ИНТЕРВЬЮ НОМЕРА
INTERVIEW

Mediatized Popular Culture in Contemporary India: Multipolar and Multilayered Reflections in Everyday Life: Interview with Prof. Usha Raman

Медиатизированная популярная культура современной Индии: многополярность и многослойность рефлексии в ежедневной жизни: интервью с профессором Ушей Раман

Usha Raman is Professor, Department of Communication, University of Hyderabad. Her academic interests span journalism pedagogy, cultural studies of science, health communication, children's media, feminist media studies, and digital

cultures. Before joining the University, she headed the communications department at LV Prasad Eye Institute. In addition to several journal articles and book chapters, she writes regularly for the popular media on issues related to health, gender and education and edits a monthly magazine for school teachers, called Teacher Plus. Usha received her doctorate in mass communication from the University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia, USA, in 1996. She has been a visiting fellow at the University of Sydney (Australia), MIT (MIT Media Lab, MIT, Cambridge, MA, USA) and University of Bremen (Centre for Media, Culture and Information, ZeMKI, Germany). Most recently, her work has focused on civic engagement and digital social networks, and feminist digital methodologies. She is co-founder of the IDRC funded initiative FemLabCo, which explores the future of women's work. Among the grants won by Prof. Raman, is "Organizing Digitally: Opportunities for Collectivization among Female Workers in the Global South," IDRC. She is currently serving as the Vice President of the International Association for Media and Communication Research (2020–2024).

— Professor Raman, what is the specificity of popular culture in contemporary India?

— India has a large and extremely diverse range of cultures, with over two dozen official languages and many hundreds more dialects. This makes it impossible to speak about a single strand of popular culture — there are possibly several subcultures that draw from extremely specific geographies, and others that share a language while spanning many regions. Cinema and the performing arts (folk and popular theatre, music, and dance) exist in almost all of the major Indian languages, but all language groups have their forms of popular culture and increasingly, these are finding space on internet platforms. Popular culture folds within it contemporary issues, reflecting shifts in social norms and lifestyles, while also drawing from and speaking to political concerns and issues.

— What are the roots of mediatized popular culture? Are mythological frames in Indian mass media presented?

— Popular culture in India draws from multiple sources, and of course religion and mythology are major influences on music, cinema and other popular forms. However, there are also strands of popular culture that draw from secular aspects of life, as well as nature and social relationships. Early forms of mediatized culture mimicked folk forms (storytelling forms filmed for television and cinema), but as modern media acquired popularity and reach, new forms of popular culture emerged, drawing from literature and translated into formats for cinema, and later television and radio. One of the most popular shows on television in the early 1990s was a serialized mythological epic, *Ramayana*, which was recently re-made and distributed through a streaming service. Mythology has also inspired recent blockbuster films from both Bollywood (Hindi cinema) and Tollywood (Telugu cinema), adapted to the superhero genre and often mixed in with historical narratives. These stories and themes have also now found their way into videogames, as in the extremely popular Telugu film franchise *Baahubali*.

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— Are there any specific Indian types of mediatization of popular culture?

— What one is seeing in recent times is the emergence of mediatized forms of what one might call 'vernacular' popular culture that had been hitherto marginalized. The availability of digital social media platforms for easy dissemination, and the possibility of low-cost content creation by individuals in their own languages, has led to a vibrant and diverse cultural eco-system. Media scholars have noted the popularity of Bhojpuri music and cinema, for instance — this is a language spoken by a large minority in Central and Northern India — which suggests that popular media creation has undergone a level of democratization. A similar trend has been observed among other migrant groups that are dispersed across the country, but who have been able to enjoy popular media in their own languages, shared on YouTube and other channels, and often circulated through WhatsApp networks. Other marginalised communities (of different caste and religious identities), too, have pushed against the mainstream to find their own media audiences for various cultural outputs, from drama to music to comedy. An interesting aspect of mediatization in Indian culture is its influence on other areas of social life, such as weddings and other social rituals. Wedding ceremonies are often modeled on film themes, and Bollywood music is an almost regular fixture in these festivities. The 'Bollywoodisation' of weddings has also traveled to the Indian diaspora, and is one of the more obvious examples of mediatization of everyday life. Political discourse too often borrows from mediatized popular culture, something seen very clearly during election campaigns.

— Traditional Indian society is of complex structure. How are these realities reflected in modern Indian society? In popular culture? In the media?

— As I mentioned above, the contemporary media landscape is populated by a tremendous variety of cultural products, reflecting the complexity of Indian society and culture. However, it must be mentioned that mainstream or dominant popular culture — particularly mainstream cinema and its associated — still reflects a certain dominant view of society, with relatively low representation of marginalized identities. There have been critiques of stereotypical and often negative representations of minorities in these mainstream cultural products, with scholars arguing that these serve to reinforce their marginal status in society. Digital platforms have allowed a wider and more diverse range of creators to speak to these 'absences' and fill the entertainment gap for audiences from minority groups.

— You are a prominent researcher of gender issues. How do you describe mediatization of this problem?

— There is a rich and long scholarship around gender representation in popular culture, as well as on consumption of popular culture by women and other marginalized groups. Issues raised and studied include misogyny in the media, the pervasiveness of gender stereotypes, as well as the lack of participation of women and other sexual minorities in production and management roles in the creative industries. Feminist scholars have also looked at how young women

form role models through consumption of popular media, and at the impact of feminist films on changing social norms. There is a growing community of film makers who are creating 'feminist cinema' that attempts to break these stereotypes — one very successful recent film in this genre is *Lapata Ladies*. There is also a growing body of feminist media that uses pop culture as a way of raising crucial gender issues, from security to access to leisure and public infrastructure. These media outlets use platforms like Instagram and YouTube to produce short content that challenges dominant gender norms.

— *In Russia, and worldwide, people like Indian films, first of all, melodrama. Researchers are discussing 'new waves', for example ecological films. Is this agenda on the top in cinema? In mass media? How is it reflected in popular culture?*

— I'd say that ecological issues do appear in cinema from time to time but there is as yet no strong movement in this regard. A few independent film makers have been making and screening films on environmental issues in special festivals, and some have achieved a degree of popular success. The recent acclaimed documentaries *The Elephant Whisperers* and *All That Breathes* both deal with the natural world. Several visual artists have been focusing on environmental issues through work shared on social media, from cartoonists like Rohan Chakravarty to artists like Orijit Sen who combine humour with sharp critique. Performers — standup comics and musicians — too have used their art to highlight environmental issues, and some of these campaigns have made good use of social media, with short music videos and reels.

— *Mediatization became 'deep' and even transgressive in the digital era. What is your point of view on digitalisation of Indian media in the context of popular culture?*

— I think it is very difficult to think about popular culture today without locating it firmly within the digital landscape. Of course, there are live forms of popular culture that attract large audiences, but one might argue that their popularity is formed by and mediated through digital networks of influence. The primary form of popular culture in much of India is still cinema — delivered through the large screen in multiplexes and malls, or on streaming platforms (again, digital). The digitalization of cinema itself — with large scale special effects, simultaneous release in multiple languages across the globe — is what sustains its dominance. Streaming audio has made it possible for millions of young creators to showcase their work and even find commercial success without the need for human intermediaries. In India, the low cost of data and the growing access to a mobile device has also ensured that media have become a part of the everyday, that entertainment (and thus popular culture) embeds itself in everyday practice, in everyday life.

— *You have a huge global research experience in such innovative research schools as ZEMKI in Bremen. The leader of this school Professor Andreas Hepp describes the current situation with AI as a sort of 'hype'. What about AI in India and Indian media? What do you think about this as a researcher?*

— This is a big question that we are still trying to understand. I agree that at this point we are caught up in the hype with not enough real understanding about the possible impacts of AI on the media industry, and by extension, on media creation and consumption. We're seeing this in some small ways in recommender systems and content curation. We're also seeing AI being used in some creator tasks — such as captioning. The more serious questions at this point have to do with the use of deep fakes, and we have already seen this in political campaigning as well as in more toxic ways, to target people (often women) with malicious fake videos. There is much to understand, therefore much to research, but I think the more urgent issue is that of digital media literacy and the cultivation of a healthy skepticism among media consumers. I'm already seeing how the rudimentary AI tools we now have (like ChatGPT) are influencing the way students approach their work, often undervaluing their own ability to create and depending on these tools instead. My biggest concern is that many of these young people will not understand the real joy of grappling with tough intellectual puzzles, or struggling with the creative process — because it is so easy to just prompt the AI to solve it for them!

— ***I completely agree with you! The way of a researcher is really exciting. What are your professional plans?***

— As a researcher, and as a critical scholar, I would only say we have to pay attention to the social and cultural dimensions of technological shifts, and use our understanding to help people deal with these changes — through education and literacy programmes. It would be great if policy makers paid more attention to the findings of social science and humanities research!

I am looking forward to retiring from my position at the University at the end of this year, and possibly spending more time thinking, reading, and writing about the things that interest me!

— ***We wish you success in all your endeavors and waiting for your new scientific discoveries!***

Interviewed by Marina G. Shilina /
Интервью провела М.Г. Шилина

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