

The Popularity of Indian Soap Operas in Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

Watching Indian soap operas, especially in the evening, is now one of the key phenomena in Bangladesh society. Several researchers and newspaper reports claim that television viewers of Bangladesh, women in particular, spend a significant amount of their daily-time watching those Indian soaps. This study examines why Bangladeshi television audiences consume this particular media content while the similar is being produced and broadcast on local television channels. According to uses and gratification (U&G) researchers, people select particular media content(s) to fulfil the needs they have. However, this study also supplements that the selection of the contents is not predominantly governed by the demand of their needs, rather by the demand of their choices. Using an analytical induction method, the study finds that multiple causes (e.g. story of Indian soap opera, the theme of the story that reflects everyday life, the craft of soap's narrative, characterisation, prominence of women character(s) in the story, retention of audience interest for next episode, acting, characters' lifestyle, etc.) function together behind their loyal viewership toward Indian soap operas. The findings of the study also suggest that the inability of the local television industry to meet viewers' expectations facilitates the consumption of Indian soaps and other television contents by the television audiences of Bangladesh.

Keywords: *Popularity, Indian soap operas, reasons, television audiences, Bangladesh.*

INTRODUCTION

The broadcasting of the Indian Television Channels (ITCs) programmes began in Bangladesh in the 1990s when the government of Bangladesh permitted the use of dish antennas for satellite transmission of foreign television channels. In the beginning, there were few foreign channels and the reach was limited because of the high price of the dish antenna. But gradually foreign satellite channels started reaching Bangladeshi houses through cable connections. By the end of the 90s, several foreign television channels reached Bangladeshis, especially city audiences and made a visible impression among the viewers (Ahmed, 2012). Among those most watched and popular channels, the majority was Indian. Since then ITCs - Star Jalsha, ETV Bangla, Zee Bangla, Star Plus, Sony Entertainment Television, etc., through their programmes have been continually enthralling Bangladeshi Television Audiences (BTAs).

A study reveals that soap opera, popularly known as serial, is the most popular programme among Bangladeshi viewers broadcast by ITCs (Khanam, Sarwar, & Abir, 2014). The study finds that among 100 respondents 68% watch Indian serials regularly and 22% of them watch Bangladeshi Television Channels (BTCs). Another study claims, of the women respondents, 51.9% watch Indian soaps regularly, while 4.6% watch Bangladeshi drama serials (Islam, Chowdhury, & Islam, 2017). Referring to a survey conducted by the Population Science Department of the University of Dhaka, BBC Bangla reports that 90% of the women watch television; of them 60% watch ITCs (Hasnat, 2016). The report also points out that these

channels gain popularity mostly for their soap operas. Tanvir, Hassan and Mollick (2013) in their study estimate a higher percentage of Bangladeshi adolescent viewers watch Indian soap operas (ISOs) in comparison to local dramas. The study calculates that together with other media contents, 34.2% of the adolescents watch Hindi serials and 27.9% watch Indian Bangla serials, while 13.5% of them agree that they watch Bangladeshi dramas. According to Cable Operators Association of Bangladesh (COAB), BTAs spend most of their television viewing time (70%) with several ITCs, while only 20% of them stay with native channels, and for the remaining 10% of their viewing time, they tune other foreign channels (Helal, 2014). COAB claims that soap operas to a great extent and similar other television programmes, such as *Crime Petrol*, drastically enhance the popularity of Indian Hindi and Bangla language television channels in Bangladesh. Several Bangladeshi national newspapers (e.g., Salam, 2013; Ahmmed, 2015; Rahman, 2016; Mohona, 2018) also report on this scenario - preference for ISOs. *The Daily Star*, a leading English language newspaper of Bangladesh, quotes Mostafa Kamal Sayeed of National Television (NTV), “Bangladeshi audiences are not interested in the country’s telefilms or serials...,” (“60pc Bangladeshi women,” 2016); rather, they enjoy watching Indian soaps (Khanam et al., 2014).

Table 1: Some currently running popular Indian Bangla and Hindi soap operas in Bangladesh

Name of Soap Operas	Channels
<i>Kusum Dola</i> (First episode: August 22, 2016)	Star Jalsha
<i>Karunamoyee Rani Rashmoni</i> (First episode: July 24, 2017)	Zee Bangla
<i>Bokul Kotha</i> (First episode: December 4, 2017)	Zee Bangla
<i>Yeh Rishta Kya Kehlata Hai</i> (First episode: January 12, 2009)	Star Plus
<i>Kumkum Bhagya</i> (First episode: April 15, 2014)	Zee TV
<i>Yeah Hain Mohabbatein</i> (First episode: Dec 3, 2013)	Star Plus

Source: (Mohona, 2018; Alam, 2018)

In recent years this viewing habit of Indian soaps has become a key phenomenon in Bangladesh society. BTAs, women in particular, spend a significant amount of their daily time watching these soap operas. Al Helal (2013) points out that the viewers sometimes forget to consume food while viewing Indian serials. He goes on to say that they can even spend a day without having a meal, but cannot afford missing an episode of their favourite serials. This is a kind of identical phenomenon that the world experienced in the 1980s when the audiences from many countries were captivated by a myth-making American soap opera *Dallas*. Ang (1985) mentions that the streets used to become empty and water consumption dropped down during the show.

Therefore, the point here to be made is: why people of one country consume media contents, particularly soap operas produced in other countries? Ang (1985) recognises from the letter responses that pleasure that arouses in audiences while watching *Dallas* plays the key role in motivating people from different countries of the world watch it. She then validly asks: what are those things in *Dallas* that constitute pleasure? Ang herself responds:

Any text employs certain rhetorical strategies to arouse the interest of the viewers, and obviously, *Dallas* succeeds in attracting the attention of millions of people with very varied social, cultural and psychological backgrounds, and maintaining their involvement in the programme. Very general and

widespread structural characteristics of television programmes such as *Dallas* contribute to this (p. 28).

Hobson (1996) and Munshi (2010) have similar articulation regarding how pleasure is constituted. For them, soap operas' narrative plays a vital role in captivating audiences. And this might help us to understand our situation: why our television audiences like to watch ISOs.

Therefore, this paper aims to address the issue by asking: what motivates BTAs to watch soap operas broadcast on ITCs?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The general objective of this section is to provide a framework for the present study through an engaged review of some selected literature. The literature reviewed here could be divided into the following: conceptualising soap opera through prevailed understanding and thoughts, studies on soap operas by Bangladeshi researchers and the U&G (uses and gratification) theory and motives of media consumptions.

Conceptualising Soap Opera

The genre *soap opera*, popularly known as serial to its viewers in Indian regions, originated as a radio programme and was 'characterised by an accent on human relations, domesticity and daily life' (Modleski 1982/84, as cited in Ang, 1985). Soap opera named after the soap manufacturers as the programme was largely sponsored by giant soap manufacturers in the US, such as Proctor and Gamble. The need for an advertising vehicle for the soap manufacturers to reach consumers contributes to the origination of the genre. Conversely, radio networks needed sponsors for a daytime programme, which initially targeted daytime radio listeners, women in particular, at home. According to Copeland (1991), soaps were principally programmed to cater to the female listeners in the household to sell soap powder. Reasonably, familial issues became the focal point of soaps' narrative with women in the centre. Therefore, soaps were considered a feminine-oriented narrative (Munshi, 2010), though the body of the audiences consists of both women and men (Warhol, 1998). Geraghty (2005) writes that "the centrality of women, and in particular the predominance of stories about families, was an important element in work which ought to situate soap operas into a larger category of melodrama". In these melodramatic never-ending narratives the characters deal with their lives. Therefore, as Hobson (2003) articulates, "their actions and experiences resonate with the experiences of the audience that forges the affiliation between the characters within the drama and therefore the audience".

In India (in Bangladesh as well), soap opera was also popularly perceived as women's genre that was made for woman viewers. But according to the creative heads of different Indian production houses, Indian prime time soap operas are made not only for women but also for the family viewership which consists of both men and women (Munshi, 2010). The family is thus the 'central basis of structure' in narrating soap stories in India as was in British and US soaps (*EastEnders*, *Brookside*; *Dynasty*, *The Bold and the Beautiful*) and the genre shares some of the generic characteristics (Munshi, 2010; Brown, 1994, as cited in Drain, 1996) with soaps of US, UK, Australia and many other countries.

Studies on Soap Operas by Bangladeshi Researchers

Ang's (1985) *Watching Dallas: Soap Opera and the Melodramatic Imagination* is thought to be one of the first influential studies in the field of qualitative research on soap opera audiences. However, as Munshi mentions, the study on soap operas, particularly television soap operas, gained rhythm in Western academia in the 1980s. It takes years to come to Indian regions and according to Munshi, earlier studies on Indian television was mainly focused on "the earlier years of satellite broadcasting in India, and dealt mainly with religious and nationalists themes such as the televising of the epics *Ramayan* and *Mahabharat*, and serials such as *Hum Log* and *Buniyaad*" (2010, p. 22). *Prime Time Soap Operas on Indian Television* is the first book of its kind that addresses the most popular programme broadcast on Indian televisions, Munshi herself claims.

In Bangladesh, there was no such large scale serious study initiated before on soaps/drama serials. However, the researchers have come across some papers written on soap operas by Bangladeshi researchers.

'Toward the impacts of Indian drama serials on Bangladeshi social system: An overview of people's perception' is a study by M. A. Al Helal (2013) which examined how Indian drama serials negatively affect Bangladeshi social system. The study reveals that "Indian tele-serials provoke sexual behaviour, instigate pre and extra-marital affair, educate criminal activity, originate eve-teasing, and nurture conflict between family members". Using a combined method – quantitative and qualitative, Khanam, Sarwar and Abir (2014) in their study also investigated the impact of Indian television serials on Bangladeshi viewers together with their popularity.

In their study 'Effect of satellite television on the culture of Bangladesh: The viewer's perception', Shamsheer and Abdullah (2012) investigated principally the impact of foreign satellite channels on Bangladeshi culture. They claim that due to the heavy consumption of foreign channels Bangladeshi people are increasingly habituating with foreign lifestyles that blatantly harm the social norms and values of the local people.

In her study 'Women in Bangladeshi soap operas: Myth or reality?', Haque (2013) examines "the representation of women in Bangladeshi TV soaps is an attempt to establish the significance for Bangladeshi culture of the local 'mega serials'". She observes that there are some attempts seen in depicting women positively – active and independent – in new Bangladeshi serials, but women representation is still stereotypical.

The researchers have come across a study which to some extent is similar to the present study, but different in terms of approach. In his study, Arman (2016) investigates the reasons for the popularity of Indian Bangla language television channels in Bangladesh. To do so he, instead of using audience studies perspective, watches the programmes broadcast on both Bangladeshi and Indian Bangla channels. He mentions the following reasons for which Indian Bangla channels are popular in Bangladesh: a) unlike Bangladeshi channels, Indian channels are very strategic in accommodating advertisements when a show is on air, b) the rhythm of the programmes – every programme ends in a certain way that inspires the audiences to watch the next episodes, c) participation of Bangladeshi competitors in reality shows of those channels, d) programmes starts and ends on time, and e) use of modern technology and quality of the programmes (for example, script and story). And the last point that he makes is the role of Bangladeshi media. According to him, Bangladeshi newspapers highlight programmes of Indian channels and celebrities more than their local television programmes and celebrities.

'Television viewing patterns of Bangladeshi audience: A study of Indian and Bangladeshi soap operas' by Islam, Chowdhury and Islam (2017) is a quantitative study that addresses mainly soap viewing pattern of female-male and rural-urban audiences together with the purpose of soap opera consumption (both Indian and Bangladeshi), in general. The study finds that women are heavy viewers compared to their counterpart and 'soap viewing is more prevalent among rural women (78%) than urban women (63.1%)'. The purposes of the watching soaps that the study finds are entertainment (48.6%), time pass (35.5%), information and knowledge (7.5%), getting rid of boredom (6.5%) and others (1.9%).

Another study entitled 'Impact of Indian drama serials on Bangladeshi culture: A qualitative study based on perceived situation and risk factors in urban setting' by Razu, Yeasmin and Islam (2018) did not focus much on the reasons why Bangladeshi people consume Indian drama serials. Rather, the main objectives of this study were to investigate how Indian drama serials affects the local culture by bringing changes in lifestyle, family and intimate relationship, and forms of art and literature. They mention that people watch Indian drama serials merely for acting. The study also finds that gorgeous jewellery, fashionable dresses and a luxurious lifestyle are significant elements to draw audiences.

The U&G Theory and Motives of Media Consumptions

One of the foremost used approaches for studying the relationship between mass media and audiences is that of the U&G theory. The theory that originated based on the psychological perspective allows the researchers to examine how and why individuals use media and their contents (Papacharissi, 2008). It is grounded on the assumption that people select media and/or their contents as certain media and their contents gratify the needs or desires of the users (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974). The U&G theory also acknowledges that the motives for the consumption of media and contents by users might vary. For instance, the reasons for watching the same TV programme may be different for different viewers. They have 'different minds and ideas' (Mus Chairil & Catohrinner, 2019). The U&G researchers assume that the audiences are aware of and can articulate their reasons for consuming various media contents (Wimmer & Dominick, 2003). Scholars (e.g., Palmgreen, Wenner, & Rayburn, 1980; Bantz, 1982; Rubin, 1983; Perse, 1986) of mass communication identify different motives or reasons for using specific media contents (Papacharassi, 2008) that fulfil specific needs of the users and are derived from their psyche (Fiske & Hartley, 1978, 2004). Rubin (1983, as cited in Papacharissi, 2008, p. 140) identifies nine motives of television use by the viewers: relaxation, companionship, entertainment, social interaction, information, habit, pass time, arousal and escape; while Katz et al., Fiske & Hartley (2004) mentioned a list five basic needs (a. cognitive needs: the acquiring of information, knowledge, and understanding; b. affective needs: the need for emotional and aesthetic experience, love and friendship, the desire to see beautiful things; c. personal integrative needs: the need for self-confidence, stability, status, reassurance; d. social integrative needs: the need for strengthening contacts with family, friends, and others; e. tension-release needs: the need for escape and diversion) of the users that mass media fulfil and for which the media users consume media and their contents. Researchers also come up with additional motives, such as para-social interaction (Palmgreen et al., 1980) and surveillance and voyeurism (Bantz, 1982).

However, though the media industry is based on the perception that audiences are at least somewhat active, U&G researchers are divided into two groups: one group, supporters of the escapist model of media use, considers the mass media audiences as predominantly

passive and the other group believes that audiences are active recipients of the media contents (Cooper, 1996, as cited in Ruggiero, 2000). The researchers who view media audiences as passive recipients presume that television viewing is principally a leisurely activity in order to pass time and contrary to this, the second group of U&G researchers argues that media use is selective and primarily motivated by rational self-awareness of the user's personal needs and the particular types of media and contents chosen by the users themselves fulfil those needs or expectations of them (Barwise, Ehrenberg, & Goodhardt, 1982; Kubey, 1986 and Katz et al., 1974, as cited in Ruggiero, 2000).

METHODS AND DESIGN

This study employs qualitative, exploratory and descriptive design and the researchers accordingly use in-depth interviews as a method of data collection.

To fulfil the objective of the study, which is 'to find out the reasons that motivate BTAs to watch ISOs', the following procedures were undertaken:

- a. review of existing literature,
- b. constructing interview-guide, and
- c. in-depth interview with the television viewers who have been watching soap operas broadcast on several ITCs.

The researchers use purposive and snowball sampling to select the samples (interview respondents). The respondents were selected using the following criteria: a) television audiences of Bangladesh watching ISOs for at least two years; b) an equal number of respondents taken from rural and urban settings; c) respondents were selected irrespective of their age, gender, marital status, education, profession, religion, economic status etc.

Based on stated criteria, two respondents were first selected purposively from rural and urban areas respectively and the remaining respondents for interview were selected using a snowball sampling technique.

A total of 10 respondents were interviewed at their residences using a semi-structured interview guide: five from the rural setting (Atrai sub-district of Naogaon District) and five from an urban area (Dhaka). ISO viewing experience of these audiences spans from two to twenty-two years and their ages span from twenty-one to fifty-two years. Among the rural respondents, two were college teachers (RR1, RR2) and three were house-wives (RR3, RR4, RR5) and of the urban respondents, one was NGO professional (UR1), one was a businessman (UR2), two were house-wives (UR3, UR4) and one was a student (UR5).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study largely investigates the reasons for the popularity of ISOs among the television audiences of Bangladesh; in other words, it tries to find out the components that these Indian cultural artefacts have for which BTAs are motivated to watch. The study also sheds some lights on the current scenario of Bangladeshi serials.

The Reasons for the Popularity of Indian Soap Operas in Bangladesh

The U&G theory endorses that people consume specific media contents to satisfy certain needs that are derived from their individual psyche. Referring to some studies, McQuail (1983) mentions that media consumers, women in particular, actively and consciously get specific kinds of gratification from mass media - especially from soap operas - those eventually satisfy the requirement for emotional unleash, identification, entertainment, escape,

company, information and relaxation. At this juncture, it can be argued that media consumers can randomly select media content(s) to fulfil those aspects of their needs. But, in reality, this is not the fact, at least for the interview respondents of this study. Therefore, some questions might emerge out of this: Why do different individuals choose different media contents from the same and/or from different media platforms to fulfil their needs of gratification? Why do some individuals like to get news from one source than another? Why do some consume a programme from a specific television channel although similar programmes are screened by many? Or, why do people sometimes prefer foreign media contents to local, though similar media contents have been produced locally? This indicates that individuals do select media contents for fulfilling the needs they have, but they select the contents not being driven by the demand of their needs, rather by the demand of their choices. The researchers of this study aspire to substantiate the same by looking at the reasons for consumption of ISOs by BTAs. In doing so, the researchers interviewed a total of ten television viewers of Bangladesh who have been watching ISOs on several ITCs regularly for at least two years.

In interviews, the respondents of the study reveal the reasons/motives for watching ISOs that gratify them. They particularly point out: soaps' story, the theme of the story that reflects everyday life, the craft of soap's narrative, characterization, prominence of women character(s) in the story, ability to retain the interest of the audience for next episode, characters' lifestyle, dresses and jewellery, the timely start of the episode, acting, dialogue, fixed break for advertisement, beautiful location and sets, etc. motivate them to watch ISOs regularly.

According to the facts gathered through the interviews, it is evident that Bangladeshi viewers of soap opera are more interested in watching long-running Indian soaps than locally produced short-spanned drama serials or Tele-dramas. The respondents strongly acknowledge the uniqueness of ISOs. The researchers categorise the responses of interview respondents of this study in the following groups: formative, performative, socio-personal, reasons for the motivation of empowerment and strategic reasons for priming.

a. Formative Reasons

Mir Sabbir (2015), a reporter of BBC Bangla, once asked a housewife in Dhaka: Why Indian serials are popular in Bangladesh? In response, she instead responded to the reporter 'why she likes to watch Indian serials'. She articulated, "The story is about the happiness and sorrow of a family, that's what I like. The story has suspense as well. Moreover, costume and make-up are good. This is why I watch". This resonance of desire for soap opera audiences is sincerely heard by the ISO producers. They understand the degrees of importance of a family for a person living in South Asian contexts. Stressing the centrality of the family in Indian soaps, Ekta Kapoor - the most successful producer of Balaji Telefilms, also referred to as the "Queen of soaps" in India - expresses that:

One subject which holds eternal interest for us Indians is the family – every Indian family is bound by traditions, festivals, etc., and every family tends to celebrate occasions with relatives, every family has certain characters who are good and bad, or rather, have particular habits. Then, I weaved all this realization together (Lalwani, 2003 as cited in Munshi, 2010, p. 118).

However, for audiences to watch a soap opera, it is the story they want to see eventually. And again, it is the story that connects them with the world of soaps. The importance of soap's narrative to attract audiences is thus enormous. The narrative plays an inevitable role in stimulating the engagement of viewers (Ang, 2005). According to Hobson (1996), soap's story emotionally engages audiences and makes them an irreversible part of the programme. While studying the audiences of British television soap opera *Crossroads* (2 November 1964 – 30 May 2003) Hobson observed how soap's narrative works in appealing audiences. Munshi (2010) correctly mentions about the distinctive feature of ITCs' flagship programmes *soap operas*. She writes,

The story of prime time soaps in India ... is a fascinating one. It is as compelling as the narratives in the soaps that continue to bring back audiences day after day and keep them engaged for years on end ... made the small screen a big medium in reaching out to people (p. 27).

The findings of this study also validate the claim of Hobson (1996) and Munshi (2010) and support the responses of Hasrul's (2019) study respondents from India on the importance of the story for a narrative-based media content. According to the respondents, the stories of soaps play the most important role to draw an audience. Interview respondents claim that the story and twist/cliffhanger (which creates an attraction to know what happen next) in the story are two major elements for which they cannot refrain from watching ISOs. A respondent who works in an NGO states that the stories of Indian serials have extraordinary power to amaze their viewers. She explains,

It is interesting about Indian serials that you sit for watching one episode, but it takes you to another episode (UR1).

The similar opinion comes from one of the two male respondents. According to him, the stories of Indian soaps are so appealing that it is indeed impossible to abstain from watching even a single episode. He shares,

I usually finish my tasks before my favourite serial starts. If I miss a regular episode due to some urgency, I watch the missed episode on YouTube immediately after my task is done (UR2).

Another respondent says,

Stories of ISOs are well organized... (RR2).

The craft of story narration of soaps contributes tremendously to achieving popularity. What will happen next in the story or to the life of a certain character (the lead character in particular)? How does the said character get out of the problem? Does the character continue fighting till the end? Does s/he get support from others? These common concerns, alike *Crossroad* viewers (Hobson, 1996), compel BTAs to continue watching ISOs.

The centrality and prominence of women character(s) in the soap's narrative in creating emotional realism and the theme that melodramatically highlights the familial issues have a remarkable stake in popularising the genre among South Asian audiences. Munshi (2010) quoted from the statements of the creative heads of different production houses in India, such as Sandeep Sikkand and Shailja Kejriwal of Balaji Telefilms Limited, "Our audiences in India love the melodrama in daily soaps ... we Indians are people who love being melodramatic ... look at the overly dramatic way in which we react to even regular everyday situations." The same is true for BTAs, as in Dissanayake's (1993) term, they live in a similar social existence which is melodramatic. It is, however, worth stating that media offer a kind of cultural sphere that 'belong to no one and yet to everyone' (Giddens, 1991; as cited in Latiffah, Samsudin & Fauziah, 2009). This implies, media users irrespective of their place of origin can find their space in the content provided and can relate it to their situations. Interview respondents, particularly women, therefore, validly claim that the prominence of a female character(s) as the central figure of Indian soaps' stories and the themes that are based on common everyday family and marriage lives inspire them to relate with their own lives and consider the characters as actual members of society. A respondent (RR1) empathetically expresses that when she sees a character in the drama, the lead character, in particular, has the same predicaments that she has in her real life, she then forgets all her sufferings. This element in the ISOs' story motivates her to watch them regularly. Similar thoughts have been expressed by a respondent who utters,

When I can relate these with my life story, this gives me more pleasure to watch (RR3).

Another female respondent emphasises,

I watch soaps because it seems to me that their stories (screen characters) are similar to our life story – women's troubles, their happiness, all resemble our family life stories (RR5).

The researchers observe that the respondents put particular emphasis on characters in soap operas. They, both female and male soap opera viewers, strongly expect the presence of strong females and sensitive male characters in soaps. The characters, like 'Joba' of *Ke Apon Ke Por*, 'Rakhi' of *Rakhi Bondhon*, 'Pakhi' of *Bojhena Se Bojhena*, 'Ruhii' of *Yeh Hai Mohabbatein*, etc., of Indian soaps play a vital role in achieving popularity. According to Kejriwal, Munshi (2010) states, characters are important components of soap depending on which character the story is built. She makes an important statement about characters: audiences might sometimes get tired of the story, but never get tired of seeing their favourite characters. Some of the interview respondents of the current study assertively speak about the uniqueness of soap opera characters. They mention that in contrast to local drama serials where women are delineated as weak and shackled by the patriarchal society, there is strong presences of female characters as well as sensitive men characters in ISOs. This depiction of Characters in the story allow audiences to participate virtually in the world of soap. A respondent shares,

In Joba, a soap opera broadcast on Star Jalsha, an Indian Bengali language television channel, the character Joba faces so much pain, trouble in her life. Her relatives, some family members, always put her in troubles; but she doesn't always remain silent, she fights against injustice. And this is what I like to watch (RR4).

b. Performative Reasons

It is not enough to tell a good story or keep the twist in the narrative at the end of each episode to retain audiences. A story needs to be reached to the viewers. And this is what the performers in the name of characters do in the story (Hobson, 2003). Munshi (2010) writes:

Actors and actresses in soap operas, and the characters they essay on screen, are the main pull that entices viewers to the genre and keeps them coming back day after day to watch the soaps. They are held in the highest regard by loyal audiences ...

This implies that the relationship between the audiences and actors/actresses is built through the medium of performance. Therefore, there should not be any disbelief that the performance of actors and actresses has a great contribution to the popularity of the genre. The research finding also justifies this. The respondents mention that spontaneous acting of soap characters is also a reason for the popularity of Indian soaps. They argue that Indian actors and actresses perform exceptionally well, especially lead actors and actresses. They make the characters so trustworthy, as though what they articulated through performance is real, the respondents emphasize. One of the respondents who is also an actor mention,

Stories of Indian soaps are brilliant, and the acting makes them exceptional ...their actors, actresses, co-actors, and even kids, all the characters in the serial act brilliantly (UR2).

He also remembers,

8 to 9 years back I was not a viewer of serials. But my parents used to watch regularly. Once I started watching with them. In the beginning ... occasionally. But at a certain point in time, I started liking serials. This is entirely because of the child character 'Ruhi'. She has lots of pain and she acts very well. Since then I never miss an episode of my favourite Indian serials.

c. Socio-Personal Reasons

A prime principle of U&G theory is that the audiences' behaviour in terms of selecting medium to be used is guided by rational self-awareness of their own needs and expectations and only particular types of media and contents can fulfil those needs and expectations of the users (Katz et al., 1974). This highlights that audiences' media usage is selective and they select a medium and/or contents when they know the contents of the selected medium can satisfy all those socio-personal needs and expectations.

As mentioned before several motives - relaxation, para-social interaction, acquiring information and knowledge, the desire to see beautiful things, emotional and aesthetic experience, entertainment etc. - come to play during the selection of media content to be

watched. Similar phenomena have been observed in Bangladeshi viewers of ISOs. Some of the respondents of the current study agree that when they watch a programme, like Indian soaps, they feel relaxed. According to them, maybe it's because of those soaps story or attractiveness, but they feel stress-free. A respondent points out,

Basically, I watch soaps after all my work is done, it's true that in family life there are many things we face every day, which make us sad and worried; but when I start watching my favourite Indian soaps I forget everything, I feel relaxed as if nothing had happened to my real life (RR3).

For a respondent (RR5) who lives in a rural area of Bangladesh, ISOs work as a point of departure for a new start. She mentions that when she was bored with her own family life (performing a similar role every day), these Indian serials give her new hope and energy to live.

Beautiful dresses, makeup, jewellery, well-decorated houses, character's lifestyle, outdoor location, etc., which have significant contribution for popularity, are most essential ingredients of ISOs and these are the sources of pleasure for audiences (Munshi, 2010). As of Hobson,

The creation of a character through dress and appearance is an important aspect of the fictional representation in television soap operas ... the costume helps to create personality and register the changes in personality. A costume can create the 'ordinary' or the most glamorous. The clothes have to be completely 'in character' for the soap opera and its style (2003, as cited in Munshi, 2010).

The researchers observe that the female viewers, particularly rural viewers, of Indian soaps repeatedly talk about dresses, makeup, jewellery, well-decorated houses, and character's rich lifestyle. The interviewees mention that these indispensable elements of Indian soaps are also the key points of their gossip. A respondent spontaneously articulates,

We regularly discuss these serials. When we women meet together we chat about: what would happen to Joba (the lead character of *Ke Apon Ke Por*)?, why did she not protest for the injustice?, we talk about her new sari, jewellery, her makeup, etc... (RR3).

According to these respondents, this conversation gives them immense pleasure.

d. Reasons for Motivation of Empowerment

It is generally believed that people watch soap operas merely for entertainment. But it is not always true. A complex mechanism functions together for the immense consumption of ISOs by the television audiences of Bangladesh, women audience in particular. For women viewers, depicting female character(s) in the story with self-esteem means a lot to them. An interview respondent (UR1) asserts that she likes serials broadcast on Star Jalsha and Zee Bangla because in those drama serials women voices are given value, they get priority and they protest against injustice. Another respondent gives her opinion in this way,

We, village women, face many problems, but we cannot protest. When we see that characters like 'Joba', 'Kironmala' or 'Pakhi' protest against those injustices, we become very happy, it gives us pleasure (RR5).

Some of the respondents believe that the encouragement that women get from these soaps' narratives enable women to protect themselves from unexpected crises in future.

e. *Strategic Reasons for Priming*

For producers, proper strategy is crucial for the success of the production. A good production can fail to draw audiences due to wrong strategies. Fixing a right slot for airing the right soap, remaining steady and getting habituated with that time slot, being prudent in allocating time and amount of advertisements are some very essential things for a television soap opera to be successful. The scheduling of airing time of *Kasautii Zindagi Kay* (The Trials of Life, 29 October 2001 – 28 February 2008), a Star Plus prime time soap, gives us a clear indication of how strategic should the entertainment television industry be for reaching out to target audiences. Munshi (2010) quotes Kejriwal:

Kasautii was scheduled for 8:30 pm. At this time, the family is generally scattered around the house – the mother may be in the kitchen, dad is just back from work, the younger children are busy with homework. The researcher told us that the younger person was most likely to watch at this time, hence *Kasautii* was a love story.

Munshi (2010) observes that identical strategy has been followed during the launching of *Saat Phere* (Seven Vows/Rounds) on Zee TV in October 2005 in the time band of 9:30 pm – 10 pm and *Bidaai* (Farewell) on Star Plus in October 2007 in the time band of 9 pm – 9:30 pm. According to her, both the shows aimed to reach out family viewership and accordingly, slotted into the family viewing time bands.

Besides, regular broadcasting (four or five days a week every month throughout the year) of television soaps, habitual start and end of the programme and frequency of advertisement have a great contribution to sustain audiences. According to Kejriwal, Munshi writes, unlike US (there are season breaks there, but none in India) ISO audiences can continually watch soaps, which give the audience sense of belongingness to the extended family, hence the characters truly become a part of their family. The researchers of this study found that Bangladeshi viewers of ISOs like to watch their favourite soaps every day and habitually at the same time. Referring to their bitter viewing experience on BTCs, the respondents reveals that unlike Bangladeshi television programmes - drama serials or any programmes other than news, these Indian television programmes maintain start and end time strictly. This facilitates their viewing as they know when their favourite show will exactly start. A respondent narrates,

As I know when my favourite serials start every day I complete all my tasks, e.g. cooking beforehand. After I sit to watch those serials, I don't even serve food if they (family members) want to eat ... of course, as they know this, they don't disturb me then (RR3).

According to the respondents, the number of advertisements that Indian channels broadcast during airing a show are appropriate. A respondent mentions,

In Indian channels advertisements are very limited, not like Bangladeshi channels ... they continuously play soaps one after another... That is why people watch those channels continuously (UR5).

The respondents also emphasise that the repetition of each episode several times in a day also contributes to the soap operas popularity. According to them, if someone misses an episode for any urgency, s/he can watch later.

CONCLUSION: POPULARITY OF INDIAN SOAP OPERAS VS. INABILITY OF LOCAL TELEVISION INDUSTRY

The findings of this study support the claims of few studies (Al Helal, 2013; Haque, 2013; Khanam et al., 2014; Arman, 2016) and popular perception frequently reported on Bangladeshi newspapers (e.g., Salam, 2013; Rahman, 2016; Mohona, 2018; Alam, 2018) regarding the popularity of ISOs among BTAs. The researchers observe that none of the respondents tuned local television channels to watch Bangladeshi serials for last five years, though they never miss single episode dramas broadcast during Eid and other festive days. The responses of nine respondents about the television viewing habit of their relatives and neighbours manifest the same. Table 2 explains the viewing habit of relatives and neighbours of some respondents.

Table 2: Responses of the respondents on relative and neighbour’s television viewing habit: ISOs or Bangladeshi drama serials

Question Asked	Responses of the Respondents
Can you tell us how many television viewers who you know among your relatives or your neighbours watch Bangladeshi serials?	RR1: “I don’t need to count. Because around me most of the people watch Indian soaps. Nowadays you will rarely find people watching Bangladeshi serials.” RR3: “In our house or in my mother’s house everyone watches Indian serials. I don’t know anyone who watches Bangladeshi drama serials.” RR4: “Most of the people around me watch Indian serials. I can tell it because my neighbours or family members who I know all watch Indian serials. Even when I go to my son’s school, I find women talking about Indian serials.” UR1: “Actually I don’t know how many people watch Bangla dramas. Because I never talk to anyone about Bangladeshi serials, but I talk about Indian serials. When I go to my brother’s house or other relative’s houses I see both men and women are watching Indian serials.” UR5: “People around me usually watch Indian serials. However, there are some who I know watch Bangladeshi dramas on YouTube. But, they are few in number.”

In this study, the researchers illustrate the responses of study respondents on the reasons for the popularity of ISOs in the ‘results and discussion’ section. The researchers discern that a complex mechanism (*content* that gives meaning to the story, *form* that content takes and specific strategies taken by the Indian television channels) functions together to foster the popularity of ISOs to BTAs.

The results of this study show that the soap opera story, ability of the story to retain viewers through creating attractions (hook/cliffhanger) for the subsequent episode, centrality and prominence of women characters in the story and characters with enormous struggles and pains are the major components in ISOs that Bangladeshi audiences cannot avoid. Besides, the respondents acknowledge that unlike Bangladeshi drama serials ISOs are based on everyday familial issues - happy and unhappy lives of family members - that enable them to relate screen stories with their own. The craft of soap opera storytelling helps facilitate their viewing as they can join/rejoin watching at any point of time and can still connect with the story. Performances of the characters and their lifestyles have a significant contribution to this popularity because, in the end, characters through their performances take the story to audiences and entice them to keep watching uninterrupted. Apart from these, a fixed airing time, continuity of broadcasting soap for years, specific and prudent allocation of time for advertisements, etc., are conducive to Bangladeshi audiences.

However, the researchers surprisingly observe during the interviews that presently the BTAs are antipathetic to locally produced drama serials, whereas they used to watch them regularly before. As these audiences live in a similar social existence (Dissanayake, 1993), this antipathetic attitude towards native drama serials also facilitates the selection of ISOs as an alternative. The researchers noticed that while responding to the question(s) regarding their motivation for the consumption of Indian soaps, the study respondents repeatedly refer to 'why they now don't watch Bangladeshi serials' to justify 'why they like soaps broadcast on different ITCs'. According to the respondents, the elements that constitute pleasure while watching the program, and for which audiences watch this genre (Ang, 1985), are poorly depicted or completely absent in Bangladeshi serials. In addition, bad strategies – the untimely start of the episode, excessive numbers of advertisements, a long break for advertisements, wrong slot for airing the serial, news in the middle of the show, and different other interruptions - adopted by the Bangladeshi television channels also beget the antipathy towards locally produced drama serials.

Finally, in conclusion, it can be argued that the popularity of Indian serials relies not merely on above-discussed reasons that the Bangladeshi audiences of ISOs point out, rather the shortcomings of local drama serials and weak strategies facilitate the consumption of foreign television contents. In this age when people are continually exposed to new ideas, it is hardly possible to feed anything that they would never consciously want to. Eventually, in a free market economy where consumers have opportunities to choose a better option, they will surely use the product that can gratify them and meet their desired needs and expectations.

BIODATA

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