

The 'Reel' and the 'Real' woman

Though there has been visible progress, women's image in the media still remains a negative and sexist one. A view from Bihar.

Television has a wide reach and it can be effectively utilized to empower women through innovative programs. However, in the opinion of most women, "despite some instances of female bonding in all the serials, the central focus is on antagonism between women." During a discussion organized by Sociology department of Magadh College, Bihar, it was revealed that stereotypical portrayal of women in advertisements as well as television serials create a negative impact on most women. Here, on the basis of the discussion, an attempt has been made to analyse the position of women in the national and regional media.

Impact of Advertisements

A few years back, a huge hoarding of Tanishq Jewellery opposite Maurya Lok Complex, Patna beamed - 'Buy 24 carat gold and let your daughter stay in peace at her "Sasuraal."' The emphasis was on dowry system. Various Women's Organisations in Bihar at once took this into notice and the hoarding was ultimately removed. One shocking advertisement on the hoarding beamed: "Spend a few rupees today (ultrasound and abortion), save lakhs of rupees in dowry for the future;" thus projecting the female child as a burden. The logo of Apollo Burns Hospital in Kankarbagh (Patna) exhibited the burning face of a woman. The hospital authorities had to face heavy resistance from the local Women's Organisations in Patna. What they found questionable was the manner in which it was presented. Since the hospital treated both male and female patients, they were immediately questioned- why did the logo exhibit a burning face of a woman and not a male?

Even advertisements of beauty products make women feel inadequate. Women with disabilities are extremely critical of the way the ads are exploiting their vulnerabilities and limitations. "The scantily dressed model becomes the ideal dream woman for many young middle class girls. The beauty pageants mushrooming all over India create expectations from thousands of young women as to what should be the size and weight of an ultimate woman," says a woman activist.

The Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI), a self-regulating body set up in 1980 by the advertising agencies, advertisers and the media, had formulated a code by which advertisers regulate themselves. It ensures the truthfulness and honesty of representations and claims made by the advertisements and checks that ads are not offensive. This code applies to

advertisements in newspapers and magazines but also to ads appearing on Televisions, Radio and Cinema or on walls in forms of hoarding and posters. *'Is it being applied'? There is only one answer - "NO".*

Films and Television Serials

Many argue against the current trend of female TV characters opting to give up their career. The character of Arati in *Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi* was interested in a career. For weeks everyone in the family tried to convince her that "a woman`s place is at home". Finally she resigned. A social activist comments, "No matter how television producers justify their stand, the fact remains that media influences women the most. All of us have a social responsibility. Since serial makers are ignoring theirs, it is up to the common people to raise their voice against the negative portrayal of women in the so-called family dramas."

For the most part, women in Hindi cinema merely seem to have moved from one stereotype to another. As far as regional films are concerned there are a number of Bhojpuri films that are being made in Bihar. The female character is constructed as an object of desire dressed in a provocative 'ghaghara choli'. The courtesan (prostitutes) is seen as one of the regular figures in almost all the bhojpuri films. She is seen as rejected, abused and admired for her heaving bosoms and pelvic thrusts. Double meaning songs like "*Kashi hiley, Patna hiley, Calcutta hilela, tohri luchke jab kamaria, sari duniya hilela*", "*chamde ki jhopadi mein aag lagi hai*", and "*teri choli mein silwate kaise padhe*" play an important role in the success of these films. These songs, demonstrating vulgarity and suggestiveness, are often used to eve-tease girls.

Role of Print Media

So what role does the print media play in all this? In the words of a leading daily's news editor, "It is tragic that women are being mistreated but there is not much that we can do." A media critic says, "When I started my career my writings were idealistic and emotionally charged. But I later realised that it does not help the society in the long run. How many people read my story on the rape victim? Or even if some even read it, do people stop raping? Our readers are fed up with soft stories about women."

A few years back a young stringer in a leading local Hindi daily was asked to drop the case of sexual harassment she had filed against one of her senior male colleagues. She was fired when she refused to do so. Another young lady reporter had written an article on the State Commission for Women but it was edited in a biased manner and published. Despite the presence of women journalists with crime beat, incidents of rape and dowry deaths (shockingly regular occurrences in Bihar and other

neighbouring states) are usually reported in a routine manner. Dowry deaths continue not only to occur but also to increase in number.

There was a sensational media report exposing a sex racket being conducted in the house of a former Deputy development Commissioner (IAS) Patna. The matter was reported in all the local dailies. It created sensationalism and public protest, but what was the result of such a hullabaloo? - *Nothing*. The matter was dumped later and today it is a forgotten story. The case of Anchor & Caesar is a well-known example of violence against women in Bihar. On the eve of Navmi (Dusseera) a young girl was allegedly raped by two young boys, Anchor and Caesar, near Central School in Kankarbagh colony. A 'Balatkaar Virodhi Morcha' was formed which included the members of Centre for Women's Empowerment and Manavi. They staged 'dharna' in front of the District Magistrate and Senior SP's office. As a result the culprits were arrested. The local press did extensive reporting. However, the humiliation the victim suffered at the hands of the boys was a secondary issue. The press never did a follow-up of the victim. What happened to her? Where is she? How is she? The news coverage lacked analytical perspective and was insensitive to the humane aspects of the story.

Over the past few years there has been a mushroom growth of beauty parlours in the heart of the city of Patna. They are owned by politicians, businessmen and wives of senior bureaucrats. Several cases of raids on beauty parlours being used for sex racketing were reported. But the net result? The media highlighted the whole episode and all of a sudden the reporting was stopped. Why? Because influential people were involved. The sex scandal and murder of Shilpi and Gautum had rocked the city a couple of years back. But the outcome: The sensational story by the media continued for a few months and was finally shelved. Why? Because the accused named in the case included a leading politician and top officials. The Anuradha Singh Story is yet another infamous sex racket case in Patna, which created sensation in the state last year. All the local dailies reported the story on Anuradha Singh, wife of a former MLA engaged in sex racket. This finally culminated into the murder of Mr. Poddar, a leading businessman who was her client. The news shook up the entire state. A former Director General of Police hushed up the whole matter, as some of the accused in the case were top politicians, high profile bureaucrats and big businessmen. Where is Anuradha Singh now? Has any further progress been made in the case? Did the media make any follow-up? **NO**.

Recent posters of women dancers clad in semi nude bikini are seen hanging all over the walls of Patna. This is an ad for the Sonepur Mela theatre. How can this vulgar display remain unnoticed by the passers by? However, has any one tried to oppose it? Is this not the Indecent Representation of women? Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act, 1986, makes it clear that the intention of the legislature is to prohibit "indecent representation". Pornography, which amounts to "indecent representation", is an offence. However, most media persons are ignorant about such laws. "No one is interested in knowing about the laws in media. The only law they know in case of harassment is lodging a FIR (First Information Report)," says a journalist.

My report on 'Indecent Representation of Women in the Country' on behalf of Bihar State Women Commission looked at various laws related to print and electronic media. Amendments to the laws on media enacted in the last two decades have failed to cover many aspects including the sexual harassment. The continued projection of negative and degrading images of women in media must be changed. Clearly, the media does not provide a balanced picture of women's diverse lives and contributions to society in a changing world. Much remains to be done with regard to the "participation, portrayal and access of women to the media and its impact on and use as an instrument for the advancement and empowerment of women". What our country needs in the present context are minimum regulation and more enablement (**Ammu Joseph**). "In spite of the medley of laws, women in India still continue to live under stress and strain of patriarchy".

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