

'Reading' Television : Towards a Definition of Audio-Visual Literacy

Nilanjana Gupta

Beginning with the notion of television as educational tool and ending with the market-driven mantra of entertainment, television in India has seen such changes that one wonders why this phenomenon has not been able to generate sufficient serious academic interest. Surviving the years of the Emergency and flourishing through the current emphasis on resource generation and profit-orientation, television in India has reached a level of frenetic activity that is perhaps unparalleled anywhere else in the world. The sheer diversity of channels, programmes, languages, genres and audiences is amazing in itself. Television in India is remarkable indeed. However, the majority of research and analysis in the area of television studies is still heavily dependent on Western approaches and based on models of enquiry imported from countries where the trajectory and issues related to the development, history, impact and audience responses has been markedly different. Not only is the diversity of programming, channels, genres remarkable, the audience too is huge and diverse and different in many fundamental ways from the audiences in the West.

The issue I wish to address in this paper is a specific one regarding whether print literacy in the audience is a factor in the ways in which audiences respond to the televisual media. Does the fact of print literacy influence the relationship of the audience to television programming? Another of the questions to be asked is whether this fact influences or even determines the construction of these texts themselves.

It seems that one of problems is reflected in the fact that when the word 'audience' is used in television studies, there is little attempt to discriminate sufficiently within the mass of viewers. There needs to be an understanding of the processes that are at work while this huge, heterogeneous, diverse mass is watching, interacting and engaging with television. For this, the

concept of the 'audience' needs to be approached from a multiplicity of defining characteristics rather than merely in terms of income, urban-rural divide or gender that form the bulk of studies so far. In this paper, I would also like to go on to suggest that television programming itself, the diversity and range of channels and formats, is also developed in response to the diversity of audiences and that these unique features of the television audiences are issues that need to be theorized or at least addressed within the discipline of television studies.

The phenomenal rise in the number of television sets in India has been a point that many people have commented on, though, the actual number of sets that are operational is difficult to state with any authority. However, the fact that you can find television sets even in the remotest village or in the poorest areas of cities is part of our everyday experience. There are areas where electricity has not reached, but people watch on solar power-driven batteries or modified car batteries. In a remote village in the Sunderban area, we saw that only the central market had electricity, and there was one small black and white television set in a tea stall. There was a *madoor* or grass mat spread in front and everyone was sitting there watching the free-to-air Doordarshan channel while drinking cups of tea. When asked about the number of televisions in the area, the people watching said that as there was no electricity, no one in the village had a set of his own, but they came and watched here when they wished to. In bustees around cities, one can find television sets in several huts. Those who cannot afford to buy one for their own household will often raise money to buy one from the para or locality club and in the evenings, the males of the area will congregate to watch the Hindi films or sports programming together. This particular communal kind of television viewing is quite common, and very different from the notion of the domestic experience of television watching. The ways in which television is integrated into existing social formations and situations is remarkable and there are many varied experiences in many varied segments of India.

Most commentators - both academic and non-academic - on the phenomenon see this spread as a positive one. The world of entertainment and information is now accessible to the poor, like never before. Perhaps even more significantly, women, whose exposure to culture, news and other media forms was always limited, are now forming the audience of television in the security and approved space of the home.

However, the question that has always remained unasked is, despite the fact that we are all watching (or not watching) the same television programming, are we really the same 'audience'? Most studies seem to focus on the most prominent part of the audience, the urban middle class. David Page and William Crawley^[1] or Melissa Butcher's^[2] book length studies attempt to capture the influences of television on consumerism, on women, or on identity. Others like Kirk Johnson's book^[3] use tools from social anthropology to capture social change. However, I would like to argue that if television studies - in India and at other places in the world - is to develop into a more rigorous discipline, we do need to innovate and create new methodologies for identifying and recording experiences particular to television.

What I wish to present here is the experience of an ongoing experiment designed to record and distinguish between the cognitive abilities of the amorphous body called the 'Indian audience'. Most Western theoretical models of television viewing assume the basic fact that their audiences are literate ones and are thus acquainted with print culture in its many cultural and cognitive manifestations. The spread of television has been seen from its inception as the perfect tool to present information to a non-literate audience. The early experiments in Indian television such as the SITE were targeted at such audiences. Yet, as most commentators have noted in India and elsewhere, such experiments have largely failed. While such notions of educational television are almost non-existent today, we do see that non-literate audiences watch television with great interest and that they list television as one the major sources of information and entertainment.

The method that I evolved for attempting to explore this rather complex question was to combine three different tools. The first was to create a questionnaire that would reflect the respondent's pattern of media consumption. This would record the variety and levels of print and other cultural competencies of the respondent. The second part was to record, show and ask questions on a variety of television news clippings. The choice of news clippings was deliberate because news stories, as the name suggests, typically takes events and puts them within certain narrative structures. There has been much work by media theorists in this area who have pointed out the consequences of 'narrativizing' news events. The third part of the investigation is an analysis of news segments - both those we used and others - to see the varying degrees of complexities in the news segments produced for specific programmes and channels and to see how this is related to the general audience profile of the target audience of those channels or programmes.

The question to be addressed through this study is the larger question about whether levels of literacy or education - which here we are defining as familiarity with narrative forms typically associated with print culture - are determining factors in the processes of comprehension or cognition even in audio-visual media where there is no actual reading of print involved. Also, by analyzing the segments, we could raise the larger question - whether the medium of the audiovisual too can be divided into the categories of the audiovisual of the oral and the audiovisual of the print. That is, whether some kinds of narratives assume a particular level of familiarity - or unfamiliarity - with print culture.

We have just begun this investigation by conducting these interviews with groups of adults with no or very low levels of education. Many of the respondents are attending literacy camps. So far all our respondents have been women as we are having problems in conducting surveys among male adults with very low levels of literacy in Calcutta city, so there is a gender bias in our sample so far. We have also in some cases interviewed the

teachers in these camps when we found that they have low levels of formal education, but are themselves literate and have undergone some training as teachers in the camps.

The questionnaires reveal that for these women, the exposure to media products is very limited. Obviously, they do not read newspapers, magazines, stories in any form. Nor do they listen to the radio, though many of them said that they enjoy listening to music and they like to watch music-based programmes on television. Some of them mentioned that they had a cassette player at home. A visit to the movie hall too is extremely rare. For many of these women, the only entertainment listed were the *para* functions. Thus, their mediascape is a particularly impoverished one. Television is the major, in fact predominant medium of both entertainment and information. On the television, they enjoyed watching some of the serials, usually in their own language - Bangla or Hindi - but the so-called K-series serials were favourites among the Bangla speaking audience as well. Interestingly, many of them referred to the serials as 'natak' or drama. Many of them said, however, that they like watching news, though they may not be able to always watch due to pressures of work. They identified 'Khas Khabor' as their preferred programme. However, we soon realized that they use 'Khas Khabor' as a generic name to refer to the Bangla language news programmes on ETV, Alpha Bangla (now Z Bangla) or even Doordarshan News.

What emerges as particularly significant for our investigation is the fact that almost of them said they enjoyed watching Bangla films on television. Though they went only very rarely to the cinema halls to watch films (both because of income constraints, but also due to time constraints) they watched plenty of popular Bangla films. When asked for more specific details, they said they liked those with Tapas Pal or Prosenjit. This is important because the form of the popular Bangla film is a very simplistic one and there has been some writing on these forms where the story has been analyzed as using simplistic narrative structures where good and evil are clearly identified and plot resolutions are usually worked through melodramatic devices

reminiscent of traditional forms of drama like *jatra*. They are usually non-realist, and supernatural interventions often help the hero to sort out injustices and betrayal that the secular institutions like the judiciary or the court fail to address to the satisfaction of the moral structure of the film. We will later try to make a connection between the Bangla film and the 'Khas Khabor' genre of news.

We showed the respondents four clippings - the first about the neglect of an indoor sports stadium, then a clipping from India TV about Zahira Sheikh turning into a hostile witness in the Best Bakery case, a clip from Alpha TV about a bus accident in Rajasthan in which several tourists from West Bengal were killed, and a clip from ETV Bangla covering the Zahira Sheikh story in Bangla.

Let me, at this point, suggest the reasons behind choosing these particular clips from about four hours of news that we had taped. We found that in the Bangla language clips, there is a particular narrative style used. In the typical segment, we find the anchor who is facing the audience directly gives a summary of the news to follow in the segment in a very simple, descriptive and usually non-analytic, but not non-judgmental, manner. If it is a long story, then the anchor introduces each sub-segment within the larger story. There are usually clear indicators in the anchor's introduction and summary as to how the news should be interpreted. Often the anchor's summary is repeated in the reporter's introductory remarks, which in turn are repeated in the interviews that are used in the segment. Thus there are often three sets of oral framing or reinforcements of the visual narrative. In the segments, there are usually very simple narrative structures that are followed - the politicians, bureaucrats and experts are usually shown as the bad guys, while the 'man on the street' whose voice is carefully included in the segments, is the good guy, the wronged or the suffering. One of the ways in which this dichotomy is built up is through a juxtaposition of the language, the stance and the attitude of those in authority. For example, in the clip about the Rajasthan accident, one of the viewers said, "police officer, police officer" just

by seeing the officer on the screen-later when asked about it, she said, "that it was obvious", the framing and the stance made it possible for her to 'read' the image, even without the identification strip at the bottom of the screen. This clip on the Rajasthan accident seemed to capture many of the features of what we may call the 'oral' audio-visual style.

The anchor tells the story as a straightforward narrative of tragedy: people who went on a trip were killed. The focus in this story is not about who is responsible or the details about how the accident took place, but rather there is an emphasis on the people as victims. In fact the story is more about the suffering of the relatives who cannot find out the facts. The victims, that is the family and relatives of those feared dead, are clearly of the lower middle class. People are shown trying to make phone calls from local STD booths, the leaflet that is shown is of poor quality, the surroundings, the language and appearance of the people who are interviewed make it clear that these people are relatively unempowered. One particular feature of these kinds of news stories is often that there is a sharp differentiation made between the raw emotion, the very fact of the inarticulateness of the victims in contrast to the relatively controlled, logical and linguistically more competent responses of the officials or people in power. The linguistic competence of individuals becomes a marker of the individual's social and often political power. In this clip, the two persons who are articulate and composed in their speech are the police officer and the minister. Yet the juxtapositions of the interviews within the segment give much more credibility to the voice, inarticulate though it may be, of the unempowered. A kind of truth index is at work where the empowered and the unempowered are defined largely through the linguistic competences of each. Another visual code that is often used in such segments is the way that the powerful are shown in official or formal settings, such as the office of the police officer and the airport for the minister, whereas the victims are shown in public spaces - usually on the street. Also, the characters like the police officer and the minister are shown on their own whereas the victims are usually shown as bunched up in a

group of which only one person may be speaking. There is a sense that he or she, the speaking person, is representing the larger community which is silent but expressing its solidarity with the speaking. In this segment all written documents that are shown - the leaflet advertising the trip for example - are also read out.

The other clip about the sports stadium was chosen and shown without the introductory remarks by the anchor. Here only the story itself was shown, which is quite self-explanatory. The story had the slant that the neglect of the sports stadium was due to a refusal of both the sports minister and the corporation minister to take responsibility to fix the problems. Again, the persons in authority are shown in a typical way, though there were no voices of the man on the street on this segment.

Unfortunately, there were no serious Bangla language news channels at the time when this experiment was being conducted except for the Doordarshan news which has a narrative style very different and not particularly relevant for our study. Since then the Tara News and Star-Ananda channels have been launched which to a large extent copy the format and style of the national news channels. Therefore, we chose a Hindi language news channel for the next segment. This was the longest of the segments we showed and was about the sensational turnaround by Zahira, the star witness in the Best Bakery case. This story tried to do a comprehensive segment, by interviewing several politicians, showing old clips, adding analytical comments and generally trying to give the story a background and context. There were of course, no responses from the man in the street. The last segment was the local Bangla channels coverage of the same story.

The research team first completed the questionnaires and then showed the four clippings after telling the respondents that we would ask them a few questions about what they saw. After the viewing, we asked them to recall the news stories. The results were as follows:

Total No of Respondents	44
Non-literate	30
Some literacy	06
Literate	08
Accurate recall	07
Not accurate, but some recall	06
Unclear	17

The story that was most clearly remembered by most was the one about the accident in Rajasthan. When asked to describe it, it was clear that not all of them actually understood the story, a few thought it was about some local violence in which some innocent people were killed and the police was not doing anything. Interestingly, while everyone remembered the policeman, hardly anyone remembered the minister. Some even remembered some of the names, or at least surnames, of the people killed. Some of them commented that they saw this as yet another story of how the poor suffer and are victims.

Almost no one could make any sense of the Zahira story except one who clearly had also read the newspaper stories on it. Most could not remember or identify the names or positions of either Zahira Sheik or Teesta Setalvad.

The story about the indoor stadium too cut little ice. Most of them could not recall the news at all and even when prompted, could not tell what the segment was trying to do or say. What was striking to us, was the fact that so many of them could not recall any of the other clips at all apart from the Rajasthan. Even after some prompting from the survey team, most of them could not even describe any part of the other segments that they had just viewed, even though they were told before the screening that they would be asked to watch a bit of television and then would be asked a few simple

questions about what they saw. This we take to be an indicator of the incomprehensibility of the text.

It is this response that leads us to the question of whether the audio-visual itself can be categorized into the oral audiovisual and the print audio visual. I would argue that many of the features of oral narrative, both in the terms of its subject and its narrative styles, are found in the segment on the Rajasthan accident. The narrator cues in the audience, setting a clear direction and context. There are narratives within the narratives which reinforce the story. The victims and the characters easily elide into larger character types or stereotypes. Emotion and emotional responses are the most significant aspect of the story. There is hardly any subplot. There is no analysis. Perhaps most significant is the fact that there is a strong sense of a community in this segment, with which the respondents identify. In fact, here the victims are shown, not as the people who had actually died, but their relatives. The striking thing about this segment which is common to most such types of news is the contrast between the suffering, the crying or the anger, of the common man, in contrast to the poise, official language, stance and attitude of the bureaucrats, officials or politicians. High emotion makes good television, while reasoned responses sound pompous and distant. Some of the features of these clips may also be compared to the narrative structure of melodrama, where the most valued response is emotion and emotional integrity.

After the questions on the segments, the team would try to start a discussion about news and what they thought of as news. When asked about the kind of news that they like watching, and wanted more of, many of them said that they wanted more news about accidents, and misfortunes suffered by the poor. When asked why, apart from the fact that they wanted to hear about poor people, they also said that they felt this had more relevance to them. Their explanation was that often they heard about accidents in areas where their children or other family members went to work and so they knew that they would be late in coming home. Whether this is a valid reason or not, the

fact remains that there was a strong sense of identification with this kind of story.

On the contrary, the story about the Best Bakery case was completely incomprehensible. Only one woman said she thought it had something to do with the Gujarat genocide ('hatyakanda' was the word she used). But she was one of the trainers in the class and she reads some newspapers quite regularly. The Bangla version of the story - quite perfunctory and with just two extremely short clips - also reflects the relative importance of this story for the news programme. Instead there were stories of local interest which took up most space.

The fact that those with some years of formal schooling could all recall the clips fairly accurately seems to indicate the fact that some exposure to the print medium is definitely a factor that enhances the rate of comprehension and competence in reading the audiovisual medium too. Therefore, the findings seem to suggest that the hypothesis that we began with - that the oral competency level does not necessarily automatically convert into the requisite level of competence in the audiovisual medium seems to be suggested.

Thus there seems to be an indication that reading television is not just an inherent skill, but one that depends on other factors. One of factors may be the level of competency in the print medium while another determining factor may be the level of competence in 'reading' a variety of media products. The results of our survey also showed seven of the respondents had responses different from those of the majority. These seven were women with no formal education and extremely low levels of literacy but they could all recall each of the clips quite accurately. When this happened the first time, we thought that there was some anomalous characteristic that we could not properly identify. The woman in fact said she loved watching movies and volunteered that *The Sound of Music* was her favourite film. Our surveyor was rather sceptical and began asking her some questions about the movie,

which she could answer. Since then we have found some more such rather counter-intuitive responses. However, there is one similarity that we find in all these cases, and that is that all of them have in the questionnaire revealed that they enjoy a large range of media products - even on television, they have listed not just serials and Bangla films - as most of the non-literate respondents did - but news programmes, sports, discussion programmes. They all listen to the radio a lot and enjoy music - both Bangla and Hindi songs. Thus, there seems to be two kinds of competencies working in the sphere of audiovisual media. The first competency is one that develops alongside familiarity with print culture, but the second which may be called an audiovisual literacy which also seems to be a skill that is learnt and acquired and may be found to be completely separate from the traditional notions we have at present of the categories of the oral and print cultures. Audiovisual competency may be connected to print literacy competency but the evidence of the exceptions would suggest that it may also develop as a separate quality.

Another interesting point in the cases of the exceptions is that they all tend to watch news programming more regularly than the others, and also watch news magazine kinds of programmes. All of them said that they watched news because they felt it was relevant to their lives. Examples cited by them include price rise, accidents and disasters and information about the polio vaccine campaign. In the case of the other respondents, the relevance of news to their lives was seen to be nil. In fact in discussions afterwards, they would say that they felt that the news programmes did not deal with issues that poor people like them find useful. At one discussion group which was entirely female, the women vehemently said that they wanted more news about women, especially violence on women as they thought that not enough coverage was given to attacks on women, especially poor women.

The fact that most of the respondents mentioned the fact that they liked watching the popular Bangla films could also be significant in understanding the levels or cluster of cognitive abilities of the audience. Popular Bangla

films also have their own distinctive style of visuality and narrative. They tend to follow simple narrative structures which are heavily based on melodrama and the structure of morality is also dependent on the moral framework found in melodrama. In this framework, the values are simple-the poor are the good, and the bureaucracy, the police, the ministers and all other holders of power are corrupt and greedy, willing to do whatever they need to in order to hold on to or increase their power and wealth. There may be a few of the good characters in these setups, but they are helpless against the powerful. The structure of the story is not particularly different from the story that we get in numerous stories on the Bangla news channels.

The people's voice is presented in almost the same way - inarticulate, in groups with one speaking out, in contrast to the suave language and mannerisms of the powerful, usually alone. There are two scenes which may be compared - one from a film called *Amar Rokte Tomar Shohag* and a news story from Alpha Bangla. In the film, the hero, Tapas Pal, is a worker on a construction site who brings the workers together to demand from their foreman that the company pay wages for the time lost to a worker who is injured while working on the site. In the news segment, the story is about workers not getting their dues from the ESI workers' insurance scheme. Here too, one of the workers stands and explains the problem and expresses the anger of the collective standing behind him. The similarities are startling. The televisual language and the language of the Bangla film are in the same register or of the same kind, both visually and structurally and with similar underlying ideological foundations or assumptions. The characters who act in these films are instantly placeable in the narrative - the heroes Chiranjeet and Tapas Pal are the good guys and Biplab Chatterjee is the bad guy. There is no need for the film to work on establishing their characters or backgrounds. Similarly, the ordinary person, especially the worker, is always on the side of the good, but oppressed and bullied with no recourse to justice. There is no need for any complicated analysis or context in these stories.

If we compare these narratives to the news narratives on NDTV (or 24×7) or even the IndiaTV one, we find significant differences. First, the screen itself clearly shows that it is targetted at an extremely literate audience. There is the logo with the time, the running news ribbon at the bottom. The backdrop itself is cluttered with three distinct divisions, the artist's impression of the world map, the three screens of the left and the anchor. In fact the backdrop changes during this particular segment. In the presentation there is an attempt to analyse events, to get a cross section of opinion and to at least try to present a complex narrative. The voice over gives the audience a summary of the Best Bakery case and then moves to a longish interview with Teesta Setalvad. This is followed by a series of interviews with a member of the National Minorities Commission, BJP leaders, Congress leaders as the segment introduces the idea of the impact on the local level BJP, the reaction of the national level BJP where Vajpayee had at one time made statements critical of Modi and so on. That is, the story is not merely a reporting of facts, but attempts to capture many dimensions and ramifications of the particular incident. This, I would argue is actually a narrative style more in accordance with the print narrative structure, where a number of supplementary or subordinate narratives run parallel or interspersed with the main narrative. This technique as a style could be called the print audiovisual. These narratives, I would like to argue, are based on the structure of print narrative structures, with plots, multiple narrators, many voices entering the narrative, contextualization through visual clues - shots of the Parliament, or the Supreme Court etc., - shots which assume literacy as the name is shown on the board, or familiarity with the visual as determining location. There is a lot more information packed into such a segment which demands more highly developed cognitive skills to comprehend and decipher. These skills I would argue are connected to literacy very directly. The only way that these skills may be enhanced is, apparently, through a development of the audio-visual literacy.

Large segments of the audience of the televisual are not trained in the reading and deciphering of sophisticated texts. Therefore the programming may be constructed in relation to the level of "reading" abilities of the particular segment of the audience that it is targeted for. Thus the relevance of determining cross-media abilities and comprehension abilities that exist within various audience segments, such as the similarities between the construction of news segments and the popular Bangla film. Both these genres aim to attract particular viewerships. While it is easy to equate the reading abilities of audience segments with income levels, because the level of literacy is itself linked to income levels, the few, but significant exceptions thrown up by the survey suggests that print literacy alone may not be the determining factor. This investigation may be extended to include the ways in which children begin to develop skills of 'reading' the televisual. What, if any, is the relationship between the levels of evolving familiarity of print media and the ability to decipher sophisticated televisual texts? There is much being written about audience segmentation especially with the spurt in the number of television channels in the last two years. It seems to me that it is worth investigating how far the literate abilities of the audience determine the form of televisual programming and the implications of such relationships.

References

[1](#) David Page and Willam Crawley, *Satellites over South Asia : Broadcasting Culture and the Public Sphere*, Sage Publications, New Delhi, London, California: 2001.

[2](#) Melissa Butcher, *Transnational Television, Cultural Identity and Change*, Sage Publications, New Delhi, London, California: 2003.

[3](#) Kirk Johnson, *Television and Social Change in Rural India*, Sage Publications, New Delhi, London, California: 2000.