within the country (Delhi, Dehradun and Mussoorie in Uttar Pradesh, Bhopal in Madhya Pradesh and Kolkata in West Bengal) the point is that reality TV inflected themes were unavoidable – in the ideas expressed and practiced by people in the daily course of their lives. I do not refer to those journal notes as the primary body of data for my analysis but I consider the insights I gained during those technically 'non-research' or 'non-fieldwork' days to be an important part of what frames this study.

³⁹ rather than 'field notes' following the conventions of ethnographic note keeping

CHAPTER FIVE

MARKETS AND “*MINDSETS*”: THE SOCIAL LIFE OF TELEVISION IN INDIA

“I don’t make television for you Lauhona, I make them for your maid.” (Rohatgi, head of Content and Communications, Imagine TV, part of Turner Broadcasting Company)

This chapter locates the emergence of reality TV shows in India in the social, historical and industrial contexts of television production. Doing so allows us to identify how reality TV becomes a popular programming choice for Indian entertainment television and find the empirical links between the symbolic-cultural forms (such as reality TV) available on television and the power of market forces to remake the cultural-ideological space of television. The objective is not to provide a causal, factorial analysis of “why reality TV” and/or deterministic accounts of how capital and market forces reshape cultural production. Rather, this chapter draws correspondences between the realm of political-economic policy shifts and the business of television in order to reveal the industrial alignments, conditional imperatives, rationalities and audience imaginaries that frame reality TV production.

The following discussion is organized in three sections. The first section historically locates the emergence of C&S television in India, tracing its roots in urban, middle class consumption and the political-cultural acceptance of market forces as a key actor in social life (in and post 1990s) that fuelled the growth of C&S television in India. The second section focuses on the unique distribution structure of C&S television in India and highlights how the distribution dynamics of the industry has allowed the C&S television universe to grow beyond the urban, middle classes - expanding more and more into lower socio-economic groups and small towns of India (in the 2000s) in search of

new, “emerging markets”. The aim is to highlight how C&S television expansion is, in the process, connecting vastly different material-economic realities within a world of cultural and aspirational participation and compelling producers to create a broad set of ideas and values (investigated in following chapters). And finally, the third section focuses on reality TV as a *programming* strategy (that is, why produce reality TV), which is embedded in the industrial and market conditions of C&S television in India and the (targeted) “audience” imaginary entailed in such programming choices. The goal is to clarify how producers conceptualize the “viewer” they are programming and producing for, situating the specific production decisions of culturally adapting a reality TV format (that following chapters focus on) in terms of the market imperatives and imagined audience.

Television’s Entry and Expansion in India

Television’s National Reach and Entry of Market Forces

Television began in India in September 1959 as a state-broadcasting venture⁴⁰. Small “tele-clubs” of 20-25 members were introduced in the capital, New Delhi, to receive a half hour weekly service and following the prevailing Nehruvian model of “rapid industrialization and *subsequent* social equity” (Kaviraj, 2000, p49) television was intended to, eventually, reach the far-flung corners of the country with its educational and pro-social programming⁴¹. But city-centric deployment of television broadcasting (which was necessary in terms of the infra-structural requirements), concentration of ownership

⁴⁰ Philips (India) offered a 500-watt television transmitter to the Indian government and UNESCO contributed a grant of \$20,000 for the purchase of community receivers.

⁴¹ for example, health, hygiene or literacy campaigns

of television sets in urban middle classes (who had the requisite purchasing power) and the elite technocratic-bureaucratic management of broadcasting (as a state controlled medium) tilted the broadcasting space towards urban middle class audiences (Mody, 1988, cited in Kumar, 1998). Policy initiatives such as reduction in excise duty of electronic parts intended to boost local manufacturing resulted in increasing availability of television sets. For example, from one company producing 1250 sets in 1969 India moved to 40 companies producing a quarter million sets by 1977 (Page and Crawley, 2001, p54-56). But television viewers were primarily in cities; for instance, in 1974 there were over 163,000 sets in the country but only 77 owned by rural “tele-clubs” (Dube, 1976, p111). In time, television growth in India followed a “pattern” witnessed in other parts of the world, where public rhetoric for educational experiments changes to pacification of urban middle classes through entertainment programming (Mody, 1988, cited in Kumar, 1998).

The emphasis on entertainment programming and middle class audiences becomes particularly visible in the period following the first landmark moment in Indian television: the launch of National Program and color television broadcasting in 1982. And, importantly, it also reveals how market forces begin to play a bigger role in the broadcasting space as a result of such structural changes. Though Doordarshan (DD, the state broadcasting channel) started accepting commercial sponsorship as early as 1 January 1976 with a maximum length of 10 seconds within a bundle before and after a show (Butcher, 2003, p55) the revenue accrued was limited because of DD’s limited and fragmented audience reach⁴². The problem was the absence of a *national reach* in terms of DD’s broadcasting capacity, which in turn meant a lack of a *national market* for

⁴² DD made less than 1% of its annual budget from advertising in 1976-77 (Sinha, 2007).

advertisers to reach out to. This was corrected with the expansion of the National Program connecting different parts of the country within the same broadcasting space. Earlier, each local station produced its own programming in regional languages and operated as an autonomous government unit because of the lack of powerful transmitters and satellite technology that could link all stations. The integration of the broadcasting system into a national (satellite telecasting) system (though still delivered free over-the-air) allowed advertisers to reach a national market of viewers-consumer for the first time.

It is important to note here that the structural changes and significant investments required for such a transformation towards a national television program accommodated competing narratives. Till 1982, DD operated in black-and-white transmission. The Asian Games, which was scheduled to be hosted by India in 1982, however mandated color feeds (as required by many of the broadcasting institutions from the other participating countries) and a decision was taken to convert to color transmission. Simultaneously, the government initiated a “one day-one transmitter” policy (Ohm, 1999, p83), which led to low powered transmitters being set up all around the country to link DD’s terrestrial broadcasting service nation wide. The development of the indigenous satellite program in 1982 meant that the low power transmitters that could pick up the television signals bounced off satellites, directly from Delhi (without having to open a production facility every time a relay transmitter was set, as was the case earlier). The National Program was thus launched but more importantly, television as part of the information and communication sector was prioritized as a way to “leapfrog” into the information age. Information and telecommunication was placed at par with drinking water as a marker of national progress (Chakravartty, 2004, p239) and “conspicuous technology” (Nandy,

1996) related investments, since television was still a “luxury” in a poor country (Ninan, 1995, p28-29), were justified in terms of a new “high-tech mandate” for development and modernization (Chakravartty, 2004, p239). As a result television’s initial expansion in India acknowledged and claimed to assimilate contending interests – that of “techno-nationalism” (Chakravartty, 2004) appealing to urban middle classes eager for symbolic displays of national self-reliance and modernization programs as well as the needs of the vast majority (at least rhetorically) who struggled in the face of acute poverty and social inequity. It is not surprising then that years later the 2011 national census would find *more* Indian households own a television set (47.2%) than households with access to drinking water at home (47%). But what needs to be considered here is the role of market forces in television’s growth trajectory. The push to expand television’s reach within this broad paradigm of technology-enabled-social development enacted at a time of increasing deregulation, entry of global corporations into the Indian markets and pro-market reform in the 1980s cannot be taken as coincidental. Telecommunication facilitates the expansion of global capital and integrates emerging markets in developing economies into the capitalist world economy and the Indian television experience was no different.

In 1984, Nestle (a multinational corporation) got 5 minutes of commercial time in exchange for paying a telecast fee and the production cost of *Hum Log (We People)*, a popular drama series (Singhal and Rogers, 1989)⁴³. *Hum Log* started in July 1984 after an U.S. based non-governmental organization approached the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting to do a series on family planning couched as entertainment, following

⁴³ Though Vinita Kohli regards an earlier show called *Show Theme* as the first commercially sponsored program on DD in 1983 (2003, p63).

Mexico's model of *telenovelas* (soap operas) or infotainment programming with social development themes. More than 80% of the 3.6 million Indian television sets tuned in to *Hum Log* every week (Kohli, 2003, p64) for its 159 episodes marathon run. The phenomenal success of the show followed by other soap operas (like *Buniyaad* and *Khandaan*) provided a new model of advertising revenue for DD (Kumar, 1998, p28). There was a subsequent push towards entertainment programming that could attract the eyeballs necessary to attract the advertising revenue. For instance, sitcoms (*Yeh jo hai zindagi* and *Nukkad*), children's stories (*Vikram aur betaal*) or women oriented stories (*Chehere*) began to fill the airwaves. DD's role also evolved from a producer of original programming to a "broker of time slots and airtime" (Pathania, 1998, p66) whereby DD sold time slots to private producers for different types of deals. Simultaneously, DD instituted in-house research team called Doordarshan Audience Research Team or DART that started conducting viewer surveys in 1988. A more regular and standardized audience research began with the implementation of diary-based panels in 1989 (Telecom Regulatory Authority of India [TRAI], 2008). Though DD's monopoly on the television space did not necessitate audience feedback in terms of programming and production decisions in any real capacity the increasing role of advertising made it imperative to provide viewer ratings mechanisms as the currency of exchange. Simultaneously, DD came under increasing pressure to generate revenue through advertising instead of relying on government funding.

The policy of engaging market forces as an important actor in the broadcasting space had thus begun long before the eruption of C&S networks in the 1990s and the policy *orientations* favoring a market-led model that would transform television from a

public broadcasting system to a private, commercial environment in the decades following the 1990s had already been set in motion. This is important to note because the booming C&S television industry in post-liberalized India of the 1990s is often characterized as a rupture from the past: a contestation between state/public and market/private forces, illustrating how C&S television is the “poster child ...of post reform economic bounciness and the rising strength of Indian capitalism” (Mehta, 2008, p148) that unshackled television from the tight controls of the state and unleashed the (otherwise repressed) power of market forces in the television space. The emergence of C&S television and the ensuing vitality in the television industry is rather, I suggest, a continuous movement towards prioritizing market forces and market based solutions in all public sectors, including television. The materialization of C&S television and subsequent emergence of commercial broadcasting environment as the dominant paradigm in India refers to more than a mere shift from state to market; rather it represents the political-economic and cultural *legitimacy* granted to markets and its competitive, entrepreneurial ideas as the principal framework for social life.

Market Reforms and Entry of Transnational C&S Television Networks

Transnational C&S television began in India in 1991, when Star TV (part of News Corporation) started broadcasting free-to-air satellite signals in Asia. But to capture its swift adoption in India we must consider its humble predecessor, the videocassette recorder (VCR) that created a pool of eager consumers and suppliers. The adoption of open-market policies had allowed videocassette recorders (VCRs) into the country free of duty. Within months, VCR prices dropped from Rs. 50,000 to Rs. 14,000 and sales

increased (Ninan and Singh, 1983). As a result, a flourishing business of video rental developed in every urban neighborhood. In 1983, for instance, India had one car for every hundred in United States but one VCR for every fifteen in United States (Ninan and Singh, 1983). When C&S networks became available these video rental outlets turned into “*cable-wallahs*”, that is, cable TV-suppliers. A ready pool of local, small-scale entrepreneurs turned their video rental shops into “distributors” of transnational television networks by installing dish antennas on their rooftops, downloading the signals and flinging cable over treetops and roadside electric poles to offer the signal to their neighbors for a fee. The urban, metropolitan middle class households already accustomed to the pleasures of home viewing with VCR facilities provided a solid demand. The development of the video rental industry had already breached the government’s monopoly over providing entertainment fare and given the urban middle classes an expanded choice.

Video technology identified viewers as private consumers – no longer the aggregated national mass as conceptualized under public broadcasting but alert and self-assertive consumers with the power (and right) to select, subscribe or reject entertainment fare. The swift expansion of the transnational C&S market had thus been eased by another technology in another decade but in the land of the elaborate licensing regulations instituted by the state (and historically referred to as *license raj*) times had also changed: the unregulated cable connections were allowed to flourish with remarkably little interference. Though there were random debates⁴⁴ on cultural invasion and challenges to national sovereignty by the western C&S networks (Pathania, 1998), unlike many other countries including China, there were no attempts to ban the sprouting

⁴⁴ in media, press commentaries or in Parliament

cable connections and roof top satellites. McDowell attributes the government's ambiguous attitude and official tolerance to its prior commitment to economic liberalization (McDowell, 1997) and indeed, 1991, when Star TV enters India, was also the year "new economic policy" (NEP) was introduced in India to restructure its economy and mark a "paradigm shift" – away from state controlled economic planning for national development and towards market led, consumer driven economic growth.

The liberalization of the Indian economy was advanced as an "idea whose time has come" (Sengupta, 2008, p36). Macro economic measures and market reform was advertised as an inevitable and irreversible consequence of operating in a global economy as well as an inexorable movement that is likely to deliver India from economic crisis (particularly after a debt and currency crisis of 1991) and continued underdevelopment. Liberalization was thus both necessary (suggesting a lack of choice; or TINA, that is, "there is no alternative"⁴⁵) and a promise of recovery (the right choice). Sengupta's study on how the liberalization advocates pushed for reform highlights a new vocabulary that begins to characterize the state affairs and reframe the political-economic sphere. For example, "men with commitment and courage" (Das 2000, p240; cited in Sengupta, 2008) were touted as "policy entrepreneurs" (Dash, 1999; cited in Sengupta 2008) spearheading a national economic recovery project; they were not just bureaucrats (associated with the inefficient, dysfunctional state) but "technocrats" with the *technical* expertise and stature earned through experiences at international economic organizations (whether World Bank or private corporations) to better *manage* the affairs of the nation. The problem with this discursive construction of (a seemingly necessary) market stimulated economic resurrection of the nation was that it disassociated the question of

⁴⁵ The notion popularly associated with Thatcher's push towards liberal policies in U.K.

power and political maneuverings from the question of economic planning and rendered the *political acceptance* of neo-liberal policies as the new common sense - as per the “Washington Consensus” model of economic restructuring (Ahluwalia, 2006) operating in a “munificent and structurally aligned international order” (Sengupta, 2008).

Furthermore, this de-linking of the economic policies from the world of social-*political* relationships and contingencies that inform the policies also distances the social-*cultural* space where the policies become meaningful for ordinary people in everyday life. The cultural implications of neo-liberal changes are, as a result, mostly measured in terms of consumer habits rather than reorientation of ideas and values, practices of meaning making, new and necessary cultural competencies and so on. The role of media, particularly entertainment television, in re-shaping the dominant interpretive frameworks in the projected narrative of transition is however not distinct; it is vitally enmeshed in the economic restructuring.

The emergence of C&S television in the 1990s did not merely unfold in the backdrop of pro-market reform and in-flow of global capital. It was, instead, a vital realm where the political, cultural acceptance of market forces was fashioned into day-to-day lives. Coverage of corporate affairs increased on news bulletin (Thussu, 2007a, p600), informing viewers of the ups and downs of the uncertain stock markets. More time was spent on advising viewers on how to invest in the market than on reporting mass farmer suicides due to destitution (Sainath, 2004). The role of the state was redefined as the regulator and facilitator of the market forces (Bhaduri and Nayyar, 1996) rather than provider of public goods and services in a market and consumer based economy and “a national cultural standard associated with the urban middle and upper classes”

consumerism came to create a new representational regime marking India's entry into global economy (Fernandes, 2000, p614). There was little accounting of the competing economic interests and political priorities that had historically inscribed the Indian state's actions in a politics of accommodation. The failure of the state to induce economic growth, national development or provide for public goods and services could thus be seen as a failure of economic policy making, to be corrected with policy redirection. The historical hollowing out of state resources by the different social actors from within had relegated the state to ineffective functioning but was erased in the rhetoric of pro-market reforms, producing what Sudipta Kaviraj describes as: "in ideological terms, this was a bizarre situation: systematic advantages from the state were drawn by bourgeois groups of various descriptions, but it became easy for advocates of a free market to blame the irrationalities of it all on the evident drawbacks of a socialist command economy... Instead of showing that the public sector had failed, the Indian experience shows beyond doubt that the sector had failed to remain really 'public' in any reasonable sense of that term" (Kaviraj, 2000, p52-55). It is in this wider context of neo-liberalism's ascendancy in the 1990s India that C&S television and private, transnational television networks also began operating in India in the 1990s - not one after another as cause and effect but in many ways each validating the other, creating a concurrence between the cultural space of everyday (global-national) television and the wider political-economic policy changes, inflow of global capital and re-regulation of national markets.

C&S Television and its Growth Trajectory

The swift expansion of C&S television in India has been widely noted in industry, mainstream media and scholarly texts. But in-between production (marking the presence of various global media conglomerates and domestic entities involved in content generation and on-air television channels) and consumption (flagging the multitude of Indian viewers who make India the third largest television market in the world) is the realm of *distribution* of C&S television – a critical aspect of the business of television and a particularly important one in the Indian television space. To understand how producers conceptualize the “market” and the “audiences”, which guides their production choices, it is imperative to understand how the distribution dynamic of Indian television industry creates a unique environment where viewers across different class backgrounds, cultural-regional familiarities, age, gender and other social-cultural attributes must be both addressed and accommodated within the same television space. Unlike the mature western markets with niche telecasting and reception practices, India, despite the size of the market and the number of television networks operating in the market, is a “mass” television market.

When the C&S market grew at unprecedented rates in the 1990s, small-scale operators often found themselves cash-strapped: without the infrastructural capacity or the capital required to respond to the growing market. They needed new dish antennas to downlink broadcaster signals and/or cables and amplifiers to distribute effectively among an expanding subscriber base. In addition, broadcasters realized the market potential and started charging the cable operators for showing/distributing their channels (instead of free-over-the air delivery that Star initially started with, in 1991). This meant the small-

scale, neighborhood cable operators had to invest in decoders (as broadcaster's signals were now encrypted) and pay for a bouquet of channels (that they would then relay to the individual household subscriber). The humble *cable-wallah* with his locality based subscribers of approximately 300 households needed to expand or risk becoming obsolete in this growing market. And yet when large broadcasters, corporate cable companies or consortium of cable operators⁴⁶ entered the distribution fray (having spotted a lucrative market opportunity) they faced an already entrenched and resilient pool of *cable-wallahs* ready to assert their political clout (directly in electoral politics and indirectly through lobbying) to retain their position in the booming business. As a result, multi-system operators (MSOs) set up larger control rooms or "head-ends" (with dishes and infrastructure capable of receiving more channels than the small cable operator could) but the small cable operator – the neighborhood fellow who was already a familiar face in the neighborhood – could not be wiped out and was offered signal connection for a small fee.

A curious dynamics thus appeared in which MSOs became a "wholesaler of signals" (Kohli, 2003, p73) and allowed capital inflow and market growth but the small cable operator did not disappear in the face of big corporations and in-flow of capital. New capital invested in the satellite dishes and decoders allowed more networks to join the market and consumers also had more viewing choices⁴⁷. The puny local cable operator in the meanwhile emerged as the "retailer" of the signal and the most powerful link because he (and in most cases they were the local boys who had become the local businessmen) controlled the "*last mile*" or the final point of contact with the subscriber in

⁴⁶ For example, in 1994 United Cable Network (UCN) a consortium of five South Mumbai operators set up a master control room; broadcasters such as Zee set up Siticable' hathway Cable from Rajan Raheja Group, RPG Cable and InCable from Hinduja entered with corporate backing (Kohli, 2003, p72)

⁴⁷ in terms of networks, though not programming which tended to be similar

the long distribution chain. The local cable operator retained a direct control and exclusive access to the subscriber (along with critical consumer data, such as who the subscriber was, how many subscribers were in the network, what were they watching, etcetera). And though the number of local cable operators reduced as more and more cable operators aligned with MSOs yet the power of the cable operator did not diminish in terms of their control over the “last mile”⁴⁸ or actual interface with subscribers.

The clout of the cable operators however should not be regarded as a challenge to the expansionary tendencies of global capital and conglomerates, as for instance Sonwalkar (2001) suggests to point towards the inherent market advantage domestic actors enjoy over transnational corporations. Rather, the power of small-scale cable operators reveals, I suggest, the particular ways that capital gains influence in given scenarios – expanding and remapping by cooperation and convergence rather than contestation and conquest. The power of cable operators must be understood in terms of one form of resources (social networks and political patronage of cable operators) aligning itself with another form of resource (the structural and material capital of global television networks). The inflow of global capital in the television industry has not erased local actors but it has also not mitigated the power of economically and structurally stronger forces to enter, negotiate and appropriate the emerging market. What we find, in fact, is a curious alliance at work between global capital and local actors that has

⁴⁸ control over the last mile refers not only to the C&S television market but also the ability to offer value-added services such as Internet/voice/telephony over cable etcetera with cable lines running into more than 42 million Indian homes (alongside electricity or telephone lines). As a result increasingly MSOs have sought to buy out the small operators and consolidate their control over the distribution chain, including the last mile. The conditional access system (CAS) which is a combination of hardware (set top boxes) and software operated by the MSOs emerged in this context though lingering and unresolved issues of who will pay for the initial costs involved with CAS have inhibited its growth. By default the expectation is for the consumer to pay for this, but consumers have cheaper options to access the C&S networks through the small cable operators and have not taken to the idea of CAS as visualized, though its potential is often touted as yet another promise of the expanding Indian television market.

expanded C&S universe and created a particular dynamic of growth. Consider the following.

**Impact of “Last Mile” on the Market and Television Production - *Maids, Memsahibs*
and *Michael Jackson***

As C&S television expanded beyond the metropolitan hubs (Delhi, Kolkata, Mumbai, Chennai etcetera) and into smaller cities and *kasbas* (small towns) around the country (in late 1990s and early 2000s) the control over the “last mile” by the cable operators had three outcomes for three different actors: 1. limited subscription revenue for big broadcasters or television channels, who had to then turn towards advertising revenue (rather than viewer subscriptions); 2. increased revenue for cable operators, who retained control despite the growing market and capital flows; and 3. low subscription rates for individual household subscribers, which allowed low income households to join the previously upper middle class space of C&S transnational television.

Broadcasters allowed cable operators to download encrypted signals with the understanding that cable operators will share subscription revenues with the broadcasters. However, once decoded the cable operators could (and did) supply the signal to whoever and *however many* households, without any accountability. Since the broadcaster does not have any technical or organizational means (at the distribution level) to get the exact number of subscribers, cable operators regularly under report the actual number of households they provide C&S services to. Such a practice increases the profit margins of the cable operators but decreases the broadcasters share of the distribution revenue. E&Y and FICCI estimates that cable operators report only 5-20% (80% is not declared); and

broadcasters end up with about 10% of total subscription fees generated as opposed to global standard of 30-40% (Ernst & Young – FICCI report, 2004, p37).

In addition, the economic realities of the Indian television market empower the cable operators. Despite the astoundingly high number of television networks in India, 43% of Indian television sets are still in old, black-and-white mode, which means they can receive only 12 channels or those networks appearing on the Prime Band (Ernst & Young – FICCI report, 2004, p38). Most cable operators have analogue systems and very few have 500 MHz systems that can take more than a hundred channels. This technically narrow delivery space, along with the fact that most television sets can get only 12 networks, means that broadcasters fiercely compete with each other and (informally and often illegally) pay cable operators to get placed (and stay) on the Prime Bandwidth. As industry professionals know, the cliché “content is king” must be qualified by the fact “distributors are king makers”. To operate in the Indian television space broadcasters must therefore have deep pockets, not only for high-value program production and promotion budgets but also to ensure that the programs they produce are accessible to viewers. Smaller networks without cash flow are often bumped off the Prime Band, losing viewers and hence advertisers. Not surprising then, the top rated networks are often large corporations, with aggregated capital that may be tapped to sustain operations in a competitive, fluctuating and curiously evolving industry. But what does this distribution dynamic mean for production orientations (that this study focuses on)? How does the distribution dynamic shape the production logics, govern producers’ conceptualization of the market and dictate production choices?

First, as a result of the limited viewer subscription revenue broadcasters in India rely on advertising revenue. This means the advertiser's interests are paramount in all programming and production decisions. While commercial television in general is motored by advertisers all over the world in India the relationship is particularly tilted in favor of advertisers. For example, reality TV shows become a popular choice because it allows for embedded advertising⁴⁹ with relatively more flexibility than scripted/fictional shows. Same could be said about reality TV's popularity in mature Western markets although other factors also contribute to its popularity, such as, the relatively low cost of production for reality TV in the West. In India however, reality TV is a high cost production and yet it is a popular choice precisely because the advertising for reality TV makes it a viable and profitable venture. Contests, events or scenes can be set up within reality TV shows (unlike pre-scripted fictional/drama series) that cater specifically to advertising needs. Specific promotional needs can be accommodated; for example, if a product is being launched in Baroda, Gujarat, then a reality TV show such as *Indian Idol* may include a special focus on Gujarati folk songs that week or film a segment in Baroda that is likely to draw viewers from Baroda and Gujarat in particular. As Moran and Malbon note, the "core of a format idea may lie in the recognition of a particular income stream or merchandizing opportunity" (2006, p37). Such trends are particularly amplified in India because of the specific industrial conditions.

The second impact of the last mile distribution tangle is that it makes C&S viewing in India one of the cheapest in the world (averaging Rs. 150-500 per month) and therefore accessible not only to the urban middle classes and elite metropolitan viewers

⁴⁹ *Idol* contestants are shown traveling in (advertised) cars, speaking on (advertised) cell phones; in *Desi Girl* winners of episodic contests within the show get (advertised) motorbikes as prize; in *Big Boss* housemates use (advertised) household goods; and so on.

that it started out with (in the 1990s) but also the small towns, provinces and non-elite, low-income groups. Under reporting of actual subscribers keep costs down for the cable operators because they do not have to pay back the *exact* fee (for the exact number of subscribers) to the broadcasters. The broadcasters loss is the cable operator's gain, and more importantly, allows the cable operator to charge a variable fee to subscribers and keep subscription rates low for low-income households. Cable-wallahs can add more and more subscribers by keeping the subscription fee relatively low for viewers (otherwise impossible at the correct market rates) and volume compensates for low pricing on the retail end. For example, a middle class household (such as mine) in South Delhi may pay Rs. 500 per month for a cable TV connection while the young woman who works as a domestic maid in the same middle class home but lives in a low-income neighborhood (also in South Delhi) may pay as low as Rs.50 for the same C&S television networks. The "maid" and the "memsahib", in other words, can afford to watch the same television channels (and shows). The distribution dynamic is widely derided by industry professionals as inhibitive of market growth that will allow niche telecasting for high paying, elite subscribers with informed consumer choices of what they want and willing to pay for what they want. And yet, an unprecedented outcome of the distribution setup has been the fast expansion of C&S television in different socio-economic categories (SECs) and socio-cultural-regions (SCRs) – from the affluent middle classes to the working poor, from the metropolitan elite to the small towns of India. The commercial arrangements get fragmented along different SECs and SCR with varying purchasing power and consumption habits but at the same time, a cultural congregation is enabled on

the same C&S television space – compelling television producers to reconsider “audiences” in new terms. As Shailja Kejriwal, a senior television executive explains:

“My maid today knows Michael Jackson died. Ten years back she probably didn’t even know America existed. *Amaerika ki?* (What is America?). If I ask her about Germany – still no idea, right? But America, she knows now. So today when her child is playing with my niece they are both talking about Michael Jackson dying, right? But look at the distance that was there between her and me ten years back. And what has brought my niece and my maid’s child closer? ...a little bit closer, because today she (the maid’s daughter) probably goes to a Bangla medium school (free Government schools) and my niece goes to an English medium school (expensive private schools). But once they are home, the greatest influence on them is television. So, in that sense, the divide, I find, is *narrowing to a large extent* – in terms of *exposure*. I am not saying economically or whatever, but television... *that (is the) common thing*, you know...”
(personal interview, 2010).

C&S television has thus emerged as a shared and salient social space, particularly the Hindi language “*general* entertainment channels” (GECs) with nationwide viewership. We cannot assume an undifferentiated television space (as SEC and SCR does have an impact on viewing choices) but GECs also provide us an opportunity to investigate the common sense and cultural competencies cultivated on television – making it important to ask, how are we hailed to assimilate, what are the terms of inclusion and norms of participation? How do producers tasked with creating content that engage viewers across

different social-cultural realities understand the imagined “audiences”; and, what are the presumably common values, aspirations and ambitions that identify and bind us, the Indian audiences?

Audience Imaginaries and Reality TV

The primary viewers of entertainment television networks, according to television executives, are “women 15+” (that is, fifteen years of age and over). The soap operas that run on primetime Monday to Friday are ostensibly directed at female viewers (and therefore revolve around familial relationships and issues assumed to be of interest to women’s home-bound lives). Television is commonly understood as a domestic medium and women, television executives in India argue, control the television remote at home. Men (husbands, brothers, sons) tend to concede the household space of television to women unless there is a news event, a cricket match or a popular film (in which case the television is reclaimed by male viewers). Despite such industry classification, professionals also admit that the category of “women” as primary viewers is a stand-in for a wider category of the entire family. India is a one-television-home market, which means: women in the family decide which shows to watch but the *entire family watches* (including men⁵⁰, children, elderly grandparents and so on). Women 15+ provide the most constant variable in the audience groups; but television in India is a family affair.

⁵⁰ In my conversations with viewers (outside the scope of research discussed in this dissertation) male viewers invariably deny watching or being interested in watching the soap operas. Instead they describe the soap operas as “*voh toh auraton ke liye hai*” (*that’s for women*). And yet, invariably male respondents also informed/corrected me with the most detailed and up-to-date information on the plotlines, characters and gossips around such soap opera stars. While never admittedly the “target audience”, male viewers of soap operas are not an unknown factor in the programming calculations of network executives either. The “trick” (according to one network executive) is to “throw a rape or two” or add some “*masala*” (spicy) element of “violence and sex” every-now-and-then in the shows to attract and retain male attention while the main thrust of the shows is on inter-personal relationships and emotional turmoil that are intended to

This conceptualization of the family as the viewing category makes reality TV shows a particularly useful choice, allowing producers to rally the entire family around the television. The weekday soap operas targeted at women viewers are cheaper to produce, fetch daily reliable ratings and constitute the “bread and butter” revenue source for the industry but offer limited choices of bringing the family together in front of the television. The reality TV shows, usually scheduled over the weekends, on the other hand, are gala events – big budget productions aimed at galvanizing the entire family, from the teenaged son (interested in daredevil stunts in *Fear Factor*, for example) to the grandmother (who enjoys the drama and prayers performed before the stunts). Unlike the West where reality TV shows offer cheaper, cost-effective production, in India (as noted earlier) reality TV shows, particularly reality TV format adaptations, are comparatively high-cost productions (requiring licensing and big budgets for high-creative values). For example, if a daily soap opera approximately costs Rs.700,000 per episode then a reality TV episode costs Rs.70,00,000 per episode (Rohatgi, personal interview, 2010). Reality TV formats require multi-camera sets, in-door and out-door shoots, massive scale of public involvement (for instance, in-studio audiences or outdoor performances) as well as high creative values⁵¹, all of which rakes up the production costs. The budgetary constraints limit reality TV shows to two or three per network (as opposed to high number of half-hour soap operas that run Monday to Friday) but they offer lucrative avenues of bringing both the core viewer group (women 15+) and the entire family to the

appeal more to women viewers on a more regular basis. Such bleak gendered considerations that frame programming decisions are beyond the scope of this research but the point that I wish to highlight here is the overall context in which reality TV shows become a viable and important programming choice.

⁵¹ Swirling lights; colorful frames; moving cameras; dramatic angles and point of view camera position; mixing of CCTV footage; impressive locations and expansive shots; use of long shots, establishing views; sophisticated sound designs emphasizing different emotions, reactions and so on

network. In addition, reality TV shows that tend to revolve around eccentric entertainment themes (as opposed to linear narratives that must be followed from start to finish) bring in the “first samplers” (usually younger viewers most coveted by advertisers) and a range of “new viewers” to a network, while operating with the broad parameters of women and family centric programming.

Conversations with television producers highlight another important reason why reality TV makes particularly reliable programming sense in India’s mass television market. In conceptualizing the audiences, categories of SECs and SCRs are used to organize ratings data and sell advertising but producers prefer to think and talk of audiences in qualitative terms (rather than quantitative indicators of SEC and SCR) – in terms of “mindsets”. For example, Harsh Rohatgi of Imagine TV, clarifies (in a personal interview, 2010):

“When I say women (pause), see - I don’t make television for you
Lauhona, *I make them for your maid. I am going for the 700th person in
the market*, either in the cities or in the hinterlands; *the lowest common
denominator.*”

At the time of the interview we were sitting at a bistro in Bandra, a posh neighborhood in Mumbai. It was my fourth visit to the same bistro. Three previous interviews with three other network executives had all landed me at the same bistro as the (presumably) preferred place for television executives. The restaurant was always bustling with its upper middle class, urban elite clientele (and a fair number of expatriate professionals) ordering chilled beer or pots of coffee with assortment of sandwiches, Caesar salads, pasta, burgers and so on. The menu, the décor and the drinks followed a format,

duplicating the aura of a corner café in New York all around the world once one walked through its big wooden doors. Such bistros have propped up in metropolitan cities as the new places for the urban middle class elite to socialize, along with the coffee shops (in a largely tea drinking nation), air-conditioned shopping malls (with security guards and gated entry to keep the largely poor population away) and multiplex cinema halls (with Hollywood and Hindi commercial films running alongside) that have redefined the cityscape. Such visible, and aggressively advertised, symbols and sites of consumption have been associated with narratives of “shinning India” emerging to take its place as a global economic powerhouse but Rohatgi, at that moment, was pointing elsewhere – at the “*aam admi*” (common man) and “*aam aurat*” (common woman) on the streets, slums and small towns beyond the air-conditioned bistro.

In Rohatgi’s articulation of the audience imaginary (reiterated by other network executives), the very rich and the very poor fall outside the lens of television producers. Rural India as well as many remote urban areas are not “measured” by TAM-Nielsen audience ratings agency; similarly, the slim bracket of elite viewers in metropolitan hubs (the sort drinking coffee at the bistro) are also mostly excluded (though, as a group with significant purchasing power there have been debates and controversies in the industry on the “problem” of under-studying and under-reporting on the elite). It is the muddled middle – the vast middle classes (SEC A and B) and its fringes (SEC C and D) aspiring to join the mainstream – that informs the television audience as conceptualized by network executives and television producers. As capital seeks to expand deeper and wider in search of new markets the television networks are also reaching out to the “700th person”. Rohatgi elaborates:

“Volumes add up, you see. Commercially for advertising that is what makes sense. Do I go only for the five million, barely 1% of the population; or do I go for the 400 million people? Right now we are pretty much going for the bottom, for people who have electricity, water and cable TV – the basics. Earlier there were 100 people (watching television); now there are 700 people. The market is getting bigger...(and) we are moving *lower down the economic strata* - we are moving *lower down the social strata* - we are moving *lower down the population strata*. Earlier people (audiences) were in metros - Bombay, Delhi, Calcutta. Then we added Kanpur and Ahmedabad (as examples of non-metropolitan cities), and now we are adding Raipur and all that (examples of smaller ten and five hundred thousand population cities). ...And, yeah, soon we will be selling to Saharanpur too (examples of an even smaller, one hundred thousand plus population town).”

“The maid” therefore now represents the market potential but the “the maid” is not only a class based, quantifiable identity (“lower economic/social strata” residing in the “lower population” cities). Rather, “the maid” represents the quintessential cultural attributes, aspirations, values and expectations of the Indian television’s core market. To continue with Rohatgi’s clarification (again, reiterated by other television executives):

“Can I just say something? You know, honestly, the average Indian woman - don’t take it wrong – but Dhirubhai Ambani’s (a capitalist-patriarch) wife, Ambani’s (the richest man in India) wife and Ambani’s

maidservant don't think very differently. ... it doesn't matter if you are the maid or the memsahib – both may have the *same mindset*.”

Though Rohatgi did not refer to the “average Indian man” specifically (as entertainment television executives rarely do) male viewers are implicitly embraced in the audience imaginary. The “mindset”, according to television producers, stripped to its most basic sense characterizes the core emotions that appeal to viewers: the hope of making more money and well being, the happiness of knowing children are healthy, the love of nurturing family and friendly relationship and so on. But it also allows producers to find working equations in the algebra of infinitely split “audiences”. Smitha Parigi (2010), a programming executive at Colors TV, part of Viacom-TV 18 group (who had previously also worked at Endemol, a global format company) explains:

“You know these soaps (fiction, soap operas) – it (is) probably very unnatural for people like you and me to watch it, but the housewives in Benaras love it. So I have the housewives, (the) older people, who follow the story. They are my regular viewers. I have them in my pocket. But I launch reality TV shows to get people on to Colors (the network she represents) who would otherwise not be there... so I have a young 17-year-old who watches *Roadies* (a reality TV show on MTV) or a MTV guy to a Mumbai banker, who is forty something and comes home and watches news (but) is also tuned in because he wants to see *Fear Factor*, *Big Brother*, *Indian Idol*...so this reality TV thing in that sense is pretty much like a melting pot; and it brings in my extra audiences.” (personal interview, 2010)

Reality TV's appeal extends from the "*Benaras housewife*" to the "*MTV guy*" to the "*Mumbai banker*", enabling GECs to aggregate viewers onto a single space (which only few other programming have been able to achieve in the competitive Hindi GECs sector; Hindi commercial blockbuster movies and IPL cricket matches being the only exceptions). The "*MTV guy*" and the "*Mumbai banker*" may not be regular viewers of the network or the daily soap operas or even watch the particular reality TV show loyally season after season. But reality TV formats generate curiosity, often prompting those more familiar and regular viewers of the U.S. editions (as a "*MTV guy*" or upper middle class "*Mumbai banker*" more attuned to global brands and consumer choices are likely to be) to tune in to find out what the Indian version of the reality TV format might look like. The distribution dynamics tagging together different viewers across different SECs and SCRs are thus often resolved at the threshold of reality TV format shows – making it important to excavate its social-cultural milieu.

Reality TV is also, as a result of its broad appeal, sold at a premium (costing more for advertisers to get airtime on reality TV than on regular soaps). Many of the reality TV shows are scheduled in the later half of the year, in particular, to coincide with holiday seasons (Diwali, Eid, Christmas) when there are new product launches in the consumer goods industry and advertisers are eager to find splashy vehicles such as the reality TV shows to get viewer-consumer attention. Further, a reality TV show in general has a "title sponsor" which gives the sponsor instant recall, one big main sponsor and then 8 associate sponsors coming on board with different amounts of money. For advertiser's reality TV offers numerous advantages – reality TV tends to be promoted more aggressively by networks as an extravagant show intended to grab attention and thus

popularize the advertisers as well; provide embedded advertising opportunities as special scenes or contests can be set at the request of an advertiser for targeted product launch; and so on. But for the networks too reality TV becomes a “win-win situation” in terms of returns-on-investment – not only in terms of the high advertising revenue accrued from the specific show but also in establishing the broadcasting network in the viewer’s daily routine. It has therefore become imperative for networks to schedule a reality TV show in all four quarters in a given year, if possible. Parigi explains further:

“So as a broadcaster those four months (when the reality TV show is on air) I am riding high on brand buzz and name recall because these are very high decibel properties. ...they usually have big stars attached, there’s a lot of drama going on, there’s always a sob story (referring to a rags-to-riches storyline)...the jury is always cast interesting. So for those four months I have extra audiences, which means I have more eyeballs, which means extra GRPs⁵² for me, which means I can sell that property at a premium, which means I am making a lot of money out of that one show, even though it’s a short-lived three to four months show. *In a year if I have three big reality TV shows, dude, I am gold.* ...We come into the market with three or four big properties (that is, known reality TV formats) and we make a lot of noise about it, we go aggressive on the PR (public relations), there’s over the top marketing, there are billboards everywhere. So its superb, really.” (personal interview, 2010).

⁵² is a term used in advertising to measure the size of an audience reached by a specific media vehicle or schedule. It is the product of the percentage of the target audience reached by an advertisement, times the frequency they see it in a given campaign.

Circuitously, curiously but certainly, the clout of *cable-wallahs* (on the distribution space, making a mass market in India) is undercut by the in-flow of global capital on the programming space. Smaller (mostly domestic) networks struggle to cough up the capital necessary to produce the high-cost reality TV format show but bigger networks (part of global media conglomerates with transnational capital flows) schedule reality TV as a mainstay of their programming menu. (A list of popular reality TV formats reproduced in India between 2000 and 2010 is attached as Appendix A.) Contextualizing the appearance and popularity of reality TV shows in terms of the distribution dynamic and programming tactics allows us to understand how reality TV's salience is mired in industrial and social-historical specificity of the Indian television market. The seemingly shared "mindsets" of viewers across age, gender, class, regional differences that reality TV shows attend and appeal to (and the following chapters investigate) are then *produced* at the interstices of industrial and market imperatives of a mass television market that has evolved in a neo-liberal India.

CHAPTER SIX

REALITY TV FORMATS AND CULTURAL PRODUCTION IN TRANSNATIONAL SCENARIOS: *WHO WANTS TO BE A MILLIONAIRE*

On July 3rd 2000, *Who Wants To Be A Millionaire* debuted in India on the network Star Plus as *Kaun Banega Crorepati* (KBC). The Indian reproduction of the format, franchised from Celador Production (an U.K. based company), broke worldwide record in viewership. In only four weeks after launch, nine out of every ten Indian cable and satellite (C&S) viewers were exposed to KBC (Nair, personal interview, 2008)⁵³. The success of KBC was also a pivotal point for the television industry in India. KBC's unprecedented popularity reconfigured competition by making Star the market leader; pushed C&S networks ahead of the national broadcaster DD in terms of advertising revenue (although DD, as a free-over-the air broadcaster enjoyed higher market reach); and, introduced a new trend of adapting reality TV formats as a programming strategy. Competing networks (including DD) rushed to reproduce formats imported from global television companies and a slew of reality TV format shows appeared on television in the aftermath of KBC.

This chapter looks at the cultural adaptation of the *Millionaire* format into KBC and locates the *Millionaire*/KBC show in the social and industrial context of cultural production. The objective is to identify the conditions, rationalities and strategies in which format adaptation becomes a common practice in the Indian television industry -

⁵³ KBC's "reach" among the Hindi speaking general entertainment population was the highest of any program in its day part, registering a high 15% in 2000 for KBC I followed by a higher 24% for KBC II in 2005 (Hindu Business Line, 2005). The third season in 2007 and the fourth season on a different network (Sony TV) in 2010 has continued the trend.

starting with *Millionaire/KBC* . The cultural (re)production of *Millionaire* format is therefore explored here not as a register of what constitutes “Indian” versus “global/Western” versions; rather the focus is on the intersection of national and transnational television forces, industrial practices and (content) production strategies. Doing so allows us to distill the core ideas that get replicated and reproduced in different cultural markets via formats. The focus is on the thematic framework supporting the reproduction of the show – the key elements, ideas, meanings and values that structure the adaptation – and pinpoint the terms of cultural reproduction in contemporary scenarios of cultural globalization.

Reproducing Reality TV Formats: Commercial Logics

“...you get the technology... and you move on. I mean why not.” (Sameer Nair, television executive, 2012)

When KBC was launched in 2000, Star was going through a critical phase – trying to establish itself in the Hindi language general entertainment market on its own. Star TV, which is part of Rupert Murdoch’s media conglomerate News Corporation, had entered India in a business tie up with a domestic enterprise called Zee TV in the 1990s. Under the terms of the partnership Zee TV had successfully used its local player’s advantage to capture the coveted Hindi language market for itself while limiting Star’s Indian presence to the marginal English language market. When Subhas Chandra, the owner of Zee TV, bought out Murdoch from the tie-up, he emerged as a national hero who restored pride in India’s competitiveness to withstand foreign interests. Star TV, on

the other hand, was left with an urgent need to establish its credentials as a *national* broadcaster (rather than an English language ‘foreign’ network as it had come to be known) in the revenue rich Hindi speaking GEC market.

Sameer Nair, who was the network executive in charge of programming and the brain behind adapting the *Millionaire* format for India contextualized the introduction of KBC in terms of specific programming needs: 1. a different and unforeseen program concept to distinguish Star TV from its competitors; 2. a high cost-high scale-high quality program to establish Star’s premium branding; and 3. ignite familiarity and enable easy association for families to establish Star as a national broadcaster (Nair, personal interview, 2008). KBC was at the center of Star TV’s programming strategy to bring audiences to its network and the flagship show delivered beyond expectations. According to a TAM study in 2000, Star TV’s channel share went up from 2% to 25% for the 9 to 10pm day part when KBC was broadcast. In the second season (2005), the channel share was 10% four weeks prior to telecast and increased to 38% with KBC’s telecast (Business Today, 2006). When KBC III was launched in 2007 it took the channel’s share from 12.4% to 24.36% (Krishna, 2007).

The choice to look at a globally successful format show – such as *Millionaire* - was a “*no-brainer*” according to Nair:

“You know its like saying when you make cars or you make refrigerators, what you invariably do is...it is known as “technology transfer”. So *you get the technology and you reproduce it* in India to suit your conditions *and you move on. I mean why not*” (Nair, personal interview, 2008).

Formats are provided for consideration with detailed empirical data on ratings and revenue generation; and different aspects of creative ideas are locked into the licensed product - from production details (such as people/contestant management, stage layouts, shot sequences, narrative development, and budgetary considerations) to programming issues (such as potential advertisers, ratings history, ratings and revenue projections, network branding etcetera). The market research and data included in the sale of a format is thus understood as its '*functionality*' (that is, what the format might deliver for its licensee) and the format itself as a "*technology*". In an increasingly competitive market – especially in India where the reliance on advertising revenue makes it (relatively more) imperative to garner high viewer ratings – the tendency of network executives is to gravitate towards no or less risk and formulaic options. Formats offer ideal choices in such a scenario.

The decision to reproduce a format is therefore first and foremost a commercially rational decision. But the commercial rationality is also, perhaps more importantly, embedded in, and an outcome of, the growing ties between "local" Indian television market operations and "global" transnational media forces (such as Star TV-News Corporation). The formal decision to license *Millionaire*, for instance, was taken at "local level" by the Mumbai based executives (such as Nair) overseeing Star TV's expansion into the Indian market. But the choice also emerged from (new) structured affinities in transnational set-ups, in terms of the business ideas and "functionalities" favored by a global network of media executives. Colleagues at News Corporation's Hong Kong office sent a tape of the *Millionaire* format to Mumbai for Nair's consideration as a potential import for the Indian market. The commercial rationalities that favored the

decision to adapt *Millionaire* was therefore implicated in Star's global network of professionals, practices and perspectives – and may be considered symptomatic of worldwide trends. Shailja Kejriwal, who was part of Nair's team at Star, nods to a correlation of sorts: increase in awareness of global programming trends result in increase in format adaptation seen on Indian television.

“At the point of KBC, I remember, when we got the tape of *Millionaire*, ... *I had never seen* television of the West. As in I never, ah, we would see some of the shows that came here; so you saw *The Bold and The Beautiful*, *Santa Barbara* (both soap operas) and so on and so on. But I had, *as a television executive*, never seen a show of this kind, or of *any kind*, I mean I had never seen so many of these formats that were rampant all over, say in America or Europe or you know...ah-ah other countries. So KBC was in that sense the first time that we saw a foreign format; and that was because our Hong Kong counterparts had seen it and sent it... because at that point Indian television executives were not frequenting MIPTV or...say all these markets, right? So the news of what was big in the West and what was super successful would *filter down to us, only in a*, you know, *small basis*. It wasn't daily event. Today you just go online and you know what is going on. You even know what is being presented to all the (U.S.) networks, for the Fall season, you know...that time that wasn't the case.” (personal interview, 2010).

The structural linkages between local/national, regional and global operations of global media conglomerates (such as Star-News Corp.) thus produce particular orientations,

range of choices, rationalities and competencies. Producers in India learn to look westward and at the level A markets (such as the United States and western Europe), emulate programming trends and import formats for localized reproduction. The popularity of reality TV formats thus reveals a structural and industrial process at work, enfolding diverse cultural (television) markets within its logic of commercial efficiency, risk management and profit orientation.

To clarify further, the “local” or national networks connected to “global” or transnational companies (such as Colors-Viacom, Star-News Corp., Sony, Imagine-Turner Broadcasting Comp., etcetera) prefer to legally license formats (rather than simply imitate the formats) because as global enterprises they are bound by the structural norms of a transnational industry and its working habits. Parigi, executive at Colors TV (part of Viacom and TV 18 Group), explains:

“We can’t be caught ripping off. We don’t want to be caught ripping off. It’s a question of - let’s just say it’s an image thing. And it’s a Viacom thing. It’s not like I am one small Sun TV⁵⁴ somewhere that I can go copy off *Nach Baliye* and no one really cares. I mean it’s an industry talk for us. In terms of ripping off, Zee, may be, can afford to rip off. I don’t know if it’s like a domestic and we being international thing. Zee also operates very differently. They’re like a bunch of *babus*⁵⁵. They’re caught in a time warp; they are very old school. So maybe they can afford to do stuff like that. It’s just that some of us wouldn’t be caught dead doing stuff like that.

⁵⁴ Referring to a regional language television network

⁵⁵ A term most commonly associated with middle class bureaucrats who have traditionally wielded enormous power in a state run economy but have since been understood to be an endemic symbol of the corrupt, dysfunctional state system.

They are definitely a force to reckon with...(but) they are very strongly imprinted in the Benaras mindset, the Bhopal mindset.” (personal interview, 2010).

To copy a format (without licensing) would undermine the (global) brand positioning of a global media conglomerate (such as Viacom) that is premised, to an extent, precisely on their access and ability to import global formats to local markets. Local network executives working for such global companies therefore *distinguish* themselves by their *preference to license* (rather than create illicit copies) which sets them apart as elite professionals working for global and legitimate corporate associations, while relegating Zee, a domestic network, to its entrenched provincial (Bhopal/Benaras) mindsets that are either unmindful of global reputations or grossly backward (“caught in a time warp” and “old”).

It is important though to note that KBC was the first *format* but not the first show to be imported and reproduced for Indian viewers. Star itself had reproduced *Family Fortune*⁵⁶ before KBC but such shows are considered “small” and random choices while KBC represents a “big property” and a particular “maturity” of the Indian market, wherein it becomes possible, indeed logical, to connect Indian viewers with global programming in the form of “big” popular formats (such as *Millionaire*). According to producers, the attributes that make KBC a mega show (with the power to set precedents, generate imitations and reorient industrial practices) refer to its scale of production: the stupendous prize money on offer, the superstars associated with the show, the high-end creative values of lighting, design, camera/sound etcetera, the massive organization behind audience involvement in the show and so on. No other show in India before KBC

⁵⁶ A popular British show that is itself based on a popular American show *Family Feud*

had offered such an awe-inspiring scope. In other words, what makes KBC unique is not the show per se but its treatment: the way the show is shown. The big-name-big-budget production was part of KBC's credibility as a "*signature show*" underpinning its inherent credibility and anticipating its popular reception. This element is important because it informs the choice to license and reproduce a well-known, well-branded, global format rather than develop indigenous reality TV shows.

Reproducing Reality TV Formats: Creative Logics

"Most of the big ideas are already taken. So if you have a homegrown format more often than not... it sounds a bit *contrived*. *I mean what are you going to invest that is not already there?*" (Smitha Parigi, programming executive, 2010)

The severe structural and commercial logics, though inadequate to identify the range of cultural calculations that come into play in the format adaptation process, nonetheless also point towards *creative logics* facilitated by formats. That is, formats are not only commercially strategic choices, they are also creative choices favored by local executives working with transnational networks. Smitha Parigi, executive at Colors TV (Viacom-TV 18) entertainment network with experience at global format companies such as Endemol is, for instance, categorical in her choice:

"Somehow I feel all the good ideas are taken. They already exist somewhere out there in one-way-or-the-other. And India because of its very culture, you know, its, you know (pauses) - you can tweak things around and make your own show but in my experience all of this has

turned out to be *quite a clumsy effort*. Its something that we at Colors, as broadcasters, we're not comfortable doing that. I rather do a nice, finished, glossy product. We buy the format and the thing is that when you are buying the format it *comes with experience*. There are consultants on board that have loads of years of experience; there's a bible in place. People already know how to do this. They (global format producers) know what they are doing. So from an economic, math point of view you know that, even if you spend an X amount of money producing these formats - because these are expensive formats, they don't come in cheap...there's licensing fee, scale of production - but you know that it is always going to work. The risk in a homegrown format is slightly higher than the international format. ... Most of the big ideas are already taken. So if you have a homegrown format more often than not, I find it to be a, a a ... (pauses) you know it sounds a bit *contrived*. *I mean what are you going to invest that is not already there?*" (personal interview, 2010).

Parigi is quick to clarify that the "appeal" of a format cannot be guaranteed and celebrated global formats have also proved to be colossal failures in India. But three points of emphasis emerge in her argument (repeated by other television executives) as to why she (like others) favor formats over homegrown (reality TV) concepts. One, formats reflect *creative expertise and experience* as opposed to the "contrived" and "clumsy" efforts of local Indian producers. Two, formats offer relative safety from a commercial perspective. In the words of another executive: "...if you have to sit and think out a story from a blank piece of paper, it's not easy; ...and its (format show) a *safer option*, you

know; quote-unquote it's a safer option. Its done well all over, so its *just a question of adaptation* ...if you can adapt it well, good for you and if can't you can't." (Kejriwal, personal interview, 2010). And three, the prevailing wisdom in the industry is that when all the "ideas" are already taken, there is no point in trying to "reinvent the wheel". In favoring a format over a homegrown show, television executives are therefore making a creative and ideational choice (and not only commercial, economic choices). Choosing to reproduce a format (rather than start with "a blank piece of paper") local television executives and producers assert their creative preference for ideas (big and universal but "already taken"); acknowledge the creative clarity of presentation of such ideas (that comes with the formats and the "experience" it sells); and claim the durability of the "appeal" of such creative ideas across cultures (even if it requires "tweaking"). There is significant creative "work" in the adaptation process as producers must choose to "add a few layers to it" (Parigi, personal interview, 2010) to make it locally recognizable but the key ideas that propel creative-cultural production are understood to be *already embedded in the format*. Formats remove the burden of creative choice from the realm of ideas-and-competing-ideas (and *which* ideas to produce) to the ambit of the senses (*how* to reproduce). The cultural remaking thus operates at a surface level, ridding the complexities and uncertainties inherent creative acts and inducing a (at least relatively) risk-less process. Producers must adapt and contextualize – put meat on the bones, fatten and fashion in recognizable ways – but the skeleton of the show or the fundamental framework of ideas that propels the show and renders it appealing to viewers is entrenched in the format itself. Cultural production in this scenario follows pre-

established and provided leads, albeit ingeniously and in ways that resonates with local cultural contexts.

The question of creative autonomy (how much leeway do local producers have in making the format their own) is irrelevant in this scheme of commercial-cultural transnational (television) production. Formats are intended to be supple and lend its self to local iterations. The more malleable a format is, the better the format is. Creative treatment is rarely about whether local productions are (or are not) according to format specifications. Format owners are concerned about retaining the global brand appeal of a format show, so that the “look and feel” of the *Millionaire* or *Idol* format for instance is recognizable to any television viewer, anywhere in the world, in the flash of an eye. But *the commercial interests of the format owners coincide with the commercial interests of the format licensees*. Both are motivated, first and foremost, to make the format a success in the local cultural market. Repeated success in different cultural localities ensures the brand appeal of the format resonates in the global marketplace and helps the format owner to sell it more and more. Formats owners are therefore invested in making the format a “local” success, bending the rules as much as necessary and possible within the gambit of the format’s branding integrity. “Global” format owners yield to the local cultural insights of the network executives and producers while “local” producers learn and adapt to follow the format. It is important to clarify and highlight therefore that the relationship between the format owners and the format licensees is not a contentious and fractious one. Rather it is a relationship of colluding interests. It would be misleading therefore to examine the relationship between transnational forces (format license owners or networks) and the national forces (local network executives or producers) as a

dichotomy; instead, this study looks at the points of cultural encounters and negotiations, by exploring how the cultural adaptation of reality TV formats operates at the conjunction of global-local, national-transnational, commercial-cultural, material and ideational forces.

The Making-Re-Making of *Millionaire* in India: KBC

The following discussion focuses specifically on the practices and terms of cultural adaptation of the *Millionaire* format into KBC. A range of variables influence the success (or failure) of a television show and the discussion is not intended to reveal the “tricks of the trade” in that sense. Rather the focus is on the contextual needs and creative responses to decipher the framework of ideas and actions that gain prominence on the show and acquire a social-cultural resonance, via television, night after night. Analysis is drawn in particular from nine in-depth, unstructured interviews with the producers (from Big Synergy Productions) and network executives (from Star Plus) who worked on KBC (season 1 in 2000; season 2 in 2005 and season 3 in 2007) and a review of broadcast episodes. The discussion is organized in terms of specific production choices and the analysis of the core ideas and themes that emerge in the process, from: 1. selecting a locally relevant title for the show and how it positions the “appeal” of the show; 2. determining whether to produce it as a game or quiz show and the cultural calculations produced therein; 3. deciding who are the target viewers and how that dictates production; 4. choosing a host and the social-cultural assumptions fore-grounded by the host; and 5. adapting to changing market needs and the direction of change suggested therein. This approach to conceptualizing reality TV format adaptation emphasizes the

practices of text production and the *contexts* that frame the practical decisions – allowing us to empirically access the evolving and mutating form of reality TV (rather than ground analysis on (presumed) textual/semiotic/genre specific unity) for cultural reading.

Naming the Show: “Real people” and Fantastic Prize Money

“What is the number that comes after a *lakh*? *What do you call it*? So somebody in the room murmured: a *crore*? And Murdoch said, okay, *what is a crore*? ”(Anonymous⁵⁷, television executive, 2010)

In reproducing the *Millionaire* format Star’s primary objective was to distinguish itself as a premium brand in an already crowded Indian television market. The circumstances in India were oddly similar to when *Millionaire* first appeared in U.K. The network ITV1 was trying to distinguish itself for “up-market viewers” and retain viewers in a competitive multi-channel broadcasting space (Wayne, 2000) when *Millionaire* was first produced as a flagship venture. The aesthetic design of the show was intended to showcase high-end production values: swooping camera; orchestral background music; dramatic, dark lighting; use of spot lights; and so on (Creeber, 2004, p235). Such creative sleights disassociated the show from earlier – and drab - quiz shows in U.K. that drew primarily older and poorer audiences (Wayne, 2000); and instead, turned the quiz-game show into a glitzy entertainment spectacle. It could thus be called as an “event” - a “high-concept” or “tent-pole” show in the language of producers - as the splashy, attention grabbing reality TV formats are often defined. The show’s success in U.K., U.S. (and elsewhere) offered a reliable strategy of recreating a similar eye-catching blitz in India

⁵⁷ The television executive requested not to be cited by name.

that Star needed to make its mark on the Hindi entertainment television market. However, successful adaptation of the format also required a range of production details that were unknown in India: an unprecedented scale of production involving nation-wide viewer participation previously unseen in Indian television; a telephony infrastructure that did not exist in India; expensive production values, which were not the norm in most Indian television shows usually produced on a slim budgets; and so on. The investments associated with the reproduction of *Millionaire* were thus considerably high. But the high “price point” was also intended to reflect the promise of a premium media product, and perhaps more significantly, Star’s commitment to the Indian market made in the name of a national narrative of change.

Star’s then chief of programming (Sameer Nair) suggests particular disdain for the way business was conducted on Indian television at the time of KBC’s launch:

“The price point in Indian television at that time used to be very low. You know, they used to pay peanuts for shows and if you pay peanuts you get monkeys kind of thing.” (personal interview, 2008).

Peter Mukerjee, the CEO of Star TV at the time declared to the press:

“To me this is not about money. Ratings and revenue are a by product.

The moot point is that Star TV gets elevated to a position of leadership...Indian TV has to rise out of the Rs.7-8 *lakh* (Hindi term for 100,000) bracket...look at the licensing and merchandising that accompanies *Baywatch* or *Ally McBeal*. This can happen here also. I passionately believe Indians are a global community. We have to adopt a global approach.” (Aiyar and Chopra, 2000).

The “global approach” articulated in terms of high costs, high spending and high end consumption, however, required to be culturally familiarized before it could be fantasized. The dramatic appeal of the game-quizz show rested on viewers being motivated at two levels: 1. to compete; and 2. to compete to win money. In India, where monetary ambitions or conspicuous materialism and consumption have been traditionally seen as shallow pursuits (marking the non-elite struggles for social mobility) the excitement of making money could not be assumed – it had to be created. The naming of the show provides an illustrative example of how such monetary ambitions were induced throughout the show, starting with the title itself.

A senior network executive (Anonymous, personal interview, 2010) recalled a high level meeting before the launch of KBC (in 2000) when Rupert Murdoch (head of News Corporation) had come over to India to meet with the new team who were directing Star’s entry into the Hindi entertainment space. The executive emphasized, in our conversation, how Murdoch (unlike many in the management positions who were skeptical of KBC’s potential) was respectful and supportive of the local programming team in India, and helped them find the title for the show.

“...you know, he had a lot of trust on us, the local talent and saw the value of our local input...and so when we said we want to do the Millionaire format he said, okay, what will you call it? We said something about *lakhs*⁵⁸ because, you know, it came to that (one million equals ten *lakhs*). So he said, what is a *lakh*? We tried to explain...you know, a *lakh* (a Hindi term) is hundred thousand rupees. And he looks at us and says no-no, it has to be more than that, *add some zeros*. So we look at each other, and

⁵⁸ 1 *lakh* = 1,00,000

mumble some number; and he says, no-no, what is after that? What is the number that comes after a *lakh*? *What do you call it?* So somebody in the room murmured: a *crore*? And Murdoch said, okay, *what is a crore*? And that is how we came up with the title, *Kaun Banega Crorepati* (that is, in Hindi, ‘who will become the owner of a *crore*?⁵⁹’). Otherwise all you would get ...just few *lakhs* (laughs)” (Anonymous, personal interview, 2010).

The money offered on KBC was therefore not a million but *ten million* in Indian Rupees, that is, a *crore*⁶⁰. The value of a *crore* in KBC was however more than a numerical quotient. It made money fantastic and almost indefinable; and helped brand the show and the broadcasting network. The goal of making money could no longer be associated with mundane, petty activities (as it is in traditional Indian values). Instead, the stupendous prize money on offer distinguished the show – and the material-financial pursuits it emphasized in the quiz-game format – as magical and aspirational. For the first time in India a television show directly addressed its (potential) viewers and invited them to compete on the basis of their mundane, general knowledge (without any special skills), and (possibly) win unimaginable sums of money. The dramatic appeal of the show was built around “reality” projection, that is, showing “real” people (non-actors or professionals) compete and encounter range of “real” emotions (of joy, hope, disappointment, devastations and so on) but such experiences and representations were simultaneously tagged to thrilling prize monies. Dreams of making money, material ambitions, flamboyant consumption and spending habits that stimulate such

⁵⁹ 1 *crore* = 100,00,000

⁶⁰ and the prize has increased in following seasons

material/monetary goals was made visible, possible and legitimate – allowing an emerging class of metropolitan middle class consumers (who were the main C&S viewers at the time of KBC’s launch in 2000) to enjoy a new sense of access and consumption in a global economy, from transnational television networks and glitzy global formats to range of other consumer goods flooding Indian markets in post-liberalized India.

KBC’s popularity prompted a series of cloned shows and competing offers for prize monies. The question, according to rival Zee TV’s CEO Mr. R.K. Singh was:

“Should we trigger a runaway expectation of money? Or should we temper it? We felt it was not a desirable tendency for a responsible TV channel given the social situation⁶¹. But we will not shy away from competition” (India Today, 2000).

While Star TV entered the Indian television market with its own repertoire of resources and competencies associated with global media conglomerations, the struggle to dominate and establish leadership over the field is expressed in terms of defining what counts as “capital” or valuable resources. Therefore even Murdoch’s Star needed to acquire national capital by appealing to a national narrative of value addition: high quality programming at par with international standards; high scale of production that includes mass participation; a new reality TV format that invokes ordinary lives; and an awe inspiring sum of money on offer that was previously unheard and unimagined. But also at play - and enabling the national narratives - is Star’s transnational structural clout in its ability to bring an international format to its Indian network and its material-financial strengths in reproducing it in a spectacular scale with no less than an unimaginable *crore* rupees as prize money. In a contested yet accommodative

⁶¹ referring to the continuing poverty levels and increasing income disparity

entanglement, the dominant force in the field - in this case, Star - defines what may be considered resources to serve their own interests; while forces seeking to acquire resources inevitably reinforce the definitions that structure the field. Executives at Zee TV, though loathed imitating its rival's strategies and was arguably, morally alarmed at the rising monetarism, needed to necessarily engage with the newly established rules of the game. What emerged was a range of reality shows, lure of prize money and promises of life altering experiences in this ratings and revenue war on television screens. As a social phenomenon this meant new practices introduced at the cultural realm that translates the logic of a market economy, profit seeking orientations and individual ambitions. As reported in a leading magazine, "quiz show has replaced the (comatose) stock market as the middle class's favorite "get-rich-quick" scheme" (Malik, Dhawan and Ram, 2000).

To Make a "Quiz" or "Game" Show: Market Realities, Cultural Calculations

"I am looking to make it into a *mass hit*. You know its not some quiz show that is testing people's intelligence". (Sameer Nair, television executive, 2008).

The *Millionaire* format invites viewers to answer "entry level questions" (advertised on the show's promotion) over the telephone in order to appear on the show. Once selected, in each episode, ten participants sit in a row on one side of the main stage and compete for the *Fastest Finger First* round. The winner is invited to walk across to the main arena to be on the *Hot Seat* and field a series of 15 increasingly difficult

questions leading to the prize money. A participant can choose one of four possible answers provided to her for each question. If unsure, she may access four *Lifeline* options called *Audience Poll* (that is, take the studio audience's opinion), *Phone a Friend* (who may provide the correct answer), *Fifty-Fifty* (that is, limit answer options to two) and *Flip the Question* (that is, change the question). Each *Lifeline* can be used only once. As such, the *Millionaire* format is a hybrid construction using both gaming and quizzing elements. This game-quiz elasticity creates a participatory-interpretive space where different perspectives are accommodated and competing appeals are formulated to engage different viewing groups.

Indians are known to place a premium on education, KBC producers informed me. Indeed, education may be connected with social hierarchy, whether as the reserve of high castes in feudal social conditions or that of high class in a more modern India. As a result quizzing is common in schools, colleges and social events. The decision to pick the *Millionaire* format was based on this cultural inclination towards quizzing (Nair, 2008). Studies on the quiz-game genre have explored the construction of knowledge and education as a taxonomy of categories varying from “academic” to “everyday” (Fiske, 1987) and an increasing shift to populist appeals (Hoerschelmann, 2000) where “public opinion” and “common sense” were often regarded the new arbiter of reality as opposed to “objective facts” (Whannel, 1992, p199). Others have noted how knowledge is redefined as an aggregation of information and there is a rejection of analysis, reflection and explanations on such shows (Boddy, 1990; Tulloch, 1976). While such insights are incisive, indeed instructive, yet it is also important – I suggest – that we resist looking at the notions of “knowledge” and “education” as abstractions. We should not disassociate

the production of (new or shifting) ideas on knowledge and education from the realities of television production as it ignores the material basis and the given market conditions that dictate and shape production choices (and hence the definitions of “knowledge” or “education” as well). In other words, we must empirically focus on the motivations and imperatives that guide producers and their discursive acts.

As a network executive accountable to ratings and revenue generation, Nair’s perception of India’s interest in education is defined in terms of mass accessibility and popular entertainment. India is a one television per home market, (as noted earlier) and family viewing is the dominant context of television experience. Families in most Indian households include parents, children (including young adults), grandparents; and often, domestic servants as well who may watch television along with the urban middle class family. To justify primetime space on a GEC a television show has to therefore address a wide viewing pool. In other words, the market requires opening up of the knowledge base of the quiz to homemakers (and others, including the maid) who may not have access to formal education and disciplinary/academic knowledge (emphasized in conventional quiz shows) but participate in the consuming choices of the family. As a result, market conditions and compulsions determine creative definition of the format as a *game* show rather than a *quiz* show:

“There was a lot of obvious excitement because there were families watching the television together. If there are some questions that only a child can answer, there are some questions that only granny can answer, and, you know, some in between. So, you know, it was bringing everyone together in that choice of questions... When we started off, Siddhartha

Basu was producing the show. He is an old quiz programming, guru type person in India. He had extremely bookish type of questions, you know, I mean stuff like: who was the Tenth Earl of Nottingham? And that kind of crap...(laughs)... And we had to change all that, you know, to make it more familiar. And I kept telling Siddhartha – Sid, *we are not doing a quiz show* (emphasis); we are making a popular entertainment show that I am looking to make it into a *mass hit*. You know its not some quiz show that is testing people’s intelligence”. (Nair, personal interview, 2008).

Basu, the production chief of KBC, asserted to me, initially, that: “KBC is and has always been a quiz show”; and yet, simultaneously emphasized that:

“The central drama of the Millionaire format anywhere in the world is the ordinary man grappling with his sense of certainty and grasp of facts, on the horns of a dilemma heightened by an extraordinary, life-changing stake...That’s its universal appeal, whether it’s in a broke former Soviet state of Georgia or in long capitalist Japan” (Basu, personal interview, 2008).

There is more to KBC in that sense than answering the questions. The dramatic interest – stimulated by the point of conflict and uncertainty – is on whether the *contestant can win the money* on offer or not. More than the questions themselves, what matters is the random knowledge and ability to *guess* the right answer by selecting one of the four choices presented to the participant and moving closer to the ultimate prize. In this process - which seemingly transcends social differences - access to the prized sum of money is given to whoever uses the “rules” of the game successfully. Knowledge is

decoupled from class status and social capital necessary to attain quality education.

Rather, the show creates an abstracted world of longing and earning that individuals can relate to, irrespective of class, ethnic, linguistic, communal or gender differences. The gaming (as opposed to quizzing) dimension and the lure of the money (along with other production details) are therefore critical to the show's success from a programming perspective.

“Seeing someone answer questions and winning five, ten, fifteen, twenty five, fifty, one *crore*! It's a big deal. So you know... It was not a regular show. It was not a quiz show” (Nair, personal interview, 2008).

The difference of opinion on how to creatively interpret KBC (as a game show with mass appeal or a quiz show with some drama) is resolved around its core narrative appeal – that is, giving a chance to common men and women to participate and compete for a *crore* rupees. It is the participation of “ordinary viewers” that is at the heart of the show and orients its production. Analysis of the reconstruction of knowledge and education on the show (as numerous studies discussed above have looked into) must therefore also account for the contradictions and accommodations (identified as quiz or game, in the world of producers) and the material and market realities that producers grapple with. Middle class, metropolitan India with a bent towards education and “general knowledge” can be cued into the show with its quizzing element while those (the majority) in the social, cultural, economic periphery may identify with the aspirational realm – the tantalizing *possibility* to change life in an instant, if one can play the game well. In a post liberalized India the state bureaucratic economy and coveted professions such as civil services (which required in-depth, wide ranging knowledge and drew upon elite educated

classes) are being replaced by the cultural logic of the market, including improvised skills based notions of “whatever works” and a goals-to-means orientations. For instance, an undergraduate degree in Physics or History is, by itself, largely useless on the job market but a short term course in computer training and speaking English with Americanized accent can provide a job in a customer service call center with a relative decent pay. In (re)defining what “works” as “knowledge” and emphasizing “common sense” or “general knowledge” (over formal education) the producers of KBC allow new resources, associations, dispositions and competencies to be introduced as social, cultural and economic capital in today’s market driven India.

How to Target Viewers: Spirituality and Materiality

“There was that whole thing about being, you know, a *karma yogi*. You work hard and you earn your place in life” (Nair, television executive, 2008).

KBC reserves relatively easier and populist questions at the entry level in order to generate more phone calls and attract a wider pool of contestants. It is important to include different linguistic, regional, class, age, gender backgrounds in order to facilitate wider viewer identification in India’s socially-culturally diverse population, specially for GECs which operate on the mainstream, national space (as opposed to regional language/niche networks). The questions to be asked on KBC must also then resonate within such a loosely held, widely defined “target group” (TG) of viewers.

In general, the bulk of questions come from the two national obsessions, namely, Hindi commercial films and cricket. But Hindu mythology tops the ranks of categories

(Basu, personal interview, 2008). An editorial team and a countrywide network of contributors are tapped for developing a pool of questions; which is then uploaded into a computer equipped with a software to randomize the questions and stack them according to levels of difficulty for the quiz sessions. The guiding principle in creating the pool of questions is to pick questions that are familiar but not always known (Basu, personal interview, 2008). And yet, answering questions on the show is more than a question of knowing the right answer or not. It is about the ability to play the game. It involves an actionable ambition strong enough to prompt one to pick up the phone and learn how/where/when to call to participate. It also requires a nimble finger that pushes a button before others and an alert, competitive mind that is able to respond quickly to an opportunity. It needs self-assertive skills that can assess a variety of options (the four answer choices, the *Lifelines*, *Fifty-Fifty*, etcetera) and act decisively to select the right answers; evaluate risk and rewards while deciding to carry on to the next round or to return home with what one has already earned; calculate the means-to-end strategies; and so on. The target viewer-winner in that sense is not one who knows the answers but one who has the entrepreneurial zeal to take a chance, call-in, compete, take risks and has a focus on winning the end reward.

Nair refutes suggestions that reduce KBC to “human drama-risk taking-destiny deciding” game or link it to gambling and greed: “We do not say greed is good. We say intelligence is useful” (Nair, personal interview, 2008). But at the same time “intelligence” in Nair’s open-ended use suggests good judgment about knowing the limits of one’s competencies and resources; deciding what is in the realm of possible and what is outside; which resources are more useful than others; and how various resources and

capabilities can be combined to bear upon reality to produce favorable outcomes. In fact he casts the game as an application of both *useful intelligence* (knowing the questions that may be asked) and *useful application* of knowledge (knowing when and how to answer to optimize one's chances of winning):

“If fused together it (intelligence and application skills) can make you rich. And that is something I think Indians now relate to well. There was that whole thing about being, you know, a *karma yogi*. You work hard and you earn your place in life and KBC was, you know, totally not a game of chance” (Nair, personal interview, 2008).

Connecting *karma yogi* to a modern day reality TV format is baffling at first and requires a staggering stretch of the imagination. But the creative use of the phrase is critical to how producers familiarize KBC to Indian viewers and translate the notion of struggle, hope and disappointment inherent in the competitive structure of the quiz-game show. At its very basic *karma yogi* refers to the discipline of action (*karma*) that leads to a state of metaphysical union (*yogic* state), suggested in ancient Vedantic and Hindu philosophy. *Yogi* refers to the individual who practices *yoga* and achieves that union, while *karma* (to do/work) refers to the form of *yoga* that achieves *yogic* perfection via action or work. The term *karma yogi* also refers to a discussion in *Bhagavad Gita*, a sacred Hindu scripture and in *Mahabharata*, a Hindu epic, where it is applied in a debate on “just or holy war” and suggests that one should not be preoccupied with the immediate results of one's actions since the *yogi* orientation (for a state of metaphysical union) requires one to act according to one's duty (*dharma*) without consideration of personal self-centered desires, likes/dislikes and attention on results. KBC takes the complex philosophical debates and

spiritual aspirations surrounding the notion of *karma yogi* and applies it to the modern day epic struggles to win a *crore* on a reality TV show. The references are not clarified on television but its use as a cultural idiom creates an aura of social-cultural familiarity and continuity in its perceived value, meaning and practice. Philosophical monologues framed around *karma yogi* are featured on the show. Material pursuits (for a *crore*) are tagged with ancient ideas and philosophical struggles in order to help translate vastly different worlds and mediate the sharp social-cultural shifts taking place in India. As India moves towards an increasingly privatized, competitive, individualized and materially driven cultural milieu, in a market driven economy, the notion of *karma yogi* is hollowed out as a spiritual concept but retains a cultural resonance, which helps make sense of everyday life in starkly different historical times.

Political-economic shifts towards a liberalized market driven economy may be enacted at the institutional-state level, but they are given expression and acquire meaning in the more personal encounters unfolding on television. For example, the following is a common moment, captured with drama and poignancy, on the show. The camera zooms to a close-up of a contestant's face struggling to make the right choice (between different answers options); deliberating, whether to go forth with the next level of questions to chase more money or to go home with less but assured sums. The music stops and murmured prayers fill audio tracks; camera pans and sweeps down into the crowd to show a sister, a brother, parents, wife or husband breathlessly praying for the *crore*. Material, ideational, emotional and spiritual lives are tangled together in webs of association. The structural and social conditions that define the scope of individual action (in modern realities and the spiritual-philosophical debates in ancient texts alike) fade

away. Instead what is emphasized is the private emotional space of the target viewer – invoked in terms of an individual’s talent and agency towards lifestyle aspirations, maximizing happiness and optimizing success through material gains.

To Cast the Host: Branding

“...with Mr. B as host and you know all the *soft touches* to it, I think this whole issue of money being won, didn’t become an issue that it may have become otherwise...” (Nair, personal interview, 2008)

The *Millionaire* format calls for a host who facilitates the show but more importantly, interacts with the contestants and provides an emotional foil. The host must be jovial at times to put a contestant at ease but cryptic at other times to reinforce the implications of a tense moment; tender at one moment to support the emotional contestant but indifferent at another moment to move forward with the game; and so on. The responsibilities of the host are in that sense more than formal. The host is integral to how the show connects with viewer’s emotions, social norms and cultural expectations. In India, however, finding a host who provokes similar levels of familiarity and identification or adoration presents a challenge since viewers are known to be a “heterogeneous lot” (with different linguistic, religious, regional, class affiliations) and “heroes in one part of the country are barely known in others” (Basu, personal interview, 2008). Star personalities are however often handy in precisely such splintered societies, as Abu Lughod’s study on the Egyptian television’s construction of a nation suggests (Abu-Lughod, L. 2005). She argues that stars provide a crucial extra-textual element to the shows with their nationally known names, faces and personalities. A similar strategy

appears to be at work in KBC, as producers cast India's most famous film stars (Amitabh Bachchan in season 1 and 2; and Shah Rukh Khan in season 3) as the show's hosts - using their celebrity status to brand the show as well as refer to their personal journeys in the film industry to foreground the show's narrative on individual ambition and its transformative possibilities.

Bachchan started acting in films in the 1970s and was known as the 'angry-young-man' - a one-man-army fighting the corrupt political systems to give voice to the disenfranchised Indian in potboiler movies. He has been a mass hero. Yet off-screen he is known for his suave, sophisticated manners; his private school education; his flawless Hindi and English diction that comes with elite upbringing; his connections to India's political and industrial leaders; and an aura of refined mystique inherited from his father who was one of India's leading Hindi poets. As a result, Bachchan has miraculously straddled India's many constituencies in popular imagination. In deciding to cast Bachchan as the host the producers of KBC deftly tapped into his iconic and pan-Indian status and instantly tagged KBC (a new and international brand) into an *Indian* show and its broadcasting network (Star, part of a global conglomerate) into an *Indian* network. As the producers of the show admitted in interviews:

“...so that it (KBC) does not become too *alien*, we get AB (as Amitabh Bachchan is popularly known) to host it...” (Kejriwal, personal interview, 2010).

The producers articulate the aura of a respected patriarch using Bachchan's tall frame, confident stride and booming, deep voice. As in the format, the studio stage is circular (a small globe of its own) where traveling disco spotlights create intimacy among

audience, contestants and host. Shots of studio audience cut randomly as the logo is superimposed; and the long-shot of the tall host in a dark suit walking onto the set, entering the world of the *Millionaire*/KBC tracks to a mid-shot as he welcomes and introduces the show. When the contestants are chosen, they follow him on to the *Hot Seat* and lights fall on them in multiple beams. The background goes dark and the audience is merely an aural presence to heighten the tension along with the music that reaches a crescendo. The traveling beams of light provide movement in the frames as the participants sit stiff with anxious faces. Bachchan comes to their rescue exuding tremendous dignity as he looks at them with a steady gaze, takes them through the game, and checkmates their answers with “Are you confident?” “Is this you’re your final answer?” “*Lock kiya jaye?*” (Should I lock your answer as the final?).

Bachchan’s baritone voice, proper diction, polite intonation was emphasized by the decision to use *shudh* (chaste, Sankritized) Hindi on the show (as opposed to more colloquial usage). Producers dismiss suggestions that the choice of purer form of Hindi was calculated. Instead they suggest that it was “natural” to use such linguistic styles given Bachchan’s stature and that many key phrases came about spontaneously (rather than through serious deliberation). For instance, the decision to call the show KBC *Pratham* and KBC *Dwiteeya* (first and second in Sankritized Hindi): “*Dwiteeya* casually came off the top of my head; during a rehearsal AB asked – so what do we call it, KBC 2 or what? He used *Dwiteeya* with a stylish, comic flourish” (Basu, personal interview, 2008). But producers were also keenly aware that the sophisticated, courteous, genteel demeanor of the host helps mitigate petty associations with monetary ambitions that

otherwise motor the show. The head of programming (Nair, personal interview, 2008) noted:

“I think the big thing that worked out for India was the manner we produced it; and with Mr. B as host and you know all the *soft touches* to it, I think this whole issue of money being won, didn’t become an issue that it may have become otherwise...it was good to win. There was no problem in winning money; there was no problem...(or need for) being ashamed that you won money and therefore became rich”.

The anti-establishment young man (in the 70s and 80s India) too admits to “softening” with time. As KBC’s host, Bachchan has come a long way from the honest, family/community oriented, frugal hero to one who explains the rules of the game, “locks” the “right or wrong” answers for instant, personal fortunes and celebrates money-making as a worthy ambition. The changing social agenda where the rhetoric of social development has been abandoned in favor of an individual entrepreneurial spirit in a global economy is poignantly captured by Bachchan’s transformation. He himself comments, “It is the state of the nation and the circumstances, which will guide what you are like, what you wear, what you do, etcetera. In the 70s, when you talk of the Angry Young Man – it was not something I had designed, but it was perhaps a feeling that the nation and the circumstances at the time needed to be told - that the system was not performing... Today, things are different. The system works or supposedly works. It is economic progress that is the new benchmark. Those issues are non-existent, the rebel of those years is now 64 and it is commercial success that counts. So roles are designed

accordingly and they are appreciated because they reflect the times.” (Times of India, 2007, p14).

Bachchan’s celebrity quotient is optimized for viewer identification. The host’s presence is crafted – stylized in the language of producers – by creating “touching” moments. As Nair recounted to me:

“So for example we had Sachin Tendulkar (a celebrity cricketer) come onto the show as a guest; and was sitting opposite AB and then told AB that “Sir can you please say the dialogue from this movie?” AB proceeded to do that and had Sachin Tendulkar sitting opposite him and staring at him, like a star struck child. And at that moment you sort of capture everything of everything, right? Because Sachin Tendulkar is India’s greatest cricketer and batsman and blah-blah, and he is young and AB is old and you know you get the old and the young and everything in between all at one go... AB came through looking like a million dollars in any case. We were dispensing knowledge and money. And you know everyone loved it...And the minute the show became a hit what we packed into, or at least inherited in that sense, was the full 25 years of AB legacy... the entire legacy was sort of attributed to the show via the person.” (Nair, personal interview, 2008).

A larger legitimacy for game-quiz format is thus created using celebrity adoration and emotions that marvel (even if from a distance) at a loved celebrity interacting with ordinary people (or watching one celebrity act like an ordinary fan of another). Often ordinary contestants are shown beaming on camera on the show even after losing the

game-quiz. As the camera zooms in, they express their joy at meeting Bachchan, which is reason enough to return home happy even if empty handed.

Adapting Reality to Changing Times

“If KBC I set the stage for the competitive Indian, KBC III has set the state for the Indian who is comfortable in his own skin and wants the world to know it.” (Kaushik, 2007).

Unlike fictional forms where production is bound by predetermined scripts, reality TV formats allow producers to make changes to the show according to changing market/viewer needs. The following discussion highlights three instances, which reveals how production strategies rearticulate the underlying ideas and actions embedded in the format, using its nimbleness to reorient the show.

Host to *dost* (Hindi word for friend). As a super star whose life involves armed bodyguards at all public events Bachchan did not project a “natural conversationalist” aptitude necessary for a television host, especially when interacting with contestants on “live shoots⁶²”. Cast as a “friend, philosopher and guide” Bachchan struggled to project the sense of un-structured/un-scripted, spur-of-the-moment, artless conversation featured in reality TV shows. Nair recalls:

“...I remember a conversation with Mr. B (referring to Bachchan) once.

Because he got really nervous with this and he said, Sameer (referring to Nair), I don’t know, I don’t think I can do this show. So I said, why is that Sir? So he said: you know, anchoring, this is something I have never done

⁶² that is, sequences shot continuous without pause

it before. And I really don't think I can do it. So I told him, actually Amit'ji (referring to Bachchan), you know I don't want you to anchor this show. So he said that what do you want me to do? So I said actually Amit'ji, what I want you to do is I want you to act like the anchor of this show. And he so totally got that. He said oh, okay, cool. And we never had a problem after that. And you know in my personal opinion I would regard KBC to be one of his finest performances. Because it was a brilliant piece of histrionic display... (laughs) and it was really good. So many small, small things happened in that. Its not just that you take a format and you make a show and you say yeah!" (Nair, personal interview, 2008).

To "act as the anchor" Bachchan wrote brief scripts (for himself) that he intended to use as cues for conversations with contestants during filming. When the production team noticed that it resonated with viewers they highlighted it in a more elaborate monologue.

"Along the way in fact we invented something that was done only in India in *Millionaire*, and that every episode we used to open with Mr. B who used to do a, like a, you know, (pause) a little opening speech which is really along the lines of you know that - what is that: chicken soup for the soul type of piece of advice. Which used to be a combination of stuff that he wrote and we wrote and, you know, maybe poems from his father's writings...that sort of thing. And it was a smash hit. I mean people so connected with that what we used to call the "opening *gyan* " (wisdom or knowledge of the soul and ultimate truth in Hindu spirituality) that AB used to give" (Nair, personal interview, 2008).

In contrast, the third season (2007) featured another superstar, Shah Rukh Khan, who is known to be charming, articulate and engaging with a natural, boyish flare. He is also known as the middle class boy from Delhi with his unshakable ambition, hard work, talent and charisma. Promotional material and interviews with Khan before he took over as the new host reiterates his “ordinary” beginnings, his singular passion for films, his secular orientations (he is a Muslim married to a Hindu woman) and his sincere desire to retain his connection to the humble reality of middle class life in India, despite his celebrity status and obvious financial well being that puts him in another class. He flaunts his success and enjoys it with the self-righteousness of someone who has earned his stardom with sincerity. Casting Khan as the next host (a younger celebrity with a cosmopolitan flare) redirected the show towards the ‘Gen Next’, that is, the 2/3rds of India’s population below 35 years (Star TV press release dated 11/26/06).

In KBC III, Khan introduces himself as the “*dost*” (friend) and not a “host”. Khan’s youthful accessibility and irreverence replaces Bachchan’s paternalistic formality and refinement. Bachchan’s presence on KBC I and II helped anchor KBC in a national narrative and allowed instant recognition in terms of a national ancestry. Khan’s presence on the other hand suggests the forward strides and tales of change⁶³. An article on popular culture’s impact on branding in the *Consumer Life* section of the business newspaper *Economic Times* argues that an “unconfident India” in 2000 found Bachchan “compelling” in KBC because “his demeanor of royalty and leadership was accepted as the necessary gospel that the laity must adopt to come up in life... If KBC I set the stage for the competitive Indian, KBC III has set the state for the Indian who is comfortable in

⁶³ Bachchan returns as the host in season 4, in 2010, but his performance as a host is characterized in more casual terms (as opposed to his mannerism in seasons 1 and 2)

his own skin and wants the world to know it.” (Kaushik, 2007). The sense of ‘comfort’ is directly correlated with “self esteem” and “nationalistic pride” based on “economic success and the rise in the GDP” (Kaushik, 2007).

The language. In KBC I and II, the global format is re-versioned in *shudh* (pure) Hindi to mark national antiquity. But traditionalism is creatively invoked and self-consciously posed without challenging the upwardly mobile and modern aspirations of the urban cable and satellite viewers. For instance, the questions on the show are asked in Hindi but the textual graphic on the bottom of the screen appears in English. Nair recalls the production team deliberating over this inconsistency but choosing English text because the Hindi “did not look good” (Nair, personal interview, 2008). On one hand the use of Hindi evokes Indian roots and access to the masses; on the other hand English texts refer to standards of quality, elite based aspirations and a global outlook.

KBC III, in contrast, abandons the formal and pure Hindi used by Bachchan in favor of an informal, colloquial Hindi sprinkled with English and regional Indian languages (depending on participant’s home towns). The titles KBC *Pratham* (first) and *Dwitiya* (second) lose their Sanskrit-ized flare and acquire numerical simplicity as KBC III. A more functional approach frames the worldview. In the opening sequence of KBC III Khan performs a lengthy monologue in purist Hindi. He pauses to look at the camera (and at India) to ask if anybody understood anything. He replies to his own rhetorical question that since nobody speaks in that stylized Hindi anymore it is not necessary on television either. There is no need to prove cultural moorings and KBC III, with its

attention on more advertiser friendly younger viewers, claims to represent contemporary social realities.

Computer'ji to just a thing. In the first two season hosted by Bachchan the computer was referred to as 'computer-*ji*'. In Hindi the suffix '*ji*' is added to suggest respect. The computer is personalized in the language and interactions with the computer are akin to getting one's future read by an astrologer. The computer is reverently asked to reveal the participant's fate. Local customs are carefully embedded in the show in a precarious balance between traditions and modernity, technology and astrology - while pushing towards a brave new world that offers riches for those willing to compete.

Again, in contrast, in KBC III the use of *ji* as suffix to the computer is abandoned along with Sankritized Hindi. The suave host of the show explains that nowhere in the world and never in the history of the format has the show been adapted to include a new term for the computer. Instead the computer, as he puts it, "is just there, just a thing". He exhibits a personal ease with objects of modernity. But in India, participants want to show "respect" (*izzat*) for the computer and so he says he has decided to refer to it as "elder brother". Computer-*ji* changes to computer "*dada/bhau/garu*" etcetera, which translates into "elder brother". While there is a distinct ease, the computer as a source of knowledge is still a modern entry into traditional social spaces. Familiarity with computers suggest socially privileged access to higher education, training and global ties. The introduction of the computer as a capital or everyday resource for economic life must first be accommodated through a process of cultural translation and negotiation.

Conclusion

It is important to note (perhaps aptly only in conclusion) that KBC, the Hindi title of *Who Wants to be a Millionaire* literally translates as: who will *become* the millionaire? One may ask: what happened to *wanting to become* a millionaire? Is the “want” to own millions a foregone conclusion? The omission is neither necessary nor unintended in the linguistic sense. Erasing the part of “(who) *wants to be*” (or (kaun) *banna chahta hai*, in Hindi) and instead making the title “kaun banega” (who will become) gives the title a frisky feel that producers spend hours trying to create in the world of pop-culture. There is a taunt of fate and an inscrutable lure tossed in the title: there is certainty that there are millions to be won, and someone will; but there is also uncertainty (who will it be; will he or will she; will you; or maybe me?). But more importantly, the silencing of “want” – and making it implicit, indeed assumed and commonsensical – in the Hindi version must prompt us to ask: what are the rules for re-imagining reality embedded in the globally circulated formats and what are the terms of cultural translations?

This chapter looks at KBC to uncover the underlying ideas, values and meanings that are reproduced in India through the popular *Millionaire* format, the conditions that favor such reproductions and the production mediations that make it possible. In doing so, the above discussion clarifies how producers invoke traditions, idioms, morality and spiritual philosophy identified as “Indian” but simultaneously, drain out such constructs into a wider global circulation of ideas embedded in the format – unleashing a new cocktail of ideas that are still familiar but now altered. There is a metamorphosis of sorts as new ideas such as competition, individual ambition, risk-rewards calculation and end-

goal orientations are rendered recognizable – everyday and commonsensical - and yet charged as electric new aspirations popularized on the entertainment show.

CHAPTER SEVEN

RE-PRODUCING REALITY ON *INDIAN IDOL*

This chapter focuses on *Indian Idol* – a highly popular reality TV show adapted from the originally British format *Pop Idol*. The *Idol* franchise has been successfully reproduced in more than 40 countries around the world and its popularity in India is not exceptional. But within India, industry professionals often identify the show as the “second big idea” in entertainment programming. If KBC was the “first big idea” as the first format to enter India (in 2000) and start the reality TV trend then the *Idol* format is credited to have started a second trend of music/dance/talent based reality TV shows, since it first appeared on Indian televisions screens in 2004. This chapter explores the terms of format re-production and cultural translation in *Indian Idol* in pursuit of two objectives. First, it develops the discussion presented in the previous chapter with reference to KBC to illustrate the recurring themes. The chapter examines the set of ideas and practices that become accessible and meaningful, indeed necessary and commonsensical, in everyday life via *Idol* (while making other ideas/practices invisible and irrelevant). The discussion is organized in terms of four points of thematic emphasis found in the production of the show: 1. the notion of competition as necessary and natural; 2. the focus on the individual as the legitimate actor; and 3. the rhetoric of universal opportunity and individual ambition that frames all action; and 4. the economy of self-management and “ends-justifies-the-means” orientation that is projected as a necessary skill-set to advance oneself. Analysis reveals the values, attitudes and aptitudes embedded in the *Idol* format resonate with neo-liberal social thought (which prioritizes

competition, ambition and the self-willed, self-motivated individual as the essential logic of social organization). As such this chapter argues that reality TV formats, such as *Idol* (KBC and/or others), popularizes a market based social milieu on nightly entertainment television.

The second objective of this chapter is to call into question the tendency to conflate the world of C&S television with the values, interests and aspirations of urban middle class elite in India (Chaudhuri, 2010; Sainath, 2006; Thussu, 2007a and b). C&S television universe has moved beyond the cultural confines of metropolitan, elite middle class viewers/consumers (especially since the mid-2000s) to include different socio-economic categories (SECs) in different socio-cultural regions (SCRs), resulting from the unique distribution dynamic accommodating both the inflow of corporate capital and small scale cable operators (as discussed in chapter five). Though viewers have not necessarily moved upwards into new classes, C&S television connections have become accessible to low income groups unlike before (specially, unlike the 1990s when C&S began as upper middle class urban India's luxury entertainment choice). The expansion of the distribution and viewer/consumption ends also, inevitably, impacts the production (and programming) aspects. This chapter illustrates how producers increasingly appeal to lower economic groups (SEC C, D) and "small town mindsets" (rather than elite, middle classes of SEC A and B) in the production of reality TV's narrative of reality, participation and possibilities of change. The second objective of this chapter is therefore to uncover how reality TV becomes a "cultural technology" (Ouellette and Hay, 2008), that initiates viewers across the country into market based social logic and signals the cultural sway of the market.

Idol after Saregama: Competition Remakes Reality

“If there is no fight for survival, then why? Why will I do anything? I’ll just sleep. Na?”

(Bhavya Sharma, reality TV producer, 2010).

When SET licensed *Pop Idol* from FreMantleMedia in 2004 and broadcast it as *Indian Idol*, the network was lagging behind others in the Hindi GECs market. *Indian Idol*’s success reversed SET’s fortunes, allowing it to consolidate its market share⁶⁴, and recreated what FreMantleMedia describes as a “true *global phenomenon*, ...proving a track record of guaranteed success in every country where it has been aired” (FreMantleMedia official website; emphasis added). But before *Indian Idol* entered popular imagination there was another program called *Saregama*. As its name bearing Hindustani classical music notes suggests (in contrast to *Idol*’s focus on the contest winner), *Saregama* was a “music show”. It began in the 1990s as a “homegrown concept” (as opposed to imported formats) on Zee TV, a domestic network and a competitor to SET. While *Saregama* was, and continues to be, a popular show both before and after *Idol*, industry professionals invariably highlight how *Saregama* has “blatantly copied” key elements from the *Idol* format, which only proves, they argue, *Idol*’s “*game changer*” effect on entertainment television in India.

⁶⁴ *Idol 1* reversed SET’s declining audience share: the show reached 57% of the universe within 3.5 weeks of its launch in the Hindi speaking markets (Krishna, 2004). In fact, SET grew 4.62% while the overall GECs space decreased 6.40%; and competing networks such as Star Plus and Zee fell by 12.81% and 2.38% respectively (Krishna, 2004).

Satish Dutt, the head of productions for *Indian Idol* 5, had previously worked on *Saregama* and his own description of the show in the pre-*Idol* days is particularly instructive:

“...*kuch tha hi nahi, there was nothing*. Participants came, sang and left.

That’s all.” (Dutt, personal interview, 2010).

While *Saregama* featured ordinary people singing on television and invited viewers to hum along, *Indian Idol* began its first season with a tantalizing promise: asking viewers to compete and win – become the “*one voice*” that captivates the nation. Its promotions in following seasons tease viewers: “*who next?*” (*agla kaun?*). Nationwide auditions offer a lifetime opportunity to viewers – to take a chance, enter the contest and become a national celebrity. The focus is not on music per se but on the possibility of becoming a star; the impetus for action is no longer the caliber of talent but on the entrepreneurial zeal of the individual to pursue his or her dreams; the end-goal is no longer to sing well but to become the winner.

Competition structures the *Idol* format; facilitating the connection between each episode, moving the show forward and lending a dramatic tension (who will win and who will not) that keeps viewers engaged. The show begins with the audition process and emphasizes this competitive context at each stage. Episodes are organized in terms of a process of selection and elimination. An initial pool of candidates is chosen from thousands (approximately 3000 to 5000) who show up at each “*city auditions*” held in different parts of the country. The selected group (about 100 to 160 nationally out of a total of 50,000 or more who audition) is invited for a “*second audition*” held in Mumbai. Producers also use informal social and professional networks (of talent scouts, music

teachers, friends etcetera) and “blind auditions” (not filmed and sometimes not even conducted by the production team but by individuals with implicit “understanding” (“*samjhouta*”) with producers that the candidates they select and send will get reviewed). There are, therefore, different avenues to enter the competition but the number of contestants whittle down quickly in the rush of a pre-production schedule and few (approximately 30) are selected for the next “*rounds*” on the show – Theatre, Piano and finally Gala Round. The “*final ten*” competing on the Gala Round vie for the “*final five*” and then the “*final three*” spots, to be on the Grand Finale. In this competitive scenario music becomes a means to a *different* end; the goal is not *merely* to sing, sing well or even to sing best (which may or may not garner audience votes necessary to win); rather the goal is *to compete and succeed – by whatever means necessary* (wherein personality, performance and other individualized gestures can often be more effective than technical prowess in music). As a result, it is not the unconditional momentary joy of singing itself but its prospective value (of fame and fortune) and our competitive spirit (whether as contestants or as viewers voting and rooting for favorites) that becomes important on the show.

Idol’s success prompted *Saregama* producers to also adopt similar strategies and incorporate competition to revamp their show; including audition episodes (which were not part of the show before *Idol* started showing the audition process on television), emphasizing personal biographies of contestants and producing contestants as ordinary but aspiring, competitive and hardworking individuals (rather than merely talented singers) that invokes viewer’s emotional loyalties and motivates voting. As a result, *Saregama* became a *reality-talent hunt* show, in the aftermath of *Indian Idol*. Not unlike

Who Wants to be a Millionaire which de-links quizzing from the “prestige value” (Holmes, 2006) of amassing general knowledge and links it to the gaming attributes of guessing one’s way to the millions on offer, *Idol* too recasts musicians as “contestants” and the hook is on who will win (and who will not).

Competition provides the impulse and logic for action not only on *Indian Idol* but on reality TV shows in general. As one reality TV producer explains:

“...if you don’t have competition going, it will go *still* after a point of time, na? Unless and until there is a fight. What should be the basic fight? The basic fight should be survival. *If there is no fight for survival, then why? Why will I do anything? I’ll just sleep. Na?*” (Sharma, personal interview, 2010).

Competitive social relations are thus naturalized in the world of reality TV formats, whether one is trying to woo a bride (*Rakhi ka Swayamwar* similar to *The Bachelorette*), win a quiz (KBC/*Who Wants to be a Millionaire*), eat a cockroach (*Khatron ka Khiladi/Fear Factor*), reveal personal secrets on national television (*Sach ka Samna/The Moment of Truth*), dance (*Chak Dhoom Dhoom, Dance India Dance, Jhalak Dikhla Ja/Dancing with the Stars*), or seek to impress (*The X Factor* or its rival imitation *Entertainment Ke Liye Kuch Bhi Karega*, that is, “Will Do Anything For Entertainment” in Hindi). Some flounder, falter and fall by the side to be eliminated but others endeavor and move forward, closer and closer to the end-goal - and drama is created out of this struggle to survive, compete and win (or lose).

The Individual Actor

“It can be anybody, from zero to hero, anybody and everybody has their chance.” (Fotini Paraskakis, Director of Content, FreMantleMedia, Asia, 2009).

From the audience gallery, with seating rows slanting back and high as in a stadium, the *Idol* stage below looks like a sporting arena. The format, often compared to athletic championships (Kjus, 2009) because of its competitive structure, is however fundamentally different in one important aspect. Unlike sports (which requires specific training and demonstration of who is swifter, stronger or leaps higher, etcetera) on *Idol* competition is universally accessible. A key element of *Idol*'s popular appeal is the idea that anybody, with or without previous musical schooling, can become the next *Idol* if they nurture ambition, have the willingness to act on it and are able to develop a star appeal. That's the brand for *Idol*, you know,” Fotini Paraskakis, the Director of Production for FreMantle Asia, explained to me (personal interview, 2009), “...that it can be anybody, from zero to hero, anybody and everybody has their chance. It could be an underdog, or it could be someone of privilege. ...*Opportunity is welcome to anybody, that's the key message.*” The individual is thus the key; while the conditions of being are irrelevant in *Idol*'s reality rendition. In the world of *Idol* the onus of success (or failure) rests on the individual contestant and his or her ability to aspire, manage and maneuver one's self through the competitive rounds into a narrative of “nobody-to-somebody” spectacular story.

The centrality of the individual actor on the *Idol* format is not surprising considering the original show (*Pop Idol*) was created by Simon Fuller, a British music-industry manager famous for his expertise in making otherwise unknown aspirants into

globally renowned pop-stars. Unlike preceding music-talent based shows, *Pop Idol*'s distinctive appeal was that it offered viewers a ringside view of how pop-stars are made (the process) and an active role in deciding who deserves to win (the outcome) through voting (Holmes, 2004). As such, a variety of tactics isolate the individual contestants for viewer consideration and promote them as budding celebrities. For example, spotlights move with the contestant on the stage, in a globe inhabited by one; close-up shots capture emotions; and handheld camera physically moves closer to the contestants, creating an illusion of intimacy with the individual. As the background is darkened except for the glittering logo of *Indian Idol*, our attention is fixed on an individual's tryst with destiny – in the here and now. Studio audiences provide emotional clues to viewers at home (Peters, 1999), cheering the contestants and screaming their adoration (on cue from production staff); and act as “fans” (Kjus, 2009, p287) whose excessive engagement with specific contestants (again, prompted by producers) highlight the individualized quality of each performance. The size and the number of shots engaging the studio audience increases as the number of contestants decrease in the final stages of *Idol*. At this point, crane shots swing in one continuous move from the euphoric studio audiences to the single contestant on the stage, creating an impression of emotional connection and mass support but also the individual figure. Viewer interaction, that is, allowing viewers to vote (via telephone/text messages) and elect the winner similarly connects the individual contestant to a wider community while privileging the individuality of the contestant as the prominent and relevant actor.

In adapting the format producers in India follow the “creative values” specified in the format (from camera angles, light designs, shot movements and crowd management

to use of “video-diaries” showcasing “behind-the-scenes” *reality* of a contestant’s life during the “*Idol* journey” or structured episodes featuring *Idol* contestants returning to hometowns as celebrities and so on). Many aspects are also tweaked to accommodate local aesthetic sensibilities (for example, warm tones like red, orange or earth-colors are used in India as opposed to the “cold western hues” of blue or mauve; or *Indian Idol* often uses “theme based episodes” such as “70s Bollywood” or “folk songs” or “religious songs” episodes, though all the songs – whether folk, ghazals, sufi, bhajans - performed on *Indian Idol* are Hindi commercial film songs). Irrespective of the specific technicalities of textual construction and format adaptation (which tends to vary), what remains constant is the thematic emphasis of the show on the individual at the center of all action who charts his or her own individual path to success – the ability of an anonymous individual to transform himself or herself into a star by taking a chance, appearing in auditions, struggling but competing with determination and unwavering ambition. The making of the celebrity on *Idol* thus becomes an opportunity to unmask and unleash the (previously unexceptional) self and showcase one’s (exceptional) potential; to stand out of the nameless crowd and acquire (or at least venture to acquire) an individuality (as a celebrity) for the first time. The production of the celebrity and the production of the individual self are thus inextricably interlinked. To fulfill one’s potential and validate one’s life it is imperative to assume the role of the self-directed, self-motivated and self-fulfilling individual (rather than any collective basis for aspiration and/or action).

Producers impress contestants on the need to establish a “*pehchaan*” or “identity” (to distinguish one’s self in the eyes of viewers and earn votes) and provide them with

self-branding strategies. Judges/hosts may be “prepared” by producers (before filming) to complement someone for their “chulbulli muskaan” or “cute smile” which becomes a cue for the contestant to bashfully smile more and more at the camera and for studio audiences (to be prompted) to cheer her on as the vibrant, smiling contestant who wears her heart on her sleeve (as they did in *Indian Idol 5*). Others may be given a “rock-star” make-over; transforming them, for instance, from “Rakesh-Babu” as someone named Rakesh (a very common male name) would be called in traditional Hindi in the state of Uttar Pradesh to a snazzy “Raka-Rocket” (again in *Indian Idol 5*) and so on. The performance on the *Idol* stage is only one of the ways viewers get to know the contestants and pick their favorites. In order to facilitate viewer allegiance with individual contestants, producer parade the contestants through interviews where they (much like celebrity gossips featured in glossy magazines) talk of their personal likes, dislikes, quirks, habits etcetera. Video-diaries provide brief segments interspersed through the show on how contestants spend their time (practicing their songs with dedication, idling their time in bed, cooking for friends with gusto, praying and so on). Such mundane, everyday chores, images and/or instances enable viewer association on one hand. But on the other hand, wide-eyed, innocent excitement of the contestants at the new experiences they find themselves encountering (such as traveling in luxury cars, meeting other celebrities, frolicking at fancy hotel swimming pools) induce a sense of exclusivity and special-ness with hints of their up-and-coming stardom. A sense of accumulative exuberance and incentives for stardom, associated luxuries and social mobility propels the individual contestants, further and further, into the increasingly tense and high-stakes

competition while viewers at home watch with fascination how “someone just like them” can become a celebrity if they have the ambition, determination and competitive will.

Manufacturing individual agency on *Indian Idol* is however also tempered by “family values and mindsets” that producers are quick to highlight as a necessary and defining feature of India’s one-TV-per-home market. In producing stardom on *Indian Idol* and offering the tantalizing promise that “*anybody could win*” producers in India must therefore accommodate disperse appeals aimed at different viewers within the family. *Indian Idol* in that sense not only seeks to invoke fantasies in a young adult or teenager re-imagining herself as the next pop-star but also stir memories of buried aspirations in a middle aged mother who gave up her dreams under social compulsions to marry and become a homemaker; or recharge secret ambitions of the father who abandoned his musical career (or dreams of becoming the next cricket celebrity) to instead become the family breadwinner; and so on. Further, producers tutor contestants to speak of how their individual aspirations and ambitions are rooted in their desire to complete their parent’s unfulfilled dreams, bring honor and joy to their grandparents, ease the family responsibilities on their elder siblings and so on.

Enfolding individualism into the more familiar, traditional values of family, community or cultural collectives often requires tricky negotiations and accommodations on the part of producers. The “look” of the individual contestant, for example, is crucial to foregrounding the *Idol*’s promise that anybody can become a star. The ordinary looking individual who walks through the audition doors in disheveled, dull clothes (shown in the audition episodes) is magically and gradually transformed into the dazzlingly dressed celebrity on the glittering *Idol* stage. As the show progresses, the

individual contestant looks less and less “ordinary” and more and more like a star (with flashy, revealing clothing usually worn by celebrities; make up; styled hair; and so on). But this transformation also threatens to unsettle values of modesty, humility, “proper dress-sense” that are associated with middle class families watching television in the evenings – especially when they are watching one of “their own kids” on television moving into a new world of stardom. The making of the star (and pursuing one’s individual aspirations to become the star) may therefore run foul of and disrupt the familiar norms of “what our boys do” or “how our girls dress”. The producer’s craft is to not let such conflicts and alienation occur; to instead, reconcile potentially contradictory strains (individual ambitions versus social/family claims on the individual’s actions and ambitions) in order to keep the entire family glued to the television.

Each week costume designers’ present different options to the creative directors who determine the dress that is finally worn on camera by a contestant. Plunging necklines and rising hemlines often cause intense deliberations. I observed the following in one fitting session (in season 5).

“How about this?” the costume designer MS held up a white sequined dress, in one such fitting, to show to the creative director MJ, who rolled her eyes and responded,

“Sexy! But it’s an off-shoulder (dress), damn it. I can’t give her an off-shoulder *now!*”

“This, then?” MS asked about a bright red skirt.

“Hmmm...” MJ replied.

There were few moments of silent pondering in the room and then discussion went back and forth. The contestant being fitted at the moment was asked to put on the

skirt. She snuggled into the tight, short skirt and looked visibly awkward, pulling the hem down jerkily. The other female contestants (all sitting together in the fitting room) giggled; one commented: “*Karna parta hai, beta (Gotto do it, kid). To become a star you gotto wear it!*”

“Oh shut up!” MS, the costume designer rebuked the younger female contestants, part in jest and part in earnest, before turning to the creative head MM: “Yeah? Looks good, na? What?”

“Nah. *Too* short,” MJ replied, but admitted to liking it, “keep it. We will use it later in the episodes. We just can’t go all *hip* on her as yet. I need a conservative look (now).”

The skirt was not rejected. The conversation veered but in keeping with the episode, which was still at an early stage in the season, it was finally decided that a pair of tight jeans, ankle high boots and printed T-shirt would replace (the more revealing) red skirt or white dress. There is no formula to measure what is “too short”, “too revealing” or “too sexy”. Local producers rely on their intuitions and socially rooted cultural instincts. The principle, in general, is to err on the side of caution and begin with “typical” and more modest clothing (*salwar kameez*, long skirts, full sleeve shirts, jeans) that ordinary young men and women might wear on the streets and eventually transition to more revealing clothing (shorter skirts, tank tops, ripped jeans, body hugging t-shirts) that one may wear in more affluent, cosmopolitan (and usually Westernized) urban parties. The construction of stardom enfolds “middle class family values” (in the words of television producers) in the initial stages of the competition (when contestants look like everyday viewers and are dressed modestly) but also breakaway, in a gradual ascent

towards metropolitan, elite cultural attributes (when short skirts become the norm) in the later stages of the contest.

What is important to note is not the production negotiations and accommodations per se but the idea of inevitability attached to the rise of the individual contestant as a celebrity who is now, unavoidably, unanchored from the markers of family/community obligations. The construction of stardom on *Indian Idol* is punctuated by “family values” but the centrality of stardom on the show inevitably and inextricably puts the spotlight on the individual and the *Idol* journey ultimately rests on the individual’s ability to transform one’s self. There is no denouncing of traditional values and “family mindsets” (gauged in skirt lengths). The female contestants are not shown to reclaim their bodies or right to dress as they please as an expression of (liberal) individual right. Illiberal values of the family/community morality continue to define the individual’s role and actions and yet there is a new sense of what is permissible and *necessary to do* if one is to achieve success, as young women from small towns enter the workforce or the market space and adapt to its needs (for glamour, visibility, self-promotion) in order to succeed. The legitimacy (and responsibility) of the individual will is the only absolute at the end. In his study on reality TV’s salience in Arab public life, Marwan Kraidy reminds us that “neoliberalism is not a universally applicable trope” (2010, p209). The focus on how reality TV educates us to become liberal subjects that has preoccupied scholarship of western experiences with reality TV may hinder our understanding of how reality TV may also engage illiberal values and create a fertile space for public debates over range of issues, from individual rights, gender relations, political rights of communities to economic nationalism. In societies not “thoroughly penetrated” by capitalist ideologies

(as Kraidy illustrates in the Arab context) reality TV's popularity thus signals how the advance of global capital entails socially, historically differentiated experiences. In retaining the focus on neo-liberal values but empirically exploring its construction by focusing on production contexts, needs and tactics this study reiterates the argument that indeed, neo-liberalism is not a trope – not an abstraction that may be distilled figuratively from lived reality and thus made universal – but a set of practical negotiations with industrial and market conditions. Production negotiations over skirt lengths reveal how gender roles and relations are both deployed to appeal to viewer's cultural mindsets and assuage cultural fears but also, at the same time, engender a new reality privileging individual aspirations and ambitions.

It is also important to point out here that in India all aspects of economic life are under the influence of capital today (Chatterjee, 2008) and to the extent that sectors of life fall outside the direct force of capital such spaces also fall outside the lens of television cameras. Rural India, for instance, seldom appears on the radar of entertainment television producers (or news television/print editors for that matter) because rural India is not metered – that is, rural viewers are not accounted in viewer ratings measurement, which is the currency in the television business and informs programming and production decisions. When village life or contestants from villages appear on reality TV's narratives (as following discussions referring to *Indian Idol* and *Desi Girl* demonstrate) the target viewer is not the average villager (living without electricity or television, often in poverty and deprivation) but the small town and urban/semi-urban viewers and low income groups who are stranded between competing realities - aspiring to participate in consumerist lifestyles that proclaims one as a capital

bearing individual in the midst of global capitalism but also confronting cultural limits that cannot be easily reconciled with liberal values. The recurrence of khap panchayats (committee of male village elders, mostly in North India) grabbing headlines with extra-judicial dictates banning women from wearing jeans, talking on cell phones, going out of homes without chaperons and so on while sitting stone's throw away from glitzy shopping malls selling designer jeans, variety of consumer goods and sites of rock concerts where men and women sashay to pop-stars are perhaps both an evidence of global capital's penetration and its struggle to breach through opposing forms of social organization and cultural orders. In invoking such conflicts (gauged through skirt lengths and other familiar markers of contention) reality TV producers appeal to viewer's attention. But analytically we must also ask how such conflicts are resolved within reality TV's narratives; what are the possible and permissible outcomes; which aspirations are validated and what cultural competencies and strategies are offered in the process. In doing so we may understand not only how global capitalism resonates differently in different cultural contexts but also harmonizes competing values, attitudes, actors and ambitions. Contentions over individual and gender rights, communal and religious identities and assertions are in that sense important in our considerations but neo-liberalism as an analytic in excavating the ideas driven home, through rough weather and rocky roads, is still important, at least in reality TV's cultural resonance in India.

Universal Access and Individual Ambition: “Aukad” (Social Status) and “U.S.P”.

(Unique Selling Proposition)

“...Do you know what your U.S.P. is? *Your U.S.P. is that you’re from the village.*

Looking at you one should think that you’re trying to learn; show the world that you can

do something...” (Satish Dutt, *Indian Idol* producer, 2010)

The growth of the C&S commercial television in India has largely been unwritten by urban middle classes since the 1990s and hence understood to cater to middle class elites in metropolitan cities (Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata), with purchasing power to pay for C&S subscriptions and buy the array of household consumer goods and global brands advertised on such networks. But starting in the mid 2000s there has been a distinct shift and C&S networks have been moving beyond the “metro” middle classes into different SECs and “interiors” or small towns of the country. For example, starting with season 3, in 2007, *Indian Idol* specifically began to target the “hunger of small town talents” (in the words of *Idol* producers and material used on promotions). A “360 degree multi-media campaign”⁶⁵ was unleashed to include viewers “on a single platform cutting across all socio-economic echelons of society” (Miditech Press Release, 2007). SET lowered the age limit for participation in *Indian Idol* from 18 to 16 years and included more audition sites in small towns (such as Jodhpur, Bhubaneshwar, Hyderabad, Amritsar, Srinagar, Nagpur, Baroda, Bhopal, and Kanpur).

⁶⁵ Hindi newspapers (*Loksatta* and *Bhaskar*) and news television networks (*Aaj Tak* and *Headlines Today*) were roped in to showcase the *Idol* participants in special ‘news’ segments; cable operators in smaller cities were asked to play contests around *Idol* and segments/capsules from the show to generate more interest; and (starting with *Idol 2*) advertising spots were placed on 29 Vividh Bharati stations of All India Radio across the country, along with advertisements on private FM stations like Radio Mirchi, Red FM, Radio City and Go 92.5 (Adesara, 2005).

This broadening of the audience/contestant base is a market necessity. Industry reports have indicated new consumers; for instance, the report *The Indian Entertainment and Media Industry: Unraveling the Potential* (2006) by FICCI and PricewaterhouseCoopers predicted in mid-2000s that 30 to 40 million people are joining the “middle class” every year and illustrate “consumption patterns associated with rising income” (p3). The television ratings agency TAM Media Research expanded its sampling to include new small towns (increasingly including cities with population of ten, five and even one hundred thousand) to cater to advertiser’s interests in such emerging markets. And, broadcasters (such as SET) repositioned their shows (such as *Indian Idol*) to focus on new subscribers of C&S networks from the small towns and semi-urban areas - initiating them into the new worlds of consumption. But this market expansion also creates new dilemmas for producers - requiring them to cogently address seemingly incommensurable and inchoate viewing groups, cutting across vastly different material, social and cultural realities: from the maid to the memsahib; the middle class bureaucrat to his uneducated, working class driver; from the small town homemaker to the posh “metro” teenager⁶⁶. The resolution, research reveals, can be found in the world of aspirations that reality TV producers create in terms of the rhetoric of universal access and individual exceptionalism, without addressing the material and socio-cultural differences in between. Consider the following.

On the day *Indian Idol* is shot the stage is active and alert but the day before, on “tech days” (when rehearsals are conducted with the technical teams, such as lighting, camera, sound), the mood is of listless anticipation. Contestants sit on the audience

⁶⁶ The social disjuncture accommodated in the television space is perhaps most strikingly borne out in the latest Household Amenities Census 2011 which revealed that only 47% of households have access to drinking water but 47.2% households own a television set.

benches and wait their turn to rehearse on stage; meditating on how to perform on camera the next day. On one such “tech day” (during the Gala Round, season 5) I was sitting with SK, a contestant. He was tense and feared being eliminated from the show at a juncture when he felt close to the finale and yet so frustratingly far.

SK identified himself as Muslim by faith and Manganiyar by caste, a community of folk singers who have traditionally performed at Rajput (upper caste) homes during childbirth or weddings etcetera and, in more recent times, at hotels for international tourists. At home in his village outside Jaisalmer (western end of Rajasthan) he had never been to a school (there are none) but joined the “paramparik pesha” (traditional occupation) of folk singing as a child. He had also never seen *Indian Idol* before entering the show. He has neither electricity nor a television at home. His entry into *Indian Idol*, after he saw the call for auditions on a hotel television and decided to try, reflects how media expansion has produced “vernacular modernity” (Ninan, 2007) wherein enterprising individuals from the social-cultural fringes have been able to increasingly insert themselves into the national imaginaries and achieve individual social mobility. The question however is; what are the terms of such insertion and inclusion?

As SK sat pensive that ‘tech day’ his worries were prompted by what had transpired the day before, during rehearsals at the hotel (where contestants stay during production). MP, the voice/music guru and Satish Dutt, the head of productions (both of whom work closely with the contestants on a day-to-day basis) had unleashed a barrage of scathing questions the moment he walked into the rehearsal room.

“What happened last time? Huh? You think you have become a hero?” MP asked.

“*Baho mat, don’t get swept away...you’ve come with a lot of dreams.*” Dutt added.

“Yes, Sir,” SK responded in a subdued voice.

“You get so comfortable on the stage, there’s no tension on your face...the whole day you loiter around, from here to there, in the hotel. ... Ever since you’ve met Katrina Kaif (a film star guest on the show) you think you’ve become a hero, eh?” MP continued.

“Kuch nahi ho tum. You are nothing. The sooner you realize that the better it is for you. ...Do you know what your U.S.P. is? *Your U.S.P. is that you’re from the village.* Looking at you one should think that you’re trying to learn; show the world that you can *do something*...but if you keep being so distracted then you’re going to land right back at the village... want to go back to the village?” Dutt asked.

“Nahi (no), Sir” SK answered without looking up.

U.S.P. refers to the marketing term “unique selling proposition”, which identifies the distinct quality of a product that can help sell it. On *Idol* (and other reality TV shows) the marketing term refers to self-branding practices, that is, how a contestant distinguishes himself from others to catch the viewer’s eye (and votes). SK was not the only one to receive a “scolding” (Dutt’s phrase) nor the only contestant to project himself as the *everyman hero*, overcoming social marginalization with individual grit and gumption, ambition and goal orientation. Another episode, for instance, featured RM, a young man from Balkeshwar, Agra (also a small town), whose success on *Idol* made his elderly parents teary eyed with pride as they stood on the *Idol* stage (invited and brought over by the production team) and talked of how their son’s ambition and determination has introduced them to spectacular new experiences and privileges – such as flying, for

the first time in their life, in an airplane (from their village in Punjab to the big city Mumbai). Air-travel has long been the symbol of elite middle class consumption but on *Indian Idol* it becomes a mark of success that anybody can achieve if they are willing to take a chance, compete and work hard to win. Similarly, young women contestants on *Indian Idol* often talk (on camera) of how they “*too*” want to make their parents proud despite being told all their life that they are “*only*” girls and hence less capable than boys (“*hum bhi kuch kar sakte hai, sirf larki hone ke bavajoot*”).

The next day, during filming, a hush descends inside the studio in anticipation of elimination results and cameras zoom in on SK. The hosts talk of his poor performance on the previous episode and suggest he might be the one to be ejected that day. SK sits stiff.

Then he jumps up, with wide-eyed surprise, as his father and uncle walk onto the “live stage”. Technically, “live” means recording is not stopped unless there is technical error. But creatively, it serves a narrative enhancing function, allowing producers to create “trigger (action) scenes” when contestants may be surprised (by inviting their parents/family to the stage, for instance) and constructing an emotionally charged environment likely to produce spontaneous re-actions and dramatic content.

“Something has caused you anguish?” the host prompted SK’s father to speak up, “you wanted to come all the way here to express your feelings?”

The judges on the podium, sitting on high black swiveling chairs, dressed in urbane suits lean forward to listen attentively. SK’s father, dressed in traditional Manganiyar attire (vibrantly colorful, including an elaborate turban, as customary) representing, in contrast to the judges, his rural cultural roots stood on the stage facing

the judges and said: “Yes, I wanted to say one thing to Anu’ji (Anu Malik, a celebrity judge on the show) that when he said that SK is no longer as he was, as he came from the village... that hurt me. My boy can never change.”

The microphone is handed to SK’s uncle, who says: “I didn’t like that someone as renowned as Anu Malik says on national TV: “you’ve forgotten your *aukad*”. I didn’t like that. We felt we should go to Mumbai to address this point”.

“*Aukad*? Did you even see the show? Did you hear me use the word “*aukad*”? That’s a wrong allegation. You gotta take it back!” Anu Malik (the judge in question) expresses indignation in return, as others in the studio (including hosts and SK) watch silently.

“Yes, you said he thinks of himself as a king, he has forgotten the things of the village,” the uncle repeats.

“I say those things to everybody. ...The whole nation is watching me... *I never lie*,” Malik’s voice rises, “*this is not a drama – this is Indian Idol: you have to face the reality here*. ...You have to trust us judges. *We don’t have personal agendas*. That smell of earth – it shouldn’t be that one should lose oneself in the glittering world (of show-business) ... I want SK to win *Indian Idol*; I don’t want him to forget his goal, his hard work.”

In the midst of the argument, SK asks permission to speak and repeats, word by word, the lessons he learnt the day before during rehearsals: reiterating for viewers that he comes from a humble, rural background but he too wants to “get ahead in life” (“aage barna chahta hoon”) and is determined to do as best as he can to maximize this one opportunity he has on the *Idol* stage. He asks viewers to vote for him and keep him on the

show so that he can prove that he can change the circumstances of life and be a “winner” (“mae bhi jeet sakta hoon”). The heated moments of the arguments between the judge and the “elders” ease as SK’s uncle concludes: “Yes-yes, of course. We want you (to Anu Malik, the judge) to keep him at your feet, under your guidance. That’s what we wanted to tell you.”

In the edited version that goes on air the tense music and sound effect of clashing swords – metal on metal – accompanying the warring words fade into a Rajasthani folk tune reminiscent of a warm feeling of community and idyllic rural life. But inside the studio and un-captured on camera, as the scene ends Anu Malik turns to catch Dutt’s eye, who as the head of production sits off-camera in the dark space below the judge’s podium during filming. “Thik bola?” (Did I speak right?) Malik asks Dutt.

“It was fantastic, Sir! *Thik bhi bola-aur kuch bola bhi nahi*,” Dutt replies with a wink: *You said it-and-you didn’t say it.*

Reality production on reality TV is an art of invisible mediation, produced through performative encounters. Malik’s comments were not scripted by producers and hence “real”. But the craft of producers is to, first of all, cast someone (like Malik) who can intuitively re-act and knows how much to say and what to leave unsaid; and then secondly, prepare them (judges/hosts/contestants) to invoke the sentiments, idioms, gestures (such as “aukad” or social status) needed for dramatic exchanges. The scene resting on the spin on “aukad” in that sense was “live” and unscripted but not unmediated either. To look for what is “real”, and what is not, is futile in that sense but to ask what are the terms of reality construction that comes alive through such performative encounters becomes necessary and important. The physical makeover that contestants

may go through (from Rakesh babu to Raka Rocket, for instance, as mentioned earlier) are also deployed on more internalized self-making; that is, not only clothing and names that helped reinvent and re-brand the emerging star but also attitudes, gestures, phrases and idioms that distinguish the deserving contestant. The individual is fragmented and reassembled, following the commands of experts and gurus, and that ability to mould oneself is itself an evidence of what marks the aspiring and determined star from the average participant-contestant. In discussing this feature of self-making in makeover type reality TV shows Joanne Morreale argues that reality TV signals a cultural shift away from the “therapeutic self” that emerged in Europe and US in late 1800s (as the result of urbanization, technological advances, rise of market economy, science and medicine, and declining influence of religious institutions over social morality) which combined to create a potent force replacing the Protestant ethic of self-denial as a route to salvation. Instead of identity shaped by sense of *being* the notion of “therapeutic self” proposes *having and consuming* as means of self-fulfillment. Morreale suggests that reality TV reverses this in a way, pushing us away from *having* products to *becoming* products ourselves. However this theoretical clarity and analytical distinction of reality TV’s liberal import into cultural life (shifting selves from *having* to *being*) that gets mired in the Indian context when culturally translated – both in its abstracted value and in its material and corporeal forms.

“Aukad”, the word in contention, refers to gumption derived from one’s social status – not only the material access one may possess and claim but also the social and cultural affluence, assumptions and entitlements that may or may not accompany material power. Aukad is a slippery term to pin down for conceptual clarity precisely because it

plays out in varying permutations and combinations of power and social status. An economically poor man may overcome his marginalized aukad if he is of high caste or is educated (social, cultural capital can triumph over economic capital, or not); a rich woman may assert more aukad than a man because of her economically elite status (class can be more powerful than gender, or vice versa). What it means to *have* something (materially, as per class and consumption capacity) and what it may mean to *be* something (as social assumptions and attitudes, cultural competencies and familiarities) cannot be parsed out so clearly therefore. Reality TV's liberal underpinning in that sense cannot be assumed to impact equally in different settings and it is only through a closer consideration of how the liberal underpinnings are re-produced that we may understand how reality TV's cultural power is manifested. "Aukad" usually invoked *against* someone (as it was allegedly for SK) is however always pejorative – a questioning of status. The response is contained, *Indian Idol* tells us both literally and figuratively, in the individual contestant – in his or her ability to overcome social limitations. The competitive marketplace is a space of equal opportunity and individual merit. The lack of infrastructure in small towns or the social, material, cultural deficiencies that come with being born in the wrong side of sex/caste/class divides may be surmounted through individual ambition and determination, that distinguishes the survivor and the "winner" from the rest who stagnate and perish. The notion of one's *aukad* or social status is thus raised and erased in the name of universal opportunity and individual ambition on the show, while prioritizing the self-directed individual as the only legitimate factor in the algebra of life's successes and failures.

Love and Longing at a Time of Self-Management

“Everybody has talent. But you gotta manage it.” (Dutt, head of production, *Idol*)

While SK was not eliminated from the show that day, another contestant named YR was. The familiar *Idol* music had filled the studio floor – thick with the sense of anticipation and exhilaration – and stopped at the tense tune that goes on and on in the background when elimination results are announced. Each week the audio-visual routine is repeated. The fade in of the music, a pause in the breath of the host and close ups of worried faces of contestants are cues (familiarized each week) that its “results time”. The music goes on but the lights stop swirling and the cameras are held static. With endless fuss, moving back and forth between the contestants, the host speculates on who might have won, who might have lost, who deserves to win and/or who does not. The envelope (containing the elimination results) is held up (ready for a mid shot of the host) while the two or three contestants with the lowest vote that week stand on the stage with the host waiting to hear their fate. They twitch nervously and hold each other’s hands in solidarity (caught on a long shot) while the scene is dragged out, teasingly, to heighten anxiety and highlight the stakes. The hosts talk of the hard work and hopes of the contestants that may end in a moment’s notice; of the necessary ruthlessness of competition where only one may win and/or survive; of the inherent uncertainties in life; the fickle and unpredictable nature of viewer voting (which determines the winner); the need to be tenacious in pursuing ambitions, irrespective of the results; and so on.

On stage that day, the host suddenly stops the nervous play. He turns to YR, holds his elbow and says, “it ends here for you.” The two other contestants standing next to him wrap their arms around him and in between the entangled arms and pounding hearts,

YR's eyes fill with tears, his lips quiver and a concerted effort to hide the overwhelming sense of failed dreams wrench his face. The host nudges the action along; congratulates other contestants for surviving yet another week; and the studio audience (prompted by producers) erupt in celebration of relief. YR too listlessly tries to clap his hands along with the crowd. As the surviving contestants walk away, YR is left alone, center stage, for his final farewell performance (as required by the format). In the edited show (that goes on-air), the scene cuts to YR's singing: his voice a bit broken but resolute as he bravely faces the world in his pursuit of his ambitions. Emotions collide and drama is created - dreams wrecked and reprieved, hard work rewarded and hopes disenchanted, invigorating joy and disappointment – all mashed together into prime time pulp.

Filtered from this emotional cocktail are however the moments in-between – when one reality interrupts another and hapless tears get in the way of a production schedule. Inside the studio, after the results pronounce him ousted from the show YR simply cannot continue with filming. For seemingly endless minutes he struggles to regain composure. The Teleprompter slows down, waiting for human breath to catch up to rolling script. The hosts shuffle their feet, occasionally touching their earplugs to listen to the creative directors who watch the unfolding situation from the control room, frantically hoping that YR would move on and the filming could go on.

The other contestants watch their fallen compatriot with dread. They stand still, very still; but then they signal for permission to rush to him. The floor manager glares back. Sitting next to me in the dark and hidden spot, away from the stage or the cameras, the assistant contestant manager frowns, wags a finger and curls her mouth into a stern NO. The clock ticks and production budget inflates by the minute. The lights, still on,

start getting hot and the technical staff asks to shut them down. A studio full of (more than hundred) people wait for YR to resume.

Gradually, still struggling, YR turns around to face the studio once more and begins to thank the judges and fellow contestants by rote. Expressing gratitude for the “opportunity” of appearing on *Idol* is a part of the ritual of saying goodbye on the *Idol* stage. In the moment of unmanaged emotions (unstoppable tears, irrepressible disappointment, creeping sense of shame etcetera) the practice of expressing gratitude provides a way to manage the emotional moment – reinforcing a “positive attitude” and image of stoic strength in the face of defeat. Departing contestants are given talk-time on camera, empowering them in the last few minutes to express their emotions. Such moments create what Laura Grindstaff (1997) calls “the money shot” – when the unmanaged emotional displays (tears etcetera) create eye-catching moments and boost ratings. But the “first person talk” also provides managed emotional closure – to the contestants and viewers – as they express their gratitude for the *Idol* opportunity and vow to continue with their ambitions. Dovey (cited in Aslama and Pantti, 2006, p179) argues that self-talk on reality TV is instrumental in creating a matrix of self-hood; whereby the monologue promotes the transformation of television from a mass medium to a first-person medium addressing masses of individuals. The contestants live together for months during production, separated from their families, hometowns and regular lives. They eat, sleep, practice, dress at the same time (as per production schedules); share rooms in hotels (where they are hosted by the production teams); and help each other, week after week, through tears, fears and jubilations. The human tendency towards camaraderie is however splintered at each turn by a first person, individualized narrative

of struggle, determination, ambition and success (or failure) as each competes with the other for the same goal – of defeating others and emerging as the individual winner. The collective experience is thus undermined and as the group of contestants is slowly reduced through the elimination process it becomes important to not only prioritize one's self but also to manage one's self by disciplining emotional bonding within calculative rationality and self-branding practices.

As YR thanks the judge and fellow contestants who helped him on the “*Idol* journey” he however, unwittingly, crosses an unspoken line by mentioning those on the production staff, behind the camera and not known to viewers. In a moment of spontaneous gratitude YR turns to thank Satish Dutt and says: “*apne mujhe pyar diya* (you gave me love) ...understanding, you taught me...thank you, Satish Sir.” While many in the studio audience turn to look at Dutt (wondering who he might be) Dutt himself decides to look at nobody. Though he initially and instinctively looks up when YR mentions his name, he immediately turns away - crouching low on the chair, with elbows on his knees, fiddling with the earplugs and pulling at the gold chain on his neck - determined to disregard what was going on around him. In his position as the Head of Productions Dutt prefers to maintain an “emotional distance”, he told me later, in order to ensure a “professional attitude” and sense of impartiality. He argued that becoming fond of any one contestant over another may impinge on a required objectivity; and expressed a deep skepticism of such emotional attachments in the world of reality TV: “They are here today and they will be gone tomorrow. It (relationships) doesn't matter. Nothing matters. Today they need me, interact with me and they'll say they respect me; tomorrow they won't even remember me and if they happen to become big stars, then *toh*...(he

laughs aloud) they won't even recognize me! *Bas ayesehi hai sab* (that's what it's like)". Emotions and relationship are thus defined by an algorithm of need and outcome, cost and benefit that one needs to learn quickly in the world of *Idol*.

After YR recollects himself and starts singing his last song on the *Idol* stage I walk out of the studio to look for MM, the contestant manager. In the restricted life of *Idol* contestants she fills the void of family members and acts as a surrogate mother⁶⁷. In monitoring the day-to-day-affairs of the contestants I have seen her often scolding them to sleep on time and wake up at call time; forcing them to eat a healthy lunch and not eat too many unhealthy treats; assuring them when they are scared and instilling caution in them when they act reckless. I wanted to know her reaction when one of "her kids"⁶⁸ as she called them was eliminated from the show. I found her in a locked dressing room. She opened the door only after confirming that I was alone. And then, she hastily closed it behind me. I looked at her, and without a word we hugged. Standing in the middle of a dressing room, in front of a bathroom, she cried on my shoulders.

"What do I do? What *can* I do? Tell me." She said, apologetically.

"But, why don't you go to him (YR)? He will feel better with you." I asked.

She smiled and nodded. "Exactly. I can't."

Immediately after the elimination results are announced and the final performance is shot on stage, the contestant is whisked away by a production team to shoot post-episode feature segments. He is then interviewed by the production team (for post-show

⁶⁷ On *Indian Idol* contestants are hosted in a hotel and strictly separated from any contact with the outside world. They do not have access to television, radio, phones, newspaper, and Internet. They are allowed one phone call a week with their family members but the contestant manager strictly monitors it. This is enforced, contractually, to maintain control over flow of information to press (who has won/lost; gossips); make contestants focus on the production and not be distracted by external events; and also, importantly, to create an emotional vulnerability emerging from loneliness, separation anxiety etcetera that allows for dramatic exchanges on camera.

⁶⁸ the age range that season was between 19 to 28 years

segments) and asked about his “*Idol* journey”. The anguish of the contestant still fresh from the moment of rejection is captured on one hand; on the other hand the contestant is asked to recall happy moments from the “experience” and what he may have learnt to emphasize the fun-filled events, the fantastic opportunities and dazzling moments that come with being on *Idol*. Then he is paraded, with supervision, to a press conference where reporters can ask him questions that he has already been prepared to answer by the production team. It is only after all this that the contestant is allowed to meet with MM, when invariably he/they break down in her arms.

“But *why*?” I was still confused. “Why can’t you meet them for two seconds in between?” I asked MM.

“*Nahi, woh ekdum se natural ho jate hai.*” They become *too natural*, she said in Hindi. “Either they get too emotional or they get too relaxed because they know I am there for them... it does not look real or right on video then, you know. ...they look for me everywhere, their eyes look all over but I can’t go to them.” So MM hides herself in the bathroom – not because she is embarrassed at the silly sentimentality of it all but to not let one reality impede on another.

“Emotions are big in India. You will find a lot of that, *rona-dhona* (tears) and all.” Parth Thakur, creative head of *Idol 5* told me. Dutt repeated it: “We Indians are very emotional people, you see. We love to love-care-cry...” The “necessary melodrama” in how *Idol* is produced in India is treated as an Indian cultural particularity. There are more references to family relationships, obligations and loyalties in India than in western (U.S. or U.K.) versions, according to producers. The emphasis on emotions portrayed on *Idol* are in part due to the fact that television in India is regarded primarily as a “women’s

medium” operating in the domestic/family context and *Indian Idol* 5 which was broadcast on weekdays competed with melodramatic soap operas focusing on familial relationships and domestic scenarios. But it is important to note that production of emotions on *Idol* is framed within a need to *manage the emotions* and *a particular rationality of individual ambitions and end-goal orientation*. For example, contestants are shown recalling the “sacrifices” of their family relatives as they promise to not fail or be deterred from their individual ambitions because it is precisely *their individual self-fulfillment* that will enable them to express their love and gratitude for their self-sacrificing family members. Emotional loyalties are thus remapped in terms of unwavering determination and ends-justify-the-means reasoning. On one hand, *Idol* can thus appeal to individual ambitions motivating them to put aside emotional obligations to pursue their individual dreams. On the other hand, *Idol* validates the family values and relationships by framing the individualized ambitions as emotionally charged acts of individuals intended to make their families happy. Contestants are shown misty eyed at the thought of making their parents smile with pride when (and if) they win the title prize; they confess that they want to win and “become somebody” so that they can provide for their family, “take care” of parents and “protect” their siblings from worldly hardships; and they cry when they see their families and neighborhoods in their hometowns cheering them. And yet within the competitive world of reality TV shows emotions must be equated in a cost-benefit relationship: some emotions are necessary but others must be edited out.

Conclusion

After *Indian Idol 5* concluded, Dutt moved on to his next reality TV production. He was scheduled to start work on *The X Factor* (another FreMantleMedia property) and part of pre-production schedule included a workshop at London, where FreMantleMedia professionals “share” their “expertise and experiences” with the particular formats and “advise” Indian professionals on “how to produce the show” (Paraskakis, personal interview, 2009). I spoke with Dutt before he left and then later after he returned, on the phone, in early 2011. I asked him if he thought production strategies he learnt in U.K. would help him in India.

“Yes,” he said, “*There too the stories are the same, you see.*”

“Are they?”

“Yes! They show the same things. There’s a teacher, he’s poor and he’s got a chance to do something with his life finally. People have the *same kind of life* everywhere; *same kind of hope*, the *stories are same* everywhere. And they are very emotional.”

“But you said we Indians are more emotional. That’s what you told me earlier.”

“Yes, you are right, I said that. We are (emotional) *but not in front of the camera*. There they are good at expressing their emotions. Yahan pae (here, in India) we either keep crying or talking or...or else we don’t show our emotions at all; we hide it all. There they know how to show it correctly. *They know how to manage their emotions.*” Dutt said.

“Manage your emotions?” I repeated, pestering him to explain.

“Yes. *Everybody has talent. But you gotta manage it.* Manage your emotions, make viewers like you; watch you. Vote for you.” Dutt, a television producer entrenched

in the day to day task of localizing reality TV formats finds shared experiences, expectations and aspirations – from London to Lakhimpur (in small town India), and beyond. Everybody has the same inescapable struggles and same inevitable desires (for fame and fortune). Aspirations are pre-scripted in this narrative, and the only difference is in how we as individuals manage our selves. Who wins and who does not depends, on *Idol's* narratives, on our self-willed and self managed ability to brand, produce and perform ourselves in reality.

Taking a production-based approach to study of reality TV texts, this chapter has advanced two main arguments about the cultural salience of reality TV in India: one, that the underlying ideological framework of reality TV formats support a neo-liberal social milieu and introduces market based ideas and practices into the cultural space of everyday television; and two, that the cultural force of reality TV (and popular GECs) have expanded beyond the metropolitan elites and mobilized different socio-economic and cultural communities which reflects the percolation of market based ideologies in Indian social life. When Star TV began in 1991, to develop the first trans-national Asian private television network, its target audience was the 5% of Asia's wealthiest population or a cosmopolitan class of urban, upper-middle class elite (Mehta, 2008, p61). Today the “target audience” for most GECs operating in India are in small towns and in SECs B, C and D. Industry reports, for instance, celebrate market penetration into “new subscribers” in small towns (Tier 2 and 3 cities) as hopeful signs of growth (FICCI-KPMG report, 2012). The popularity of reality TV on C&S television thus indicates more than middle-class consumerist aspirations; rather, it reveals *deepening of market values* (from urban middle classes to semi-urban, lower middle classes).

The reality TV fuelled narratives of change premised on competition, ambition and the “enterprising self” (Rose, 1992) reveal, I suggest, an intersecting and inter-animating relationship between the cultural realms and political-economic policies reshaping social life in India. The meta-narrative of market competition permeates all sectors of social life in post-liberalized India, wherein the role of the state in public life is reconfigured from the provider of public goods and services to the regulator of “free-market” operations. The state is no longer the interventionist-reformist actor for social-national development but a mediating apparatus in the global-national flow of capital interests (with appropriate licensing, re-regulating instruments) while reality TV instills a necessary “rationality of governing that emphasizes self-empowerment as a condition of citizenship” (Ouellette and Hay, 2008, p7). The transition of the Indian state from its “commanding heights” of state controlled economic planning to the neo-liberal role of market regulator makes it essential that its model of citizenship must also be rearticulated. Liberalism’s expectation of the role of the state involves an expectation that its individuals will actively participate in their own self-governance by replicating the economic rationality in their lives. As Ouellette and Hay (2008) have argued, “free market” relations and liberal government developed through one another; the modern virtues of laissez-faire capitalism were articulated through liberalism’s reasons about freedom, efficiency and self-sufficiency as the basis for civil society.

In a 2008 article discussing democracy and economic transformation in India, Partha Chatterjee cites a “vague but powerful feeling” amongst the urban middle class elite that the market, and not the government, is the more efficient way to economic development. Poverty and/or social marginalization are no longer understood as resulting

from unequal opportunities (p58) but from mismanagement. The “powerful feeling” is neither vague nor limited to the urban middle class today. The sense is indeed commonsense; reproduced through emotionally wrenching and dramatically engaging narratives of “zero to hero” “real” stories and of neighbors taking a chance and being entrepreneurial instead of looking towards public entitlements. In the face of farmer suicides because of financial ruin in Vidharba, Maharashtra, a Member of Parliament and Union Textile Minister Shankar Singh Vaghela argued in 2007 (Deshmukh, 2007) that farmers are in debt because they are lazy and do not make the right choices⁶⁹. His comments, while contested and criticized vigorously in the press at the time, nonetheless has a peculiar resonance with what is argued on reality TV shows and suggests how reality TV shows work as “cultural technologies” (Ouellette and Hay, 2008) - championing the culture of the market.

⁶⁹ The specific taunt was “If you just sit and chew tobacco in the farms, how can you expect good crops?”(Deshmukh, 2007). The remark ignored predatory practices of global agro-businesses like Monsanto, which benefited from distress sales of cotton at low prices by farmers caught in debt inducing circumstances, whereby farmers take loans to buy expensive and patented seeds, which require higher irrigation and pesticides and hence again, higher loans from banks to offset the low irrigation facilities – ending with financial ruin and hence suicides when crops fail.

CHAPTER EIGHT

CELEBRATING REALITY THE “*DESI*” (HOMEY) WAY: FROM *CELEBRITY SLEEPOVER* TO *DESI GIRL*

This chapter focuses on *Desi Girl*, a reality TV show produced and broadcast in 2010 on Imagine TV⁷⁰. The primary objective is to understand how the themes identified in previous chapters with relation to the *Millionaire* and *Idol* format are replicated in *Desi Girl*. Doing so allows us to not only recognize the recurrence, repetition and prevalence of the particular set of themes but also analytically acknowledge the various forms and formulations of such themes on reality TV shows.

Desi Girl, as a reality TV show, is different than *Millionaire/KBC* and *Idol* in three crucial ways. First, unlike *Millionaire* or *Idol*, the contestants on *Desi Girl* are celebrities and not ordinary viewers – which prompts the question if reality TV involving celebrities are also *thematically* different? Second, *Desi Girl* is an “idea based show”, that is, it is not a series repeated one season after another (like *Millionaire* or *Idol* franchise). The show highlights a *specific* “idea” that producers identify as socially salient and therefore likely to create a splash with viewers – becoming a “water-cooler phenomenon” that is widely talked about in media and in public - and in the process bring new viewers to the network and maximize viewer ratings (even if it is only a short-lived phenomenon). What then are the ideas that project, or claim to represent, a shared sense of everyday reality, strike a chord with viewers and propel them to the television screens? Which ideas and articulations gain traction in the world of competitive C&S television programming and reality TV? Third, *Desi Girl* is based on a licensed format but it also

⁷⁰ Imagine TV was at the time of fieldwork in 2010 one of the top ten Hindi GECs and part of Time Warner Group, Though it was later shut down and is no longer in operation the criteria for selecting the show and focusing on the network, as outlined in chapter four, are not undermined by its closure.

incorporates a variety of non-format elements into the reproduction (again, unlike *Millionaire* and *Idol* which have higher format fidelity). The production of *Desi Girl* therefore gives us an opportunity to understand to which production choices have been normalized in the industry? When incorporating a presumably infinite number of creative choices/formal elements to (re)create a show, which ideas, practices, values, meanings do producers choose (and which they do not)? Do the key elements and themes introduced on Indian television via successful, landmark reality TV formats (such as *Millionaire*/KBC starting in 2000; *Idol* starting in 2004) seep through the format specificities and tend to be replicated in other reality TV shows as well? May we then identify a cultural salience of reality TV shows in terms of a specific ideational framework popularized on entertainment television, whether it is a format, non-format or hybridized format based show? I suggest yes, and aim to illustrate how the appeals embedded in reality TV shows recur irrespective of the “type” of show (format/non/hybrid-format; celebrity/ordinary contestants, etcetera) and more importantly, how the articulation of reality on reality TV, and the modes of participation it entails, reflects the mechanisms of (transnational) industrial and markets forces on the (local/national) cultural domain.

The following discussion is organized in terms of three sections. The first section focuses on the central “idea” on which the show *Desi Girl* is premised and the particular production choices that articulate the idea, rendering it meaningful on the cultural space. The second section draws from embedded observations of the editing process to illustrate how producers identify and (re)create the key themes that structure the show, repeating, as research reveals, a thematic framework built around competition, ambition and self-

management skills common to all reality TV shows. The third and final section looks at the reliance on celebrities on the show; examines the commercial-creative rationalities for casting celebrities; and searches, specifically, for thematic variances that may (or may not) occur due to celebrity-contestants (as opposed to ordinary viewers participating as contestants on other reality TV shows).

Projecting Reality, Producing Place: The “Idea” of Rural-Urban Divide on *Desi Girl*

“Where is Jharkhand, man?!...kya hai kya vahan pae (what is there, afterall?)” (Bhavya Sharma, creative director *Desi Girl* and BBC India executive, 2010)

A cursory search on the internet on the phrase “desi girl” would yield an array of pornographic websites, promising prospective clients different categories of women’s bodies available for purchase as per their South Asian profiles – “hot Indian girls”, “sexy Pakistani girls” and so on. The term “desi” refers to a pan South Asian identity, meaning he or she who is of the native land or homey. *Desh* (in Hindi and many other Sanskrit based North Indian languages) is homeland (though not necessarily nation-state); while, *desi* is one who belongs to homeland. Once away from home (and specially, in encounters with the “other”), the term often assumes pan-South Asian colloquial connotations, burying the historical cleavages and blurring the borders of nation-states that emerged in the aftermath of colonization and post-colonial nation-states (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh) in a single word. But the coupling of the word “desi” with the English word “girl” creates a phrase that may be injected into a broader circulation (of

beings, meanings and products) and has, almost invariably⁷¹, been tainted in popular imagination by its pornographic slant. This usurpation of the phrase posed a peculiar predicament for television executives at the Hindi GEC Imagine TV (a wholesome “family entertainment” network) when they proposed calling their new “idea based” reality TV show *Desi Girl*: condemning the show and by association the network to unsavory and unintended ideas that would be unacceptable on general entertainment television.

Possible “title sponsors” (Hero Honda bikes) refused to associate its name with the show due to apprehensions of potentially negative publicity (in case viewers associate the show with pornographic usages of the phrase)⁷². Executives at Imagine TV however decided to take a chance and retain the title. Not unlike the branding strategy of pornographic websites, both words – “desi” and “girl” – were considered necessary to the show’s essential appeal. “Desi” was needed for reality claims – suggesting a familiar, ordinary and homey everyday life. The English word “girl” (rather than its Hindi equivalents) on the other hand was necessary to refer to the celebrity contestants who were to participate on the show – emphasizing their allure as belonging to a space that is beyond the home and uncommon; as a more urbane, westernized and widely circulated form, tagged with aspirations and exotic exigency. None of the concerns of “off-putting” viewers proved true though when *Desi Girl* was aired in summer 2010 (much to the relief

⁷¹ Almost everybody I spoke with, both in the television/media industry and ordinary viewers, instinctively associated the show with “sounds like porn”. The phrase closely resembles other phrases, for example: “Angrezi/English daru” which is advertised at low-end liquor retail stores to tempt consumers to “Angrezi” or English (in Hindi) daru (alcohol). The core product (daru/alcohol) is known by its familiar Hindi word but its allure, again like the women advertised on porn sites, is in its exotic exclusivity – rarely accessible but now procurable. However, I qualify this association of the phrase “desi girl” as “almost invariably” because a recent Hindi film (*Dostana* released in 2008) also used the phrase in a popular song (“Who’s the prettiest girl of all? Its your desi girl, desi girl!”) lending the phrase some “family friendly” association.

⁷² though later Airtel, a telecommunications company, provided the primary sponsorship for the show

of broadcasters), and while the show was not a “landmark hit” (as KBC or *Indian Idol* was) it was widely viewed.

The title *Desi Girl* is a shortened version of a longer title - *Dil Jitegi Desi Girl*, which means, in Hindi, “*the native girl will win the heart*”. The show itself was however a foreign import - an adaptation of an originally British reality TV show called *Celebrity Sleepover* (owned and first produced by BBC in 2001 in U.K.). In 2010 executives at Imagine TV commissioned BBC Worldwide to reproduce the format, with an “Indian twist”. The British version featured the awkward experiences of a celebrity forced to spend a night at the home of an ordinary family. In India however producers turned the concept around, focusing not merely on the discomfort of celebrities but the transformation of a celebrity into a “desi” – one who belongs to the family/community/land and its culture. The central *idea* of the show in that sense was not centered on the celebrity (though the celebrity status of contestants is crucial) but on the humble *desi*.

As a “partly created, partly inspired format” (Roy, 2010) *Desi Girl* was advertised as an “idea” highlighting the contrast between celebrity and ordinary family life but also, importantly, the widening social-cultural gaps between rural and urban lifestyles in contemporary India. Eight celebrity women (mostly television personalities) are plucked from their busy, urbane life in Mumbai and transported to Sialba Majri, a village in Punjab, where they must live and adapt to the rural chores, mores and customs in order to compete for the title of the show – “Desi Girl”, that is, the (best) “Native/Village Girl”. Can the rich, fashionable and professional women from Mumbai survive a rustic life? Can they give up their cell phones and air-conditioned rooms; shed their miniskirts and

put on salwar-kameez (long tunic-pants); take off their high-heels and walk bare feet in the fields; and adjust to the conditions and norms of rural India? Implicitly then, the play on the title sets up a contrast not only between the desi (ordinary) folks and the celebrity (affluent, English speaking) world or the desi (village) as the place of origin and home as opposed to the city (and its celebrities) as the realm of aspirations and work but also, importantly, distinguishes the desi-rural from the city-urban in terms of materiality and consumption competencies.

In pre-broadcast promotions *Desi Girl* was described to the press as follows: “the idea is to displace these celebrities from their familiar surroundings *sans any material comforts* and give them a *taste of the real rural India*.” (Roy, 2010; emphasis added). The idea is carefully crafted into the opening sequence of the show (episode 1), which begins with shots of the celebrity women being driven to the village. The women watch the changing landscape from inside their limousine’s dark tinted windows. The city view fades away as they continue on a highway - the concrete jungle gives way to a leafy one - until, abruptly, the uniformed⁷³ driver stops the car and tells them that they must proceed on their own from thereon. The paved roads (an imprint of urban life) reach its material limits and the car (another material marker of urban life), the driver says, cannot be driven on the unpaved, muddy trail towards the village that continues from thereon. The celebrities stumble out of the car, unwilling and confused. They stand under the blazing sun in the open fields, awkward and unsure of how to carry their own suitcases, as they are accustomed to maids and assisting staff. Their short, tight western outfits (such as mini skirts and dresses that equate their urbanized backgrounds with

⁷³ Formally reiterating the affluence of the employers who not only have drivers as many upper middle class households in India might but have “staff” (therefore uniformed) drivers signaling a higher capital bearing personhood of the employers.

Westernized lifestyles) make them cultural misfits in the new setting. Villagers pass-by gazing at them with wonder, curiosity and eventually, (disapproving) shock. Encounters with “real” India in its rural settings are signified in terms of material differences but also as differences in sensibilities; the roads and the clothes must both adjust to new ends, signaling a shift to a new reality.

As the show progresses, there is a shift in narrative focus, carefully managed with production mediations. Producers reinterpret the material gaps between rural and urban India (that were invoked in pre-broadcast advertising) in cultural terms - emphasizing a clash of values and mindsets (rather than material realities, which are now instead pushed into the sub-text). Complaints over the difficulty of sleeping in rooms without fans or air-conditions, absence of refrigerator chilled water in the sweltering heat, inability to access the internet or chat on the cell phone are mentioned as what irks the celebrities in their new, materially un-privileged desi life but become trifling matters as following sequences focus on histrionic conflicts (raised eyebrows, rude behavior, tears, fights, more tears and so on) between some of the contestants and their foster home members, based on contestation of “cultural values” and lifestyles. The villagers hosting the celebrities in their homes, for instance, ask them to change into modest and traditional dressing (rather than revealing short skirts or bare shoulder/tank-tops they had brought with them from their city homes) which the celebrities find uncomfortable, shabby and unnecessary infringement of personal choices. And yet, if one is to win the “game” then one must play by the given rules, savvier and less “headstrong” contestants declare and decide to move on. Individual preferences are adjusted according to the family, village community norms as better self-management skills and sacrifices at the altar of ultimate ambition of

winning the show's title. In articulating rural-urban social-economic gaps in cultural terms, producers thus create a space of cultural validation of desi/village communities on *Desi Girl* while hinting at the material differences.

This privileging of the desi/village norms and need for contestants to fit into the *desi* surroundings (rather than remain a celebrity) marks a departure from the format *Celebrity Sleepover* (which does not specify such a transformation) but it also signals an acknowledgement of market imperatives. Majority of Imagine TV's viewers live neither in villages⁷⁴ nor in metropolitan cities⁷⁵; rather, they live in small towns and semi-urban areas, in between the rural fringe and the urban centers. Ordinary viewers in such small towns, producers argue, share and identify with the cultural "values" of villages but also "aspire" to the material life associated with big city lifestyles (replete with cell phone, air-conditions and so on).

This tussle between traditional, cultural values and modern, material aspirations is often fought over the women's body (which parts of the body will become the westernized "girl" and which will remain "desi") not only on *Desi Girl* but in contemporary India. The possibility of women transgressing community norms and dressing/acting in (newly) individualized capacities has emerged as a critical issue in post-liberalized India. As many young women join work force in urban centers (most prominently in service sectors where they must, often, dress in trousers and skirts) cultural perceptions of what is permissible and what is not for "our women" must also change. And yet, in a market driven society such change is mandated at an individual-

⁷⁴ Rural areas are not "metered" that is, the television viewer ratings agencies do not account for rural viewers and they are therefore unimportant demographic profiles. Networks aim to capture only those viewers who are measured and therefore deliverable to advertisers.

⁷⁵ Elite viewers in big, metropolitan cities (such as the celebrities on the show) are a very small fraction of the total population and therefore often overlooked in the ratings driven calculations of networks.

private level (in her aspirations for gainful employment; ability to adjust her-self to the demands of new employment regimes; dreams of money, social mobility and self-fulfillment and so on). The command of the community over the individual self and its subjectivity must then be renegotiated and reworked through the market if it is to survive. Some communal values and practices survive and may indeed be reinvigorated. Other values and practices become contentious issues and are often resolved with spectacular acts of brutality and violence. Posh shopping malls in urban areas, for instance, may sell Hallmark style greeting cards invented for *karva chauth*, a day when Hindu wives fast to pray for their husband's health and end their fast by touching their husband's feet to seek his blessing (along with other rituals). But within miles of the same shopping malls selling such items alongside designer and global brands of jeans, women may be socially ostracized or physically punished (or killed) for wearing jeans, talking with unrelated men or seen walking without an escort from the family by community elders. One of the critical points of contention in post-liberalized India is therefore the clash between market-fueled dreams of (westernized) commodity consumption on one hand and communities seeking to retain control over everyday life with "traditional" norms, habits and lifestyles, on the other hand.

In highlighting the rural-urban contestants in terms of clothing, at the outset of the show, producers of *Desi Girl* tap into this simmering tension that describes the lay of the land – geographically, culturally and materially – connecting and disconnecting rural and urban India. In highlighting the contestation producers acknowledge a wide set of viewers without offending any particular viewing constituency – from the urban, metropolitan centers (who prefer to wear jeans and skirts and may feel limited by more

conservative surroundings; or those who feel the need to do so only as demands of urban life) to the small towns and villages (who see such attires as markers of alienation, “western influence” and affluence). But as the show moves on, the celebrities are shown to find comfort in the emotional bonding, loving relationships and sense of belonging with the members of their village homes. They accept the codes of their village/*desi* homes and “happily” blend in; remarking on the joy of “sitting together” and being with the family/community as aspects of life they had forgotten in their urban and ambitious lives. As the narrative delves into their slow adjustment, the celebrities are shown shedding their materially rich lifestyles to find a richness of another (immaterial and emotional) kind. A contrast is thus set up: urban celebrity life denotes modern consumerist values while “real” village life is the sanctuary of the nation’s emotional core - the real “idea” of India. This attribution of “traditional” *desi* lifestyles as an ultimately benign part of the authentic, homey, cultural core residing in villages is a sleight of hand from the production perspective – resolving the tension (at least temporarily, on the show) between rural-urban India. The celebration of *desi* life becomes a cultural alibi for market mechanisms. Through the interplay of traditions versus modernity and rural versus urban life producers of *Desi Girl* acknowledge, first and foremost, their core or “target viewers” who live in the small towns and have “conservative values” and “very traditional mindsets” (in the words of Sharma, personal interview, 2010). But at the same time the values and mindsets upheld through dramatic narratives respond to the curiosity of city viewers (more accustomed to urban lifestyles, including working women or women wearing westernized clothing) about how the “other” India lives.

To clarify though, material pursuits or power are not dismissed as irrelevant or unimportant on *Desi Girl*. Rather, in showing how celebrities accustomed to materially privileged lives adjust to “real” rural lives “sans material comfort” (as pre-broadcast promotions suggested) there is an implicit and strategic suggestion of commodity consumption as “rewards” (of one’s labor and/or enterprise) that signifies social mobility and progress. Consumer (and luxury) goods are often introduced into the village life and upheld as aspirations. Prizes for winning contests on the show (in weekly episodes) are material luxuries. For example, if a celebrity wins a task-test she gets a night’s escape from the village home to a fancy city hotel where she may sleep in an air-conditioned room; or, a dinner at a posh restaurant in the city and a right to invite fellow (and preferred) contestants to her dinner, while leaving others behind in the village; and so on. Similarly, rewards for villagers participating in various activities on the show also celebrate urban consumer choices, initiating villagers into new consumer habits and related cultural competencies – farmers help in a game of tug of war and win trendy sunglasses; village women dress up as brides and the best looking wins a “full range” of cosmetics; young men dance to Bollywood songs to win motorbikes, and so on.

Each commodity incorporated into the reality TV show, by way of contests and rewards, provides an opportunity for embedded advertising for primary and secondary sponsors (apart from the airtime sold for advertising in each hour of each episode). Producers therefore have an incentive (and are often pushed by the sales team) to include narratives surrounding specific commodities. Consumerist lifestyles associated with urban middle class lives are thus made available as desirable, valuable and aspirational – without addressing the questions of material inequity that distinguish rural and urban

India or the class differences therein. On one hand, *Desi Girl* features the frustration of celebrity contestants learning to live without cell phones, air-conditioned rooms or refrigerator-chilled water (that are projected as common features of urban life). On the other hand, contestants are also awarded money, motorbikes and material goods as rewards for winning contests. In one instance, there is celebration of consumption (that comes with being a “winner” in the contests) and modern urban consumption defined lifestyles are projected as achievements - of having become “somebody” – and the full personhood that only capital bearing individuals may stake claim to. In another instance, the village/desi life without the material markers is affirmed as the eternal, pure past (posing material consumption and urban modernity as the future).

This fine balance between an emotional core and materially marked progress is epitomized in the production choice of an adequately evocative desi village. India offers different rural environments, with varying levels of economic development; material conditions; cultural norms; languages; symbolic and aesthetic associations and so on. Village life in that sense is drastically different from one region to another – charting very different realities from Kashmir to Kerala, Bengal to Rajasthan, Manipur to Maharashtra and so on. How, then, did producers of *Desi Girl* determine which village to showcase? Producers cited both aesthetic and logistical deliberations. To begin with, a production team arriving at a village with tons of electrical equipments need electricity. The vast majority of villages in India do not have electricity (let alone reliable 24 hour connections). Production teams traveling with heavy equipments also require easy and motor access, in other words, a village that is connected to roadways. Such basic infra-structural requirements eliminate large sections of rural India that are economically

underdeveloped (without highway access or electricity and so on). But alongside logistics there are creative and aesthetic considerations. Poverty, underdevelopment and stark differences between urban hubs and rural India may be a reality but do not fit the “look and feel” of reality on reality TV. Bhavya Sharma, the creative director of *Desi Girl* explains it as follows:

“...(television) it’s my daily dose of entertainment...I don’t want to see problems. I face problems every day. So if the same kind of show (pause) - if you say let’s do in Jharkhand. *Where is Jharkhand, man?! I’ll ask that question first. Why? Kya hai kya vahan pae? What is there? I don’t want to see problems, man.* I want warm and big visuals of music, dance, color...” (personal interview, 2010).

Jharkhand is an eastern state in India, known for its rich natural resources but destitution of vast majority of its people. The state has been at the center of “insurgency movements” (known as Naxal-Maoist mobilization) waged by landless poor and tribal groups protesting against being driven out of forests and agricultural land by national and transnational mining companies eager to cut down the forests and dig out mineral resources; or, counter-insurgency operations by police, widely reported to deploy torture, in-custody rapes and “encounter-killings” (whereby individuals suspected of being associated with insurgency groups are murdered in fabricated encounters with police); illegal paramilitary groups (such as Salwa Judum) organized by mining companies and landowning class to suppress the tribal-poor led insurgency; along with other common issues of poverty, corruption, caste based violence and so on. As Sharma notes, Jharkhand is not only a “problem”, it is a reminder of many of the problems that ails

many of the states (and its villages) in contemporary India – specially, with the penetration of capital (turning forests into mines and extraction sites; agricultural fields into “special economic zones” intended for manufacturing units; dusty neighborhoods into air-conditioned shopping malls; and pushing slums of urban, working poor to the city’s periphery to create gated communities and parking lots behind high walls). Punjab, a northwestern state known for the agro-businesses, industrial development and economic prosperity offers a sharp contrast to Jharkhand and supplies the “big visuals of music, dance, color” that Sharma, as a creative director, considers necessary to portray the reality of desi, village life:

“It gives a nice colorful backdrop – it’s a nice warm place. *The moment I say Punjab: oh-ho, maza a jayega! (Lets have fun!)...Big-big glasses of Lassi; everything is larger than life there.* Whether it’s the people, tall: 6ft plus...” (personal interview, 2010).

Sharma waves his hands around to gesture the grandness of Punjabi culture, and asks me, rhetorically:

“oh (f***), the Scotch! Patiala peg, where does it come from?”

The “Patiala peg” refers to a large measure of liquor associated with Patiala city in Punjab and is commonly associated with the cultural penchant for whiskey in Punjab. Though alcohol itself cannot be featured on television (as per government regulations on advertising) Sharma uses it as an idiom to emphasize a common understanding of Punjabi culture built around its festive orientations. Happiness is well rated on television, he argues.

Furthermore, Sharma continues:

“...its easy to sell Punjab, you know, because I’m already exposed to that.

Visually if you go to Rajasthan, OK, you know what you will get there.

Same with Punjab. But *you know Punjab instantly*, right? The amount of Punjabi you have heard, have you heard that much Rajasthani or Maithili or Jharkhandi? Bhojpuri?”

Again, the rhetorical question (“you know Punjab *instantly*, right?) suggests the core principle that guides creative choices: commercial viability of the communicative exchange. That which is already familiar (such as the green fields of Punjab villages) may be harnessed more easily (than imagery of Jharkhand) to invoke a sense of affinity necessary in articulations of *desh* or homeland. In other words, the “look and feel” that has already been circulated in the market is reiterated; reaffirming the value of the existing cultural capital while relegating all other realities out of sight and into silence. The music used on *Desi Girl* also refers to the same logic as it borrows, almost entirely, from blockbuster Hindi film songs already entrenched in popular imagination. Kejriwal, supervising executive for *Desi Girl*, argues as follows:

“I could create my own music, you know, or use rural folk songs from Punjab but I don’t because Hindi films songs are known all over – from M.P to U.P to Punjab.” (personal interview, 2010).

Recording original music can be accommodated in the budget but it is not considered necessary. Rather, recording original music becomes counter-intuitive when creative instincts must abide by commercial logics. The Hindi film songs (rather than village folk songs) and the visuals of green and yellow verdant mustard fields of Punjab popularized on Hindi films are therefore reproduced as the common perception of warm-hearted,

colorful, village life for nightly entertainment. If one looks *inside* a Punjab village today one may in fact find immigrant farm laborers from Jharkhand working the Punjab fields. But the creative-commercial production rationalities (what is easier to sell, what is already familiar, etcetera) reproduce the historical-material realities (that make Punjab a more prosperous state than Jharkhand) on the cultural space, as already familiar village scenes from Punjab are regurgitated all over again to represent “village life” in India. What constitutes the “village life” sans “material comforts” as advertised on the show’s promotion therefore operates within the limits of a consumer friendly village – a village that is economically comparable to the urban materiality (with its big tractors, brick and mortar houses, marble floors and big courtyards) rather than the countless villages in other parts of the country that register below the poverty level and are more associated with farmer suicides, starvation and infant mortality rates below Sub-Saharan Africa. This market motivated and market validating erasure of “problem” villages repeats a pattern not only set by Hindi commercial films but also on news (television or print), where multiple farmer suicides (a problem) gets less coverage than fashion shows (a celebratory event)⁷⁶. But the importance of such erasure on entertainment television is more poignant, I argue, because the limiting of the every day imaginative space (rather than representative space) negates the possibility of envisioning difference. Jharkhand too, it must be noted, has rich reserves of “music, dance, color” but its socio-economic realities and relatively lack of consumption capacity renders its culture not only valueless but also alien - unrecognizable as part of what constitutes the *desi*.

⁷⁶ <http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/columns/sainath/article995828.ece?homepage=true>

Competing Realities: Tasks, Tests and Point of View (POV)

“Na-na-na...this is looking *very depressing*. ... You’re looking at it as a task. This is just *ghatna* (incident). Esme na *zero POV hai* (there is zero POV in this).” (ShK, 2010)

Filming for *Desi Girl* was completed on a continuous schedule on-location at the village of Sialba Majri, outside Chandigarh, in Punjab. Later the hours of footage were brought back to Mumbai to be edited according to episodes. Critical production choices – which stories to tell, which contestants to focus on, how to create dramatic tension and interest in the narratives, and so on – were thus made for the most part (as it usually is) in the editing rooms (rather than on-location, during filming). I joined the production team for embedded observations during this editing phase, in the cramped editing suites in urban Mumbai, far from the open fields of Punjab villages. The editing studio was located in a high rise building in Andheri, the hub of televisions studios in Mumbai and could be reached only through the slow drag of an old, cranky, wrought iron elevator. I regularly found myself trapped inside the elevator, pulling and pushing its unyielding and rusty gates; unable to maneuver the precise twist-and-pull it required to open effortlessly. A man, dressed in a guard’s uniform, would help me (and many other newcomers or slow learners like me). He sat, literally and metaphorically, as a mediator of sorts, in-between worlds that are indispensable to each other, yet incommensurable: positioned as he was between the clattering old elevator and the ultra modern editing suites filled with latest technologies; between the iron gates that always got stuck on the hinges and the smooth, swinging glass doors of the studio; between the tattered notebook he maintained,

registering manually the entry and exit of guests to the editing studio, and the electronic ID scanner at the glass doors of the editing suites.

Rakesh, the security guard, became friendly with familiarity. He told me he worked on contract with a security agency and though he found the low pay and long hours of sitting in between doors in the sweltering heat and humidity rather difficult, he was thankful for the job. “Guzara ho jata hai” he said. The job helped pay the bills. A migrant from Bihar (state neighboring Jharkhand) who had come to metropolitan Mumbai in search of a livelihood, he still could not afford to have his family join him in Mumbai and felt anxious because the contract with the agency could also be revoked anytime to leave him jobless. But sitting on guard on a floor in a high-rise building was better than many other jobs he would find, if lucky, in the grinding world of the city below.

When I chatted with Rakesh, we often stood on a narrow balcony behind the elevators, sprouting off the stairway, where others from the editing studio also congregated for frequent chai and cigarette breaks. The sky-scraping balcony offered an aerial view of the neighborhood plots. The editing studio was located next to a waste dumping ground, where children played hide-and-seek amidst the trash. But next to the open land heaped with garbage was a lustrous garden and pristine blue waters of a hotel swimming pool. A high brick wall separated the two. Lingered tourists and attentive waiters loitered around the hotel pool. The poolside music mingled with the din from the *chawl*⁷⁷ teeming with families, that stood on the other side of the studio building. A golf course was being built behind it. In the colliding worlds that often define Mumbai’s

⁷⁷ It is a form of housing common to Mumbai where many immigrant families and urban poor live. It comprises of rows of one-room apartments and the residents of the apartments or the families share bathrooms.

cityscape – and much of India’s social and cultural terrain – it seemed difficult to tell if the affluent were reshaping the scenery or the working poor were reclaiming it.

Inside the editing studio, deliberations on making *Desi Girl* was also about competing realities. Life in the village in *Desi Girl* is ordered on competition, as it is on other reality TV shows. Each week participants are given a “task” intended to “test” their ability to adjust to rural life. In performing the task (whether it is cleaning the courtyard or making a haystack) they compete against each other (individually or in pairs). If they “win” then they earn a spot in the “safe zone”, which protects them from being voted out of the show by fellow contestants. “Losing” on the other hand places them in the “danger zone” and open to the possibility of being voted for elimination by rivals. The two (sometimes three) contestants who receive the least number of votes face the *Panchayat* (committee of village elders); plead their case to be allowed to stay back in the village; but must abide by the decision of the *Panchayat* who ultimately select one contestant for expulsion from the village and the show. After each week’s “task” and amidst much trial and tribulation the contestants and the villagers gather at a brightly decorated village courtyard where the elimination results are announced. Drums beat and music throbs in the background as a lone contestant walks away – defeated, evicted and forlorn - while the huddled village community looks on and moves on to next week’s contest and elimination. The sense of growing emotional bonding amongst the contestants and the villagers is thus punctuated and refracted by the competition. The quest for the title prize – which *one and only one* may win – comes through hard-fought contest; and the tantalizing goal of money, fame and title of being *the* “Village Girl” can be reached only

through a rite of passage marked by competitive ambition, rivalries, hard work, struggle and determination.

The incorporation of mundane domestic chores as a series of tests is a *functional* feature common in reality TV. Technically, each task-posed-as-test provides a theme and a setting for each episode; and “engines” the show by eliminating unsuccessful contestants (Keane and Moran, 2008). But the tasks also serve, I argue, a crucial *qualitative purpose* necessary to the competitive context of the show. The nature of the tasks changes as the show progresses. The show begins with more “earthy” and “unglamorous” tasks (“ghar ka kaam” or house-work) intended to emphasize the rural ways of life and yet, slowly but surely, the tasks move to more exciting and fun-filled missions. For example, initial episodes feature the urbane celebrity women haplessly trying to catch chickens, learning to make cow-dung cakes (used in villages for fuel), sweeping courtyards or making tea on the slow burn of a village *chulah* (mud oven) and so on. They are shown fretting over their ruined manicured fingernails, the dusty hair that needs to be shampooed again or the smell of cow dung clinging on their clothes. But later episodes require them to dress up in fashionable (and western) sportswear (abandoning the chaste *salwar kameez* that they are required to wear while at home in the village) and learn wrestling moves from bodybuilders in an *akhara* (village gymnasium), which creates “cute” and “awkward” moments of sexually suggestive interaction between the men and women. Or, the women contestants are sent to “hunt” (“pakarh”) young men from the village and invite them to the field for a game of tug-of-war; compete to dress the young women in bridal wear; set up colorful karaoke stalls at a village fair; and so on. They are shown anxious but giggling and enjoying the tasks that test their ability to retain

their spot in the competition. In other words, the *nature of the tasks* is an important creative factor in managing the “overall mood and feel” of the show because reality on reality TV tends to weigh “negative” with the anxieties produced in the due course of competition. The gradually evolving nature of the tasks/tests provide a transformative journey to viewers, elevating competition to a glamorous scale and holding out a tantalizing promise of a grand, potential end – if one struggles and survives through the different chores, tasks and tests. As one producer encapsulates:

“It (the “mood” for the episode) should be celebratory, you know. ... You have to show the *bigness of the whole thing, the bigness of things*. Otherwise the competition - (pause) it gets negative, you know...”
(personal interview, 2010).

Moreover, structuring the show in terms of tasks-tests also enable producers to create different “point-of-view” (POV) – parsing the competitive contexts in terms of a contestant’s acuity and ability. Reality, as a result, is rendered unconditional, only subject to an individual’s perception and performance. Consider the following instance.

Following a tentative script (developed pre-filming) associate producers (APs) responsible for specific episodes of the show assemble an initial “rough cut”. Thereafter, the episode is revised and reedited for review by senior executives of Imagine TV, the broadcaster, who have the “final call” on what goes on air and what does not. The post-production/editing schedule for *Desi Girl* operated on a 24-hour cycle. Editing slots rotated and APs came in or left, like on a factory floor; leaving or resuming their positions in the editing booths. On one such day I was chatting with one of the APs when her cell phone started buzzing. Within seconds the news made its way around the studio:

ShK, the Executive Vice President (EVP) of Content for Imagine TV, was on her way to review some of the episodes. The editing studio was located a short drive from the corporate office of the network and as ShK stepped out of the office her assistants called to make sure the episode tapes were ready for reviewing. In an instant, APs were rushing to set things up in the editing studio.

“A bit like *Devil Wears Prada*, isn’t it? But she’s cool. You should definitely watch her at the edit and talk with her”, an AP walked by with advice for me. Cultural references from Hollywood films collided and colluded with Punjabi village accents blaring from the speakers in the editing booths. The talk of urbane APs, discussing newest models of cell phones and video games, was drowned by popular Hindi film songs used on the show and that were being cued for screening the episodes:

<i>“This is the future man!</i>	<i>“This is the future man!</i>
<i>...Pappu ki gaadi tez hai</i>	<i>Pappu’s car is fast;</i>
<i>Pappu kudiyon mein craze hai</i>	<i>Pappu is famous amongst the girls;</i>
<i>Pappu ki aankhein light blue</i>	<i>Pappu has light blue eyes;</i>
<i>Pappu dikhta angrez hai</i>	<i>Pappu looks like a white man;</i>
<i>...Rado ki ghadi haathon mein</i>	<i>a Rado watch on the wrist;</i>
<i>Perfume Gucci wala</i>	<i>the perfume is Gucci;</i>
<i>... But Pappu can't dance saala⁷⁸</i>	<i>But Pappu can’t dance, damn;</i>
<i>Haan, Pappu naach nai sakta...</i>	<i>Yes, Pappu just can’t dance, man.”</i>

The network executive, ShK, it turned out despite the warnings, was neither devilish nor did she wear Prada. Instead she agreed to accommodate me (very

⁷⁸ in Hindi refers to brother-in-law but often used as a derogatory slang

graciously),⁷⁹ in the small editing booth as she began reviewing (episode 17). I sat huddled on a platform of sorts in between ShK on a chair and a network AP, who stood pressed against the wall on the other side. The creative director (from BBC, India) sat on the other chair and the BBC AP in charge of editing the episode sat on the floor with his laptop, ready to take note of ShK's comments.

In episode 17 the contestants are given a new “task”. Each celebrity contestant is paired with a young man from the village. They are then sent shopping to the nearby city (Chandigarh). The female (celebrity) contestants are tested on their ability to “make over” the male partners – by buying trendy clothes for them, taking them to get hair styled and so on. The challenge is to transform the self-conscious and casually dressed village men into hip, urbane and confident looking men. Then the celebrity contestants are required to “train” their partners to dance to a popular Hindi film song (assigned to them), which they have to perform as a couple in front of the entire village. Their performance is competitively assessed (by a celebrity choreographer from Hindi film industry). Both members of the winning couple are rewarded: the female contestant will be placed in the “safe zone” and cannot be voted for elimination by other contestants while the village man will win a top brand motorbike. For the “losers” there is drama, anxiety and uncertainty – the men return empty handed except for the thrill of having spent a day with an attractive, celebrity woman and acquired new pairs of jeans, T-Shirts and haircuts and so on; while the women contestants scheme against each other to save themselves from being eliminated from the show.

⁷⁹ Though I had prior permission from another senior executive of the network and had been in touch with the APs to arrange my presence as an observer during editing sessions, I had also realized that in the chaotic world of television production in India it is easy to be shut out of the editing studio at given moments/days if the person in charge at that time did not want me to sit-in as an observer.

In the editing room, as the screening begins, ShK quickly interrupts the screening.

“Na-na-na. You know, suddenly this is looking *very depressing*. Overall

the feel is (pause) *very negative*. *It should be celebratory...*”

As the editor lowers the volume (letting the tapes continue) ShK argues that the episode in its current form is “too crude” and requires “detailed work”, which, in other words, calls for creative deliberation and mediations (in editing). She tells the AP:

“You’re looking at it as a task. This is just *ghatna* (incident). Esme na *zero POV hai* (there is zero Point-Of-View or POV in this).”

Technically, POV shots direct the viewer’s gaze, provide a subjective understanding of a scene/event from the perspective of a particular character and thereby denotes the point of access the viewer has to the unfolding scene. POVs are therefore a handy way of limiting the viewer’s understanding and interpretation of the experiences/events unfolding in the scene to *a partial and specified* position. Without POV a scene is simply *ghatna* or series of events. “It can’t be reportage, you see. In reality TV you have to make the reality entertaining. How do you do that? You give the reactions, the-the point of views; how each is handling the situation.” ShK explained to me (later). This strategy of contrasting individualized responses to the same situation (via POV) is however not only about making reality engaging to entertainment television viewers but also, importantly, about making a “very depressing” and “very negative” depiction of events into a “big” and “celebratory” one.

The tentative script that the AP followed (a bit too much to the word, according to ShK) inadvertently and inevitably exposes the anxieties inherent in the competitive

reality of the show. The script in a reality TV show delineates the “triggers”⁸⁰, the tasks and the tests that structure the show, listing the actions and leaving the re-actions as anticipated. The “work” of editing is to fashion what emerges during filming – action *and* re-action – into a (newly scripted) depiction of “reality” as it unfolded in front of cameras. In relying on the tentative script, the AP had however exposed *exactly* what unfolded in front of cameras (making it “reportage”), in sequence and without much creative crafting. As a result, the “mood” in the episode appears to turn sour very quickly: the men appear ill at ease; the women grow increasingly anxious and jittery about the possibility of losing and being evicted from the show. Though the “task” was initially perceived as a fun escapade from the drudgery of daily, dusty village life into the air-conditioned shopping malls in the city, followed by the festive performances on a gala stage, when the task becomes a test there is a stress in the air that dampens the mood. Shopping turns into a chore and has to be rushed through, while calculating time and money. Time has to be saved for dance rehearsals and purchases must fit the limited budget. When the couples come back to the village and begin rehearsals, the celebrity contestants realize the difficulty of transforming the coarse village men into more sophisticated, urbane avatars in the short span of time given to them. The men themselves appear dispirited, confused and unsure of how to act with the women. They find it difficult to make the synoptic leap, from their everyday village life where being in close physical contact with a single women is taboo to finding the flair to move in sexually provocative dance steps following the Hindi film songs. Also, as competition jangles nerves, the celebrity contestants grow increasingly unmindful of friendships, loyalties,

⁸⁰ as discussed in the previous chapter with reference to *Idol*

sentiments or morality in their quest to survive and win. The AP had simply scooped up all of this as he put together the shots and sequences in the initial edit.

ShK's suggestion to use POV on the other hand emphasizes individual contestants and is intended to draw attention to their attitudes and outlooks. Competition should be reframed, she instructs, in terms of the personal qualities of individual contestants and the interpersonal relationships:

“...start with the rehearsals as fun first, then show the contrast, OK?

Somewhere Ishita (referring to a contestant) goes off to cool after the rehearsals but the competition is getting to her; that she is forgetting everything else, OK? *Usko jeet ka junoon itna hai ki (she is so focused on winning)* that she doesn't even know what the girls are thinking about her. Then go back to high octave rehearsals of Ishita practicing while the girls are talking. Cut to the girls gossiping. Then show Ishita practicing, then cut to Kashmera (another contestant) talking about Ishita not being so bad after all, that she's a tough competitor.... Structure it in this manner that Ishita's change in character and preoccupation with competition is depicted from the three girls POV.”

The initial edit (by the AP) focuses on Ishita, one of the celebrity contestants who grows increasingly anxious about losing the competition. She lashes out at her fumbling partner as he struggles but fails to learn the dance steps. His discomfort stems from his gendered position (a village man finding it difficult to be publicly physical with his female dance partner) while Ishita displays a class privilege of a suave urban woman who is not only comfortable in the company of men but often in command (screaming at him

in anger for repeated mis-steps). But in re-editing the episode, the focus is shifted away from Ishita. As she gets more and more jittery, her emotional unraveling under the pressure of competition is reduced in terms of airtime but included as a (“negative”) counterpoint to more “positive” ways of handling competition. Ishita’s “meltdown” is contrasted with Aushima’s (another contestant’s) more self-controlled reaction to the same stress (following ShK’s advice to use POV). While Ishita screams at her partner, Aushima is seen pleading breathlessly (though just as desperately) to her partner, during the dance rehearsals:

“Don’t look nervous. If you look nervous, I’ll get nervous and then I’ll look nervous and you’ll get more nervous. *Whatever we do in our dance, we shouldn’t look nervous, please!*”

Aushima offers a character-foil to Ishita and a contrast is set: angry, frustrated outbursts versus gentle, even if distressed and comical, cajoling. As per ShK’s direction, POV shots and self-reflective monologues position each contestant and their strategies for “training” their partners “positively” or “negatively”. While both Ishita and Aushima are shown to display different competencies of reacting to competitive anxiety (placing the onus of winning or losing on their individual capacities) both however strive to the same end. In editing the sequence, producers end with both Ishita and Aushima praying for the same. While Aushima reinforces the hope that her partner (who is not a good dancer) will not “look too nervous” on stage, Ishita also hopes for the same, telling viewers (on a mid-shot) that perhaps there will be a miracle and “self-confidence” will somehow shine through on her partner’s demeanor. She hopes that he, who is ironically (though not unusually for a Punjabi) named Happy, will not look unhappy:

“Happy ka happy rehna bahut zaroori hai”

That is, in Hindi: *It’s very important that Happy stays happy.*

Further, by showing “girls gossiping” (again with POV shots) the narrative offers multiple points of entry and interpretation - some view Ishita as self-involved and single-minded in her ambition (a negative value) while others regard her obsession to win as a do-or-die spirit of a determined competitor (a positive value). Emotional and moral variance is created for the viewer, allowing identification and alignment with whichever POV and/or character seems more reasonable at any given moment. Ishita’s emotional explosion is not measured against the competition that reduces her experiences to “survival of the fittest” or relegates the weak to perish. Rather, the use of POV in the narrative renders the competitive set up invisible and instead foregrounds it as a material for gossip and fun – without changing content of “reality” as it had “really” unfolded in front of camera, in spontaneous moments. Though competition pervades all the conversations and events yet the dim reality of training for the contest is mitigated by the interpersonal tittle-tattle - the gossips on rivalries, jealousies, factionalism and emotional injuries the contestants cause each other. The “feel” (negative or positive) is managed by pitting one individual’s reaction against another. “Negativity” is rendered as an individual failing with the use of POV and selectively crosscutting between the different contestants chitchatting amongst themselves. Ouellette and Hay (2008, p16) suggest, correctly I think, that the tasks that structure reality TV shows are “mini tests” in “civic laboratories” intended to reveal and filter the desirable and undesirable qualities separating the “winners” from the “losers”. Examining the making of the texts however reveals how the personalized qualities cannot be assumed and abstracted, as inherent to the reality TV

texts; they are, instead, subject to the commercial-creative motivations of rendering “reality” entertaining and point to larger industrial logics at work, in and through the texts and numerous moments of contention and creative deliberations.

Casting Celebrities, Producing Contestants

“...pucca TRP moment hai yeh” (“this is a pure TRP⁸¹ moment”) (Priya Bhawe, television executive, 2010)

While *Desi Girl* is premised on the idea of watching affluent celebrities struggling with rural life, many other reality TV shows in India also rely on celebrities as contestants (rather than ordinary viewers). Producers often categorize “celebrity-reality TV” as a particular “type”⁸². From a production perspective, the reliance on celebrities highlight, first and foremost, the significance of casting in reality TV shows. Celebrities lend a “gawk-worthy” (Parigi, 2010) quality, tagging the reality TV show to already famous (or infamous) faces that stir viewer curiosity and help promote it. Producers also have ready “storylines” to work with, based on the particular biographies of the celebrities. A television executive explained the strategy as follows:

“Its about casting interesting people and we have coined a phrase for it, we call them “newsmaker”...so you cast people who have been in the press for right reasons or wrong reasons because you know there is a lot of PR riding on them already. The second season of *Big Brother* (format)-*Big Boss* (Indian adaptation) had one of the best casting. It had a Rahul

⁸¹ TRP refers to Television Ratings Point, or viewer measurement matrix

⁸² similar to in-door/studio-reality TV formats, such as *Big Brother* format, or out-door-reality TV formats, such as *Fear Factor* and many other classifications that circulate in the industry

Mahajan⁸³. ...If I get a man next door (that is, an ordinary viewer as a contestant) then how do I promote him? There is no PR on him. No one wants to know. He may be a wife beater for all I know (referring to what might make him sensational) but the thing is there is no PR on him. I would have to work that much harder to get a story on him. ...(but) no matter what Rahul Mahajan does – he picks a fight, he overdoses on coke, he flirts with Monica⁸⁴, he gets married. There's news around him. He maybe a jerk but he's a news magnet.” (Parigi, personal interview, 2010)

This search for existing or possible PR (that is, public relations) applies to casting ordinary viewers on other reality TV shows as well. Producers look to create, as the previous chapter on *Indian Idol* suggests, striking stories of rags-to-riches or hero-to-zero biographies or infamous to famous redemption narratives that help market the show and connect with viewers. While each show has different requirements (calling for celebrities or ordinary viewers) the underlying logic of casting is same.

Furthermore, in casting celebrities, producers also invite viewers to witness an unraveling – to watch the stripping away of the carefully crafted “image” that celebrities maintain in public and see their “real” selves, sometimes literally, that is, revealing what glamorous celebrities look without make-up but more crucially, exposing the emotional vulnerabilities (fear, anger, disappointment, hope, joy etcetera) that make celebrities *just*

⁸³ Rahul Mahajan is the son of Pramod Mahanjan, a prominent politician of the BJP – a party known for its rightist, conservative and Hindu identity politics. Pramod Mahajan was however killed in a scandalous and controversial manner (murdered by his younger brother) that cast the family in news. Rahul, his son, was soon thereafter involved in a series of scandals himself (drug overdose, charges of domestic violence and eventual divorce, etcetera).

⁸⁴ Monica Bedi started her career as a film actor but gained notoriety (and became more of a celebrity) after being arrested for forgery and fake passport (for which she also served a brief jail-term) and for being romantically involved with Abu Salem, an underworld mafia kingpin and smuggler. Both Rahul Mahajan and Monica Bedi were cast on *Big Boss* (*Big Brother* format) and were shown as flirting with each other.

like anybody else as they fight to win the prize monies offered on the reality TV show. Celebrity contestants, like ordinary participants, play themselves – performing to self-branding strategies that may help them win. If shows such as *Idol* document the journey of ordinary viewers struggling to become celebrities, then the celebrity-based reality TV mirror the process in reverse, by showing how celebrities too are – in “reality” - ordinary subjects. In *Desi Girl*, for instance, the celebrity women are often seen without make-up in domestic settings marking their un-made-up, “real” selves. At the same time, the tasks that test their assimilation into the village life may highlight their ability to *put on* make-up - invoking their professional-celebrity identities – as, for example, they may be seen helping young village women with make-up tips or advising young village men on fashion trends of celebrities. In addition, celebrity contestants are paired with ordinary villagers in teams for specific tests and can be seen as hapless or happy, as any ordinary individual might be, in the face of defeat or victory. As a result, reality TV shows create a broad space of aspirations and self-enactment in pursuit of the end-prize, whether the casting involves a an ordinary viewer or a celebrity participant.

For instance, Kashmera (one of the celebrity contestants on *Desi Girl*) is rebuked by her foster (host) mother (at the village home) for not knowing how to make tea. In an emotional conversation that follows, Kashmera explains to the village woman how she was “forced” to go out and earn a living when her father expired and since she became a “working woman” she did not have time to learn domestic chores. Kashmera’s inability to make tea is thus no longer an attribute of her privileged celebrity lifestyle but a marker of her personal grit in the face of adversity – having chosen to do whatever necessary (in this case, become a “*kaam karnewali aurat*” or working woman) to support her family

and be successful. Her celebrity status is humanized and normalized – made recognizable, accessible – while making her deficiencies as an every day woman (who should know her way around a kitchen) undercut and overridden by her *individual* determination (*junoon*) to protect her family from financial ruin. A larger legitimacy is created for her ambitions, attitudes and attributes within a narrative of enterprise, ambition and fortitude that opens up progressive possibilities for women to enter public spaces and pursue their own ambitions – *in the name of their families*. But it is also important to note that such liberal pathways simultaneously close any option to question, rebel or offer radical alternatives to the dominant paradigms and gendered (or class) based constructions of the self. Kashmera's decision to pursue her career is justified precisely because it was done to serve and save her family. The pursuit of self is thus not a contradiction or challenge to values that place the family over the self; but a re-articulation of such values through the unitary self, individual ambitions and personal grit.

It must be noted though that celebrities do not appear on reality TV show in India only as contestants; they also participate frequently as judges, hosts and/or guests. On *Idol*, for instance, film stars make regular appearances as guests, which serves a mutually beneficial marketing strategy – the reality TV show capitalizes on the film star's fame and fan-following while the film stars promote their upcoming film/theatrical releases on television. As guests, film stars validate the aspirations of the ordinary participants by recalling their own struggles to acquire fame and fortune. On one hand celebrities are thus rendered more familiar to ordinary viewers and on the other hand, the ordinary contestants are granted preemptive celebrity status – a sense of being a celebrity by

association. When “famous” choreographers from Mumbai land at a village in Punjab to teach dance steps to villagers the show is elevated to a celebratory “bigness of things”. Similarly when a famous film star dances with an ordinary aspirant on *Idol* (as for example when Ranbir Kapoor, a Hindi film star and national heartthrob, dances with Bhoomi, a young female contestant from small town Baroda, in *Idol 5*) producers create “*pucca* TRP moments” (Bhave, personal interview, 2010). TRP refers to Television Ratings Point, which measures the popularity of a channel amongst viewers; and the “*sure-shot* TRP moment” is producer’s slang for spectacular, eye-catching moments that captivate viewers. The appeal is not only in watching a star appear on television but the sense of possibility invoked through the ordinary contestant’s *interaction* with the celebrity. What sells the shows are not the stars themselves, no matter how popularly placed they may be in the celebrity totem pole. Producers do not focus on the celebrity’s fleeting presence on the show; the emphasis is not on the person who is already the star but the person who is in the process of becoming so. When ordinary villagers interact with Mumbai based celebrities or young aspirants dance on the *Idol* stage with film stars, the interpersonal interaction reduces the distance between the two worlds of celebrity life and mundane reality; and makes it seem possible that ordinary lives can be transformed into extraordinary ones, on reality TV. There is little thematic difference, therefore, between a celebrity and non-celebrity/ordinary participant based show.

The production strategy to cast celebrities also highlight another phenomenon at work: how reality TV shows serve the branding interests of the network as a whole. Networks often cast soap opera actors (who are minor celebrities compared to film stars) to appear as reality TV contestants. The benefit of casting soap opera actors is that it

makes the actor a popular face, granting a heightened sense of celebrity-ness that helps draw attention and promote the soap opera he/she stars in. Soap operas are the main feature on program schedules, appearing all week nights on prime time. The reality TV show – which is a highly advertised weekend bonanza, offered as a wholesome family entertainment fare - in that sense becomes a marketing tool for the soap operas and the network as a whole. On the other hand, re-casting contestants famous for their participation in other reality TV shows (that have appeared on the networks in previous seasons/years) allow networks to capitalize on an existing labor pool. *Idol* for instance often casts its winners from previous seasons as hosts, guests and judges in proceeding seasons. The effort of promoting a contestant for a particular show is thus not lost but recovered by using the (already famous) contestant in other shows; advancing a returns-on-investment strategy that dictates casting decisions on reality TV. A new industrial tactic of labor recirculation is created that signals a “systematic reconfiguration” of ordinary people and celebrities into “durable forms of talent” (Curnutt, 2011, p1062) that has been noted already in the United States. Text specific production choices cannot be considered as discrete and formal, in that sense; rather as units of structural and industrial conditions that illustrate how commercial imperatives increasingly determine creative choices.

Conclusion

“They (local producers) don’t need that much oversight nowadays. Earlier there was a lot of confusion; you had to be careful that the core concept was not, you know, messed up... But now they get it.” (Anonymous global executive, 2010)

Unlike *Celebrity Sleepover* in which celebrities stay with host families as passing guests, in *Desi Girl* the celebrities live as family-members in the homes of the village host families. Though *Desi Girl* is adapted from *Celebrity Sleepover* this element is borrowed from another format show called *The Simple Life*, in which U.S. viewers saw celebrities (Paris Hilton and Nicole Richie) clean farms, mop floors and wait tables at restaurants as they spent a day living the “ordinary” life. In *Desi Girl*, living as a family member who is held responsible for household chores lends mundane-realistic associations but also emotionally charged-dramatic moments as the celebrity women perform daily chores, sweat, get exhausted and find themselves pushed to the margins of their comfort levels while they compete to become the best village girl.

Desi Girl in that sense is not a high fidelity format adaptation; rather it bends the rules and takes creative liberties by mixing elements from different formats/shows to recreate a show that local producers consider best suitable to Indian television viewers. This is an increasingly common practice and reflects what global television executives’ call increasing “maturity” of local television producers. If initially (in early 2000) format owners maintained a closer eye on the format adaptation process, in subsequent years, with more and more formats being reproduced, local producers have exhibited an increasing awareness of the core elements of a format that must be maintained to retain its global branding while tweaking other aspects to cater to local cultural needs.

“They (local producers) don’t need that much oversight nowadays. Earlier there was a lot of confusion; you had to be careful that the core concept was not, you know, messed up; they will want to do all sorts of stuff and we would have to say no-no-no because you can’t compromise on the

(format) branding. But now they get it. They know what's important and what's not; what you can't change..." (Anonymous global executive, personal interview, 2009).

As producers in India are professionally attuned to understand and intuitively respond to "what's important and what's not" in the "core concept" of a format, specific format details (whether from *Simple Life* or other shows) can then be selectively incorporated and creatively distilled for local cultural purposes. For example, in "building up the mood" of a gala performance on a village stage on *Desi Girl*, producers decided to use "the *Idol* style". The phrase "*Idol* style" has become common as a reference to time-lapse video that *Idol* uses to show how fervent crowds quickly fill the audition sites, accentuating a sense of enthusiasm and urgency around the show. In borrowing the time-lapse video style, producers of *Desi Girl* hope to highlight a similar sense of eager anticipation in the village for the dance performances. One format thus sets the stylistic norms that are replicated by others, affirming its strategy and normalizing it as a production choice. In the process, an ideational framework also gets interpolated as commonsense – positing the individual performer, alone on the stage, as the enterprising actor who stands distinguished from the nameless crowd on the merit of his or her ambition and determination, while the crowds gathering (quickly, in time lapse) below the stage validate the emerging star.

This chapter advances three major arguments. One, that whether a reality TV show engages ordinary viewers or celebrities, the ideational framework built around notions of competition, individual enterprise, self-responsibility and self-management remains unaltered. The central themes identified in reality TV shows such as

Millionaire/KBC or *Indian Idol* is thus found repeated and reiterated on *Desi Girl*.

Second, the central “idea” of rural-urban divide that the show upholds to appeal to the values and curiosity of viewers is also appropriated within the thematic constructions.

And third, as more and more reality TV formats are introduced into the Indian market a particular set of production strategies and creative gestures are normalized on the cultural space, reflecting what television producers call “maturity” and we might think as a new cultural discipline – familiarizing and remodeling cultural spaces across the world with the same set of formatted ideas and practices.

CHAPTER NINE

CONCLUSION: THE COLLIDING AND COLLUDING WORLDS OF CAPITAL, COMMERCE AND CULTURE

In a 2012 convocation address to the Asian College of Journalism, in India, economist Prabhat Patnaik has argued that there is a peculiar correlation between the growth of media industries and its power to shape social, political change in India. The “conundrum” as senior journalist N. Ram notes on the editorial pages of a leading national newspaper (*The Hindu*, October 6, 2012) is that according to “Patnaik’s Law” media is powerful when it is championing the need for deregulatory policies to allow international finance and global capital flows but weak when it shifts its lens on social issues of poverty, inequity and deprivation. This according to Patnaik (and Ram concurs) is because of factors that fall *outside media* – from the inability of nation-states to resist advance of global capitalism to the absence of political groups who can counter the “intellectual hegemony” (Patnaik, cited in Ram, 2012) of global capital. This study offers a different, and more qualified, view of media and its ability to inform social, political and cultural change - illustrating how advocacy for global capital and market forces is fostered not only in direct appeals for economic policy reform and discussed in “hard news cycles” or reflected in the increasing number of stock market reports and lifestyles of the rich and famous, as it is widely attributed to, but also, and more persuasively, through personalized testimonies of individual ambition, struggle and determination, entrepreneurial zeal and ability to win (or not) on the “soft” fuzzy world of reality TV and entertainment television. Instead of arguing that media dismisses “social issues” this

study suggests it is important to look closely at how “social issues” are engaged - the representation regimes, interpretive frames and narratives of reality, participation and possibilities of change that are popularized via reality TV. Such a view may reveal, as this study demonstrates, how moral, intellectual hegemony of global capital acquires cultural consent precisely because it invokes the anxieties and aspirations of socially marginalized actors, offers narratives of individual gumption and grit and the promise of social mobility and exposes the localized, cultural practices and moments of change that render the advance of global capitalism meaningful in everyday understanding and imaginations. And importantly, to do so we need to look *inside* media – examine the changing practices and conditions of cultural production, identify the national-transnational industrial linkages, the flow of material and ideational capital, introduction of globally circulating symbolic-cultural forms such as reality TV format shows and the production imperatives, rationalities and strategies that guide representative-interpretive frames on popular television (rather than look *outside* media, making media incidental to *other* social forces and yet, presumably, an intentional force by itself). This study is an argument in that direction.

The cultural salience of reality TV formats is empirically investigated in this dissertation to understand the commercial and creative logics that prompt the circulation of such symbolic forms, the structure of ideas imported and adapted via global reality TV formats, the grammar of choices and the rules of inclusion and exclusion as producers culturally translate the formats for Indian viewers, the points of cultural connections and contestations and what it tells us about cultural shifts and emergent terms of social imaginations in contemporary India. The study locates reality TV format re-production

practices in the social-historical contexts of change in the television industry in India (chapter five); traces the rationalities and functionalities that make the import of reality TV formats common practice in the industry (chapter six) as the Indian television industry is structurally incorporated within global industrial mechanisms; and thematically categorizes the practices of cultural translation as producers identify the core ideas embedded in the formats and then adapt the ideas into given contexts and culturally specific needs on the Hindi avatars of the format shows (chapter six, seven and eight). Analytically the aim has been to uncover how the structurally integrated industrial logics of a national-transnational television industry are intersected by localized, cultural practices of reality TV producers in, and through, format (re)production, which reveals, as the study illustrates, the power of transnational television and capital forces to produce and popularize specific ideas that favor the cultural logic of the market but also how such ideology reproduction is entangled in and articulated by deeply rooted localized cultural codes. What emerges from this dynamic relationship between transnational television industrial forces and localized cultural practices are complex changes in the Indian cultural codes that signal wider social, political and cultural transformations.

The study draws upon embedded, non-participant production ethnography in the television studios in Mumbai, India (along with interviews with global and domestic format producers, industry reports and secondary data) to explore practices of cultural adaptation of reality TV formats. This empirical focus and analytical tactic of relying on production ethnography to identify the industrial and cultural practices of format adaptation is not merely to supply us with a more rounded understanding of the media chain, from production (and distribution) to consumption of texts (beyond the limits of

textual and rhetorical analysis, as elaborated in chapter one). Rather, one of the core arguments presented in this study is that the television industry (in India or elsewhere) provides us an important site to explore how our social lives are transformed in contemporary global economy. The entry of global capital into the television industry in India, restructuring of production scenarios and introduction of new commercial-creative calculations (exemplified by the import of reality TV formats) that we find remaking the television industry as well as the day-to-day minutia of television production and cultural practices offers us a look at a wider phenomenon, that is, how global capital flows through – *and is refracted by* - localized economies, industries, markets and cultures to reshape social lives.

Political-economic studies have characterized the global capital flow as a feature of advanced capitalism and neo-liberal restructuring across national economies. As David Harvey notes, neo-liberalism operates as a set of “political economic practices” within “...an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade” (Harvey, 2005, p2). Social experiences of such political economic practices and institutional policies have been increasingly noted as the entrenchment of an “enterprise culture” (Heelas and Morris, 1992) and the “unassailable normative acceptance” (Gooptu, 2009, p46) of competition, commoditization and market ethic across all areas and means of social conduct – from the State to the reorganization of labor and workplace culture; from the schools to the family to the individual subjectivity (Heelas and Morris, 1992). In India too the birth and valorization of the “enterprising self” has been critically studied; Nandini Gooptu’s ethnographic study (2009) of the organized retail workers in shopping malls in Kolkata for instance speaks to

the transformations in labor and work that reveals the intrusion of economic policies in our social and political subjectivities as obedient workers and self-willed, self-responsible neo-liberal citizens. Cultural adaptation of reality TV formats, as discussed in this study, in contrast highlights an opportunity to reconsider the power of global capital flows – not as a determining logic that operates with (presumed) motives and affects but as intervening and interacting logics that collide, contend and often collude with competing forces.

The terms of engagement in television production (unlike retail or most other industrial sectors with labor laws, trainings, appraisals, promotions or dismissals) are neither explicitly stated nor strictly followed. Television, after all, is a creative venture replete with improvised gestures. Television formats, for instance, may come with a “production *bible*” but faithful communion is always open to interpretation, improvisation and performative gesticulation. Production of representative-interpretive frames popularized through television thus calls for a closer, grounded inspection of production contexts and practices, revealing as this study lays bare, how infusion of global capital and transnational structural links in the television industry interacts with culturally specific encounters and inclinations.

The contribution of this study, discussed in the following concluding sections, is therefore two-fold. On one hand, the study empirically illustrates how the framework of ideas popularized by reality TV shows signal the deep embedding of neo-liberal, market-based values in everyday life via nightly entertainment television and illustrates the cultural sway of market forces in India. Production ethnography provides instances from the everyday practices of television production to uncover how the social site of

television changes under the influence of global capital and re-signifies the interpretive frameworks popularized via television. On the other hand, empirically grounded analysis of the localized cultural practices, intuitions and understandings that producers use to culturally adapt a (global) reality TV format helps us reconsider the dynamics of capital flows - not as a monolithic phenomenon with homogenizing impulses but as a set of necessary and contingent compromises enacted at different industrial, aesthetic and social-cultural levels and relations of power. Studies have already suggested reality TV's embedding in liberal social thought but the localized work of television-culture producers makes it clear that experiences with neo-liberal narratives can only be understood at specific sites of actions, re-actions and re-articulation. To do so is not to add a "local" case to a "global" phenomenon but to reveal, empirically, how transnational capital flows through different social and cultural sites, and tends to be mediated by different socially-historically defined actors - from the national, trans-national and sub-national - to render a range of macro-structural, institutional and political-economic practices meaningful in everyday cultural lives. The following discussion elaborates on the conceptual usage of *performative encounters* (explained in the theoretical framework in chapter three and highlighted in the empirical chapters in chapter six, seven and eight) that captures this dynamic between the structural, material and industrial force motoring the global circulation of reality TV formats and the cultural agency and localized enactments that are nonetheless necessary in rendering the formats meaningful; between the cultural logic of global capital and the local cultural codes and gestures that interject, interpret and animate it.

Performative Encounters and the Transformative Power of Transnational Television

The dynamics between structural power and cultural practices (elaborated in the theoretical framework, chapter three) is conceptually captured in the term *performative encounters*, which provides us a helpful tool to capture the complex social, cultural changes afoot in India. The notion of encounter signals a meeting, a stumbling upon and by different actors. Encounters occur as a part of a wider social, historical process; a result of a course already undertaken, leading to surprising but not unexpected assembly. The entry of global media conglomerates in India is, for example, part of a social, historical phenomenon: symptomatic of an era of global capital flows. But the entry of transnational television companies and capital also introduces new production norms and practices such as reality TV formats. Practices of cultural adaptation of reality TV formats in India are thus *structured encounters* between local producers and global format owners, between localized cultural understandings and the commercial-cultural logic of global capital. Fieldwork reveals, for example, how producers in India grapple with, learn and acquire new creative ideas, values and skills as they find themselves required to culturally adapt a format for Indian viewers. The decision to license a format, motivated by both commercial and creative expediency, is undertaken by network executives accountable to advertisers and profit margins, in interaction with global counterparts, flow of ideas and shared strategies in a structurally integrated television industry (refer to chapter six and discussion on introduction of *Who Wants to be a Millionaire* format, for instance). Producers must then make-remake the format to appeal to localized cultural sensibilities and cue viewers to the ideas embedded in the formats (of

cut-throat competition and do-or-die ambition; of identities framed around “winner” or “loser” positions; of individual enterprise and ability to overcome given social conditions and hierarchies to achieve manifest destiny; of *aukad* or social gumption to transgress social orders of class, caste, gender or regional inequities and so on). In other words, producers are given a format, a tentative script of ideas and advice (listed in the production bible, through training workshops or consultancy services provided by format owners) on how to enact the ideas in the format adaptation that they must then perform to.

And yet, performances are, as we know, inherently unpredictable, always irreducible to the script and invariably improvised in specific moments in interaction with others. How producers adapt, what cultural cues they deploy, how production strategies get mired in variegated positioning and what performative stance they adopt to render the formatted ideas meaningful to local viewers cannot be presumed or read off the texts/formats but excavated in the sites and moments of cultural production. The rationale for conducting production ethnography adopted in this study has therefore not been to “go-behind-the-scenes” and expose the truth claims of reality TV production or identify the limiting principles of the format that reveals how much leeway local producers have to change the format. Rather the goal is to identify the reality claims – the ideas, narratives or templates of reality provided by the format that is then mediated by local producers in acts of meaning-making; to explore and arrest a moment of change when culture producers encounter, re-act, enact and perform to, and within, given structural conditions. Local producers are, in that sense, performing to a script (as format adaptation

becomes a structured norm in the national-transnational television industry) but it is the performance (not only the script) that tells the story.

It must also be noted that reality TV formats do not exist as a “text”; rather formats exist as a set of negotiations and practices that may be best captured only in terms of the specific production practices. A network executive or producer, for instance, receives not one but several iterations of a format’s adaptation from several different cultural markets. *Idol* producers in India may therefore borrow the idea of inviting guest judges from the *American Idol* while taking the stage design from the German version of *Idol*. To look at the industrial conditions and practices (of culturally translating a reality TV formats) does not, or should not, suggest the “industry” as a “totalizing and unified” entity (as Caldwell also points out in his study of U.S. television-film industry, 2008, p7). It is an important terminological qualification because it compels us to consider how despite the structural alignments the global television industry is punctuated at different locations and its operations are filtered through social-cultural specificity and interpretive-selective agency. To theorize the social and cultural impact of a global cultural economy and transnational television forms such as reality TV we must then account for the variety of socially-historically localized encounters, negotiations, mediations and re-production practices that lend form to a format and facilitates its global swirl.

Since the 1990s, specifically, scholarly attention in international communication and global media studies has increasingly focused on the various means through which cultural connections are established in an interconnected world (including information technologies, transnational travel and migration flows, de-territorialization of cultural

production and consumption etcetera). The circulation of reality TV formats in different cultural markets provides us an opportunity to look at the cultural technologies facilitating interrelated social-cultural experiences and the interpenetration of culture and economy as a salient feature of an emergent global culture. The notion of performative encounters is helpful here because it focuses our attention on the flow of both materials and ideas while locating relations of power, at the center of dynamic, in terms of the practical contentions and accommodations. In contrast to majority of global media and cultural studies engaged in parsing out “global”-“local” relationships as abstract cultural constructions (including studies on the “global” career of reality TV formats; refer to, for instance, Ernest Mathijs and Janet Jones edited volume on the format *Big Brother*, 2004) this study does not index the “local” and the “global”, the “universal” and the “particular” or pinpoint the confluences as “glocal” because the conceptual vocabulary does not capture the lingering questions of power (that are central to this dissertation) – that is, how do relations of power (both material and ideational) implicate cultural encounters or how cultural practices mediate and manage; what are the moments of contention and conflict or what are the tentative, tactical compromises; what are the competing claims over reality representation, participatory rights and terms of imagining social change; and importantly, what are the methodological strategies to empirically identify the play of power and practices. In contrast to approaches premised on global-local binary or looking at ensuing hybridity and evidences of multiple modernity, the notion of performative encounters highlight the material flows and structural conditions and compulsions while alerting us to its contingent nature by retaining a focus on the creative agency and cultural practices.

Thinking through performative encounters requires us to locate our research at the sites and moments of cultural change, accounting for the structured practices (between domestic producers and format owners, network executives and creative producers, contestants and producers, and so on) as well as the multiple possibilities of re-acting, responding, positioning and performing. For example, the introduction of the *Idol* format educates local producers (of both *Indian Idol* and other shows) of the “necessity” of including competition in music shows, although music television shows without the competitive hook had proved to be immensely popular on Indian television before *Idol* made its mark (as discussed in chapter seven). The element of competition introduces an array of other creative elements also mandated by the format: the focus on contestant profiles as competing personalities (rather than just singers); heart-wrenching narratives of zero-to-hero contestants, fighting to win at all costs; and so on. Local producers learn, as a result of the structure of ideas imported via formats, the importance of showcasing the participants on the show as contestants and “competitive characters” that viewers can identify with and vote for. This requires producers to think of competing appeals and ways of presenting the contestants to viewers. As producers tap into entrenched cultural values and concerns, contestants on *Indian Idol* appeal for viewer’s attentions (and votes) with tales of ambition fuelled by the desire to fulfill a mother’s dream or provide for one’s elderly parents or uphold the name and honor of one’s community – none of which are necessarily suggested in a format. What emerges in this dynamic of formatted elements and localized cues is however a new priority of self-positioning – of devising appeals that make the contestants most marketable to viewers. The best singer or the most authentic person does not necessarily win the *Idol* crown (as discussed in chapter six),

rather it is the personality, positioning and performative strategy that makes or breaks careers – marking a shift in cultural values and emphasis from the internalized qualities (traditionally valued) to the externalized expressions (necessary in the format’s branding and prime time entertainment television); from display of modesty (that makes for boring, muted television experiences) to spectacle and self-exhibitionism (that makes for easy and presumably engaging viewing); from folded hands and lowered eyes to loud cheering (often imitative of holler common in U.S. culture signaling excited audiences) and bold assertions of individual will or naked ambition to win (a million rupee or more that invariably comes with the reality TV shows); from the limits of “middle class values and mindsets” to the emphasis on developing competitive attitudes and survival skills. In reality TV, formats provide partial scripts (as mentioned earlier) that specify actions and “triggers” to spontaneous re-actions from contestants on “live” camera. As producers improvise on how to produce (and contestants improvise on how to compete) what emerges is a complex moment of social and cultural change that is at once a structured encounter and a performance. The intellectual hegemonic power of global media is inadequately understood if we only look for brute material coercion, corporate ownership chains, monopoly over airwaves or cultural compliance over global universals; rather it is more helpful to look at the performative gestures that signal production of consent and common sense over specific ideas, or the reproduction of ideology through creative assembly at local cultural sites and moments, punctured through localized values, meanings and attributes.

Reality TV Appeals in India

Examination of cultural adaptation of reality TV formats in India pursued in this study reveals how a core set of ideas centered on the production and packaging of self are imported into the Indian social-cultural spaces via popular formats. For example: 1. the notion of competition wherein the survival-of-the-fittest is the natural order of social life and the onus is on the individual to seize opportunities and change manifest destinies; 2. a focus on enterprising individuals and “self work” (Ouellette and Hay, 2008, p2) that celebrates self-directed, self-responsible and self-managed individuals propelling themselves in pursuit of self-fulfillment; 3. a seeming necessity to unmoor the self from collectives (of family/community/colleagues)⁸⁵ in order to develop a calculative self capable of individually beneficial decisions (deemed necessary to survive and strive); 4. an ability to rationally deliberate and manage the emotional self, projecting certain emotions that display particular self-branding attributes (for viewer votes, for example) while suppressing other spontaneous expressions (of dissent, dejection); 5. the need to accept uncertainty as inherent, indeed natural, in the pursuit of one’s ambition whereby only one (or select few) may win while others fail and persevere.

Though reality TV shows reveal the thematic emphasis most poignantly and allow everyday viewers to access to such ideas of self-making as “real” people (whether ordinary viewers or celebrities unmasked as their “real” selves) provide “real” accounts of how an individual may overcome his or her social conditions to chart individual success stories, the core set of ideas resonate across other media forms and mediums as well. Soap operas (which are the main programming type on Hindi entertainment networks), for example, have evolved particularly since the mid-2000s to offer images

⁸⁵ Though it is done without an explicit rejection; only through emotional-dramatic scenes of conflicting loyalties (as discussed in chapter eight) wherein one must prioritize one’s self to survive in the competitive reality (rather than succumb to emotional-collective bindings)

and strategies of “hope” and “fighting back” (Saxena, 2009). A serial called *Agle Janam Mohe Bitiya Hi Kijo* (*Make Me A Daughter In Next Life As Well*), based on the story of a father in a desperately poor family in Bihar, who is forced to sell his daughter for money, is also about seeking possible happiness if an individual has the will. Nitin Vaidya, the producer, argues: “Though the protagonist Lali lives in acute poverty she tries to create happiness for her family. As the serial progresses, you will see how she fights. It’s a serial of hope, not despair.” (Saxena, 2009). Lali, the protagonist, does not rebel or run away; she tries to retrieve from what remains in her life a semblance of happiness through sheer will. Intertwined with the imperatives of producing entertainment television and the craft of turning unhappy realities into hopeful ones is also a message for viewers watching at home – to *look* happy, *appear* confident, *overlook and overcome* the circumstances of life, *fight* to survive, *be* ambitious, *take* risks for possible rewards, *conduct and calculate* one’s actions with strategic intent, never losing sight of the end-goal. Such self-making strategies often run counter to the entrenched social values of accepting one’s fate, respecting elders and social hierarchies (of caste, gender, class) and/or systems of patronage that have been routes of individual or communal well being. How producers recreate the liberal appeals and market milieu embedded in the formats to allow viewer identification and involvement in often illiberal social-cultural mores are thus important for our understanding of emergent global cultures that are shared and yet fractured. Reality TV format re-production provides us an opportunity to understand how the economic rationality of the market (compete, risk, calculate profit-and-loss) beams into everyday lives and is rendered meaningful as popular television narratives, whether on reality TV shows or on fictional serials.

Amogh Dusad, a market researcher for Imagine TV, pointed me to a “not that complicated space” where reality TV and soap operas resonate *thematically*:

“I am not going to watch *Fear Factor* and take up gymnastics tomorrow. That’s not my take out. My take out is feeling a bit more confident about myself, feeling more empowered... Fictions show a lot more of domestic space or familial situations and women (as primary viewers) get a lot of cues on how to handle situations. Non-fictions do not do that. But then *Idol* or *Dance Indian Dance* (as examples of reality TV shows)...that phenomenon is catering to the *same emotions*, you know. So you can unify a lot of audiences into ‘*I want to get my life better*’. So anybody sitting in Jaipur or in Bombay – the story that is being told, whatever programming, is finally appealing to that, not so much what is happening in it. So, am I eating cockroach or am I jumping off the cliff is not the point. The point is that I am crossing a boundary or I am doing something everybody thought I couldn’t do but I am doing it.” (personal interview, 2010).

Similar worldviews may be found replicated on regional language television networks or on Hindi blockbuster films as well. Interviews with television producers, for instance, invariably involved mentions of popular Hindi films like *Dilli 6*, which too plays on the same set of appeals. *Dilli 6* features a young woman – the female protagonist – dreaming of becoming the next *Indian Idol*. The problem (providing a dramatic conflict in the narrative) however is that her parents who hold “traditional, conservative mindsets” think it best for her to marry and become a homemaker (remain within the familiar domestic boundary) rather than pursue individual ambitions that take her to

uncertain territories or make a spectacle of herself on national television. As a result, the young woman regularly leaves home in traditional dresses (salwar kameez) complicit with the values of the home but quickly undergoes a wardrobe change in public bathrooms at subway stops (into short skirts, tank-tops and revealing, stylish clothes) to look more fittingly dressed for college trends, auditions or photo-shoots. She *manages* both the demands of her parents at home who call for conservative values and her own individual needs to aspire to be the next pop star and find validation in her ambitions and individualized successes.

The appeals energized by the reality TV formats are thus no longer limited to the symbolic-media form but accessible and legitimized across media platforms and cultural spaces. In exploring reality TV's narratives this study therefore does not focus on the textual features per se but on the ideas that gain cultural footing – that tantalizing promise that “anybody can be a winner” irrespective of materially-culturally defined positions, if only one is willing to compete, be ambitious and remain unwavering in their pursuit of the end-goal. The specific cultural codes are open to negotiation. The “proper” length of the skirt distinguishing the ordinary contestant at the early stages of *Indian Idol* from the celebrity contestant close to winning the *Idol* title is debatable, as discussed in chapter six; too little skin-show or too much skin-show, too little emotional expressions or too much of such emotive positioning can both “work” or backfire (leading to viewers rejecting the show or producers deciding to refocus on other contestants in terms of how much airtime they give the contestant or how they present the “character” for viewer's attention). What is important however is the *management* of such qualities, gestures and features – the need to develop an awareness of the need for self-management and the

intuitive acumen to do so, precisely because the authoritative accounts of what is “proper” and prescribed are negotiable in a means-to-end orientation of a competitive social world.

Expanding Markets, Expanding Appeals: Resistance and Rhetoric

The 2000 to 2010 period is bookmarked in this study, starting with *Millionaire/KBC* in 2000, *Indian Idol* from 2004 onwards and *Celebrity Sleepover/Desi Girl* in 2010. The timeline is important not only because of the steady explosion of reality TV formats and different type of reality TV shows that make it the decade of reality TV on Indian television screens but also, more importantly, because it reveals the how the appeals crafted on reality TV shows have expanded between 2000 and 2010 to target new viewers in small towns and lower socio-economic groups in India.

The 2000s is the second decade of transnational television networks in India. The first decade (in the 1990s), while marked by its fast pace of growth was, nonetheless, limited to elite-middle class, metropolitan consumers who constituted the “emerging market” that global corporations (in media and other industries) sought to engage. The “metro-middle-classes” (in Delhi, Kolkata, Mumbai and other big cities) were the vanguards of India’s rising consumer culture in the wake of 1990s post-liberalized and “open-market” policies adopted by India. The next decade – starting in 2000s but particularly since mid-2000 - markets for both the television networks and the consumer goods advertised on television have expanded exponentially, making in-roads into “interiors” and “heartland” and targeting consumers-viewers from small towns and lower middle classes. The shift in the “target group/audience” is apparent as reality TV

producers reorient production practices: increasing the number of auditions in small towns; casting contestants from small towns and rural areas; crafting narratives that speak to and give voice to issues of marginalization faced by participants in small towns or non-metro cities; including a wider regional-linguist pool of contestant profiles; using specific references to “small town values and morals”; inciting emotional conversations of how one’s life may be transformed from small town anonymity to appearing on bill boards in big cities; and so on. To look at the explosion of reality TV shows and how it has become a mainstay on all entertainment programming schedules thus illustrates the deep embedding of the cultural logic of global capital and market forces in the small towns and “heartlands” or “interiors” of India.

The argument here is not that the ideas imported and culturally translated via reality TV formats are implanted without friction or accepted without question – particularly when the reality of material and cultural marginalization meets the rhetoric of universal opportunity and access central to reality TV’s participatory branding. Contestants I met during my embedded observations on the sets of *Indian Idol* for example regularly expressed the belief that their fate on the show depended less on viewer votes (which technically elects the winner in the format) and more on the producer’s discretions (on how much airtime producers give to contestants both during filming and in editing the episodes; how producers “package” the contestants, that is, the kind of personality they project in crafting the show, whether they give “makeover” to the contestants and make them look like glamorous, potential winners, what sort of emotionally engaging stories are built around the contestants and so on). Similarly, aspiring contestants I met at unofficial audition sites and music competitions from where

participants are often recruited reiterated the claim, time and again, that what gets one onto the *Idol* stage (or other reality TV shows) is not talent or ambition but “*rishta*” (relationship, in Hindi) or the professional networks, social connections (through family or friends) and familiarities that one possesses - in other words, the social capital. Contestants (or those willing to contest) also do not feel unencumbered by obligations to family or community or imagine themselves as individual actors charting their own destinies. Individual aspirations must be constantly reconciled with what is communally considered “proper” or permissible; and individual ambitions are often claimed in the name of family responsibilities – from financial needs to fulfilling parent’s dreams. However - and it is an unassailable how-ever - the narrative that appears on television, on the reality TV shows, are centered on tales of purposeful individuals rewriting their lives with entrepreneurial zeal and a cultivated agility necessary to adapt to given (competitive) conditions. Resistance is thus realigned within rhetoric and a curious dynamics becomes visible on reality TV. On one hand, the reality TV shows allow individuals from the social-economic and regional margins to emerge on the national space, invoke social issues of class, gender, regional economic and infrastructural deficiencies and locates the individual within the social claims of the community. On the other hand, the modes and terms of participation featured on reality TV shows also foreclose dissent or dialogues focusing on the conditions and causes of marginalization or collective engagement. Niret Alva (personal interview, 2007), producer of *Indian Idol*, captures this dynamic of invoking and foreclosing questions of inequity as follows:

“I was stunned by a 17-year-old girl from Kanpur, Ankita Shrama, *by her confidence and presentation*. These kids have confidence and

presentations skills, *the way to talk to people and can showcase* their talents in ways that I wouldn't have had despite the Delhi background or good schooling. These kids are letting us know that talent is not only in the cities or with the city slickers; but (also) all over the country. There is a huge talent pool *out there*. And they are raring to go; they are only looking for the opportunities. *They are young, fully charged, coming from the smaller places, no real father - patronage is the word I would like to use - standing purely in terms of their talent*; ...you can see the tremendous drive and confidence and desire to prove a point and do something that is keeping them going. You can see it on their faces, you can see in their body language. It is pretty much the same with *Idol*. The talent that is coming from the smaller places is hungrier."

The specific skill sets (acquired with "good schooling" available in metropolitan cities) become less important, while the individual self becomes a reservoir of endless resource, if one has the "drive". It is the ability to exhibit "confidence" (irrespective of how one truly feels or has reasons to feel), the "presentation skills, the way to talk to people" and knowing how to "showcase" that are emphasized as the winning qualities (over internalized attributes of knowledge, good singing voice, moral characteristics or training). In characterizing the contestants, Alva (like other producers) claim to represent a wider national reality – "*out there*" – which reinforces the vantage point of producers (mostly elite middle-class) working with transnational media corporations who now engage with the "hunger" of small town contestants, striving without "good schooling" or the array of cultural competencies that lend "confidence" or acculturate us on

“presentation skills” and “the way to talk to people”. But in doing so Alva also reveals how reality TV producers appropriate “hunger” and needs (reflecting various material and cultural disadvantages) of the small towns and lower SECs into the structure of ideas and appeals embedded in the reality TV shows – reclaiming reality and preemptively erasing resistance within the rhetoric of reality TV. Here the aspiring, confident self constantly “looking for opportunities” is the flip side of “hunger” and social, material disenfranchisements. The “hunger” suggests an ambitious self, which is then collapsed into the competitive world of “survival of the fittest” both on and off television. Ambition and deprivation are both rearticulated in the benevolent and liberating circuitry of market relations (wherein anybody may participate and compete to possibly win). Alva’s argument, it is important to note, is not that small towns have now acquired the infrastructural facilities that make them equally equipped contenders against the big city contestants. The playing field has not necessarily been leveled between the metropolitan centers and small towns or different socio-economic classes, genders, regions and so on. Neither opportunities nor resources for social mobility and self-fulfillment are equally accessible. What Alva points out, along with other producers, is that individuals are entering the spotlight (on *Idol* stage or off it) *despite the social inequities*. While the State entrusted with social development has failed to meet the expectations of individuals, it is despite the dysfunctional and inhibitive State – symbolizing social organization and the locus of political-collective action – that individuals have propelled themselves on the basis of their individual ambitions. Collectives fail and rarely respond to individual needs but the striving individual may survive and even win, if he or she is able to well manage one’s self. The market’s expansionary gestures open a new space of participation - often

allowing very talented and skilled individuals from otherwise marginalized class, caste, region or gendered backgrounds to gain visibility, but the terms of participation are not premised on social equity. Instead participation is now conditional to an individual's ability eject oneself out of marginalization and deprivation. Collective actions recede as a legitimate force in the popular narratives (along with the withdrawal of the state from different sectors of the economy) while the individual emerges (in the market driven society) as the self-responsible actor caught in a fight to survive against others.

Alva narrated to me various instances of individual drive and desire that enabled contestants on *Idol* to move forward in the competitive rounds (despite lack of training, poor performances, lack of talent or votes). As we spoke that year (2007) the streets of Mumbai erupted in celebration of India winning the ICC Twenty20 Cricket World Cup, beating Pakistan in a dramatic final. Rallies on roads and masses of people blocked traffic as the team was given a hero's welcome when they arrived at the Mumbai airport. The significance of the moment was not lost on Alva either. He compared the unprecedented popularity of *Indian Idol* season 3, where a contestant from a humble social background and small town (Darjeeling) had been crowned the *Idol* winner to the victorious cricket team. "Look at cricket - you see the new team? Again the new team, again at some level, it is pretty much like the *Idol*. Look at the names, where do they come from? Earlier the team was full of Delhi, Mumbai and people from big cities. Now?" Not just reality, reality TV or cricket but the nation as a whole is re-imagined in terms of a new awakening of self-driven individuals, charting new territories irrespective of social, material differences in access and opportunity.

Reality or Fiction: Aspiring Protagonist

The notion of ambitious, competitive and self-willed individuals rising from the margins to reinvent themselves is increasingly echoed on fictional shows or soap operas as well. There has been a distinct shift in focus, for instance, on the social backgrounds of characters and “issue” based narratives. According to Ashwini Yardi, a television executive (cited in Saxena, 2009) the dominance of *saas-bahu* (“mother-in-law and daughter-in-law” themed) serials that were popular on C&S networks in the 1990s have lost their appeal in the later 2000s because viewers no longer wish to watch “how rich people live”. Such serials were known for opulent images of domestic settings (for example, mansions with winding stairways) where women work in the kitchen wearing gold jewelry and silk saris. The thematic focus in such serials was on domestic-familial conflicts and inter-personal rivalries, jealousies and loyalties, etcetera. While such serials were immensely popular with urban middle classes (who were the primary consumers of C&S networks at the time), starting in mid 2000 there has been a noticeable shift in the stories and character profiles. Narratives are now based in small towns and highlight “social issues” (such as child marriage⁸⁶, female feticide⁸⁷, class bias⁸⁸ etcetera) and more “realistic” presentations (less grandiose scenes of domesticity). For example, in *Bidaai* the “dark” complexioned protagonist comes from a lower middle class family in Agra; *Sabki Laadli Bebo* is set in Amritsar; the protagonist in *Uttaran* named Ichcha (which means “wish” in Hindi) is the daughter of a maid; *Bandini* on NDTV Imagine focuses on a young village girl in Gujarat who is married off to a man much older than her; and so on. Uday Shankar, ex-CEO of Star Plus, argues, “We had to make shows which

⁸⁶ *Balika Vadhu* (Child bride, in Hindi)

⁸⁷ *Na Aana Is Des Lado* (Don’t be corn in this country, baby girl, in Hindi)

⁸⁸ *Uttaran* (Hand-me-downs, in Hindi)

connected with the new universe. Stories had to be situated in middle India” (cited in Saxena, 2009).

This cultural remaking, which places the small town and low socio-economic category (SEC) viewer center-stage, on the national spotlight, is not coincidence. As highlighted earlier, majority of viewers of (transnational-national) Hindi entertainment television (and the global reality TV formats featured on the general entertainment networks) live in small towns. Industry reports estimate a growth trajectory for the television industry “backed by strong consumption in Tier 2 and 3 cities” (KPMG-FICCI Frames press release 2012), that is, the smaller cities with ten, five and one hundred thousand population. The focus on the lower SECs and small towns have erupted most noticeably in a legal challenge as well, wherein NDTV (one of the leading domestic television companies) have filed a complaint against the viewer ratings measurement agency TAM-Nielsen in New York (where Nielsen is headquartered). NDTV (along with host of other networks) have suggested (over time) that Nielsen reaches only a fraction of the Indian population (0.0001 percent of the total television viewership) and tends to monitor primarily middle and upper middle class homes (SEC A and B) in urban and metropolitan areas which under reports their market reach and produces a highly skewed measurement that ignores the small towns and lower SEC viewers (Guha Thakurta, 2012).

The argument here is not that reality TV’s focus on stories of “real” life struggles and aspirations from the “heartlands” have informed narratives on soap operas but that the ideas advocated on reality TV are not limited to the form either. While reality TV is most directly associated with the “me too” phenomenon, allowing viewers to re-imagine

their lives and aspirations when watching other “ordinary viewers” remaking themselves on national television, the cultural salience of the structure of ideas promoted on reality TV resonates beyond the specific media texts and audience groups. By highlighting contestants from small towns and low SECs reality TV shows connect with the “target groups” but also offer “feel good” stories to upper SECs and metro viewers who marvel at the talent emerging from “out there” in the nation. Whether one is watching *American Idol* or *Indian Idol*, with or without material, social or political parity there is therefore an increasing cultural connection between metropolitan India and small town India, between global cities and those in forgotten corners of the world.

Shinning India to Striving India

In 2004 national elections, Bharathiya Janata Party (BJP) led government spent an estimated USD \$20 million to hire the global advertising firm Grey Worldwide and create a campaign around the slogan India Shinning. Though the slogan was initially coined to promote India as a potential investment market and invite global corporations with promises of open market policies, with an eye to the elections the campaign also appeared on national newspapers and television channels to remind the nation of an upbeat economy on its way to becoming a global economic player with a growth rate of 7% (in 2004). Images of well-fed, urban middle class Indians, shopping, going to work, returning to well built homes and happy, smiling faces played alongside the slogan: “*you’ve never had a better time to shine brighter*”. The campaign however backfired for the ruling party (who lost the elections) and was vociferously rejected both by opposition parties and the vast majority of people, appalled if not confused by the difference in what

was being portrayed and the conditions of everyday existence. With 7% unemployment, largest number of malnourished children in the world, nine out of ten pregnant women (between 15 to 49 years) in the country suffering from anemia and absolute per capita food availability in 2002-2003 sliding below the time of 1943 Bengal famine when 1.5 to 3 million people died (Frontline, March 12, 2004), the campaign India Shinning was quite apparently only a campaign, and far from reality. The advertising was pitched to earn the votes of the few in urban, upper middle classes, who have benefited from the economic liberalization of the country but in electoral politics the assertion in the name of the nation fell flat and false. And yet, the central idea underlying the campaign has continued to resonate not just in the years since but also across political groups, that is: economic growth will result from pro-market reforms; market induced growth will, in time, trickle down to the poorest sections of the society; the era of State-led growth and public, infra-structural developmental agenda must be, and will inevitably be, replaced by private ventures and a consumer-driven economy. There is a general consensus (across political parties and economic leaders, State institutions and policy makers, media organizations, judiciary, regulatory agencies and the bureaucratic-managerial middle classes) that the world of private capital and market forces is a more efficient means to achieve economic growth. Social issues of individual and collective lives are thus bracketed within a meta-narrative of market competition that now permeates every aspect of social life.

The popularity of reality TV shows and the ideological constructs that are promoted in the process upholds a similar and related but also different social, national narrative – marking a shift from India *Shinning* to what may be understood as India

striving. It is a slippery claim – not one that proclaims the arrival with any certainty (that doomed the India Shinning narrative) but an enticing promise, eternally renewable. The obligation is on the individual to strive and achieve; failure to do so is only a temporary blip in what must be a continuous effort; not making an effort is failure by default and marks one a “loser”; and if one wins then there is always more to be won (replicating the expansionary instinct of capital and market forces in the business of self-making).

This resonance between the neo-liberal economic realities and ideas popularized on reality TV has been noted in cultural markets around the world as a confluence of reinvention of governance and reinvention of television (Ouellette and Hay, 2008). The popularity of reality TV (in the west, primarily the United States and western Europe) from mid-1990s and the numerous reality based entertainment and lifestyle shows that teach us how to conduct ourselves and “empower” ourselves as enterprising citizens coincide with the neo-liberal remaking of society from welfare-to-work mandates and public-sector downsizing to the privatization policies. Reality TV becomes the “quintessential *technology of advanced or “neo” liberal citizenship*” telling us how to develop a striving self that is “...a flexible commodity to be molded, packaged, managed, reinvented, and sold” (Ouellette and Hay, 2008, p4-7). And yet, *technologies are not universally meaningful* – technologies are limited by the practical uses that they are put through and offer unpredictable formulations. The transference of neo-liberal ideologies via reality TV formats, in that sense, cannot be assumed from the formatted texts or how such texts play out in U.S. or western European cultural markets that most critical studies on reality TV shows have looked at. This study benefits from the scholarly investigations on reality TV’s play in western cultural contexts in terms of the core themes that appear

inherent to the formats (competition, individualism, ambition, risk and rewards calculations and so on). But this study also marks an important point of departure from existing scholarship on reality TV's cultural and political salience by highlighting the importance of analysis that goes beyond the text into the *practices of text making*. Sustained empirical explorations of the terms and practices of cultural translation of reality TV formats in India reveal how the cultural logic of advanced capitalism and market forces are fraught with localized understandings, interpretations and accommodations. Inflow global capital may revitalize provincial claims, for instance, and allow small town contestants to gain visibility and voice on national television; the politics of the private and survival-of-the-fittest may be advanced by invoking the failed publics, marginalized communities and unresolved questions of inequity; illiberal cultural customs, common sense and ingrained acceptance of social hierarchies (cutting across class, gender, caste and/or regions) may be inserted – and remade, remapped - as appeals to support a (neo)liberal ideology *in the making*.

Appendix A

Popularity of Reality TV shows in India between 2000-2010⁸⁹

Years	Type of shows that gain popularity	Examples of Popular Formats	Strategies to win viewer attention
2000 to 2005: A New trend and its formative years	Quiz-reality TV; game-reality TV; singing/dancing contest-reality TV	KBC 1 and 2; <i>Indian Idol</i> , <i>Saregamapa</i> , <i>Nach Baliye</i>	Use of Bollywood film stars as hosts (for example, Amitabh Bachchan for KBC, Anupam Kher and Manisha Koirala for <i>Swal Dus Crore Ka</i> (2000 on Zee), Govinda for <i>Jeeto Chappad Phad Ke</i> (January 2001 on SET), Madhuri Dixit for <i>Kahi Na Kahi Koi Hai</i> (July 2002 on SET); voting and viewer engagement; on air-campaigns promising viewers the opportunity to decide who will win and who will not; launch of new show concepts and formats (rather than imitate popular formats).
2006 and 2007: Consolidation of Reality TV's Popularity	Singing, dancing-reality TV shows continue to be popular; more controversial concepts involving sexually charged interpersonal drama and competitive frameworks (such as <i>Big Brother</i> format) are also introduced	KBC 3, <i>Big Boss</i> , <i>Indian Idol</i> , <i>Jhalak Dikhla Ja</i> , <i>Voice of India</i>	Inviting film stars as guest-judges or hosts on shows; incorporation of on-stage "live drama" (showing more fights between contestants or sexually suggestive scenes/relations between contestants; casting contestants from lower SECs and small town and diverse personality profiles; use of both on-air and on-site promotions.
2008 to 2010: Continuing Years	Quiz-game-reality TV becomes popular again (KBC 4; <i>Kya Aap</i>	KBC 4, <i>Dus Ka Dum</i> , <i>Khatron Ke Khiladi</i> , <i>Sach</i>	Use of more sensational "reality" or dramatic content; use of film industry celebrities, casting contestants who gain celebrity status from one reality

⁸⁹ This is not intended to be a comprehensive list but an indicator of the transformations in reality TV shows in the ten years between 2000, when KBC was first aired starting the trend of adapting reality TV formats, and 2010, when *Desi Girl* was broadcast, as covered in this study. I am grateful to Swati Mohan, Vice President of programming and operations for Fox International Channels and National Geographic Channel Network, India, for clarifying the elements identified here and to Vibodh Parthasarathy, Jamia Millia Islamia, for pointing out the need to map reality TV shows in India.

Panchvi Paas Hai? (Are you Smarter than a 5th Grader?) in April 2008; *Big Money-Chotta parda, Bada Game* (in 2010);

Ka Samna, Big Boss, Rakhi Ka Swayamvar

TV show on other/new reality TV shows as “celebrity contestants”; emphasis on shows that can create media “buzz” and word of mouth publicity; use of new concepts (such as *Rakhi ka Swayamvar*); use of television personalities or soap opera stars as contestants; increasing mixing of different elements to create “new” show ideas.

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