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'Adverts make me want to break the television': Indian children and their audiovisual media environment in three contrasting locations. (2010). In *South Asian media cultures: Audiences, representations, contexts.* London and New York: Anthem Press. pp. 51-72.

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Introduction: 'Indian' children, 'global' media?

The media environment surrounding children in a metropolis like Bombay, India has altered almost unrecognisably in the last two decades. Despite the introduction of hundreds of cable and satellite channels and broadband internet into many middle and some lower middle-class homes, however, discourses about children and media have remained surprisingly stagnant. These discourses tend to fall into one of two paradigms. The first is an effects paradigm, which focuses on content in either a negative or a positive manner. Instances include the protectionist stance that sees most Western media products as dangerous and having negative effects on 'Indian values', or the argument that the liberalising of the Indian media economy has brought about changes in content that challenge sexist and other negative attitudes. The second paradigm posits content as irrelevant. It views all innovations in the Indian media and communications environment as socially beneficial because they, apparently, make India more modern and competitive. While a host of other positions exist amongst parents and young people, these are rarely articulated publicly. The voices that get most coverage in the public sphere are usually those calling for censorship and/or technological skills development. Complexity is seen as problematic, and hence sidestepped.

Built around a small-scale interview-based study with Bombay children (aged between 9 and 12) about their film and television viewing

and their experiences with ICTs at school and in the home over a period of four years, a focus group of girls (aged between 10 and 12) in a village (Barsu) in the Himalayan foothills[i] and a larger focus group study (with 10-14 year olds) in a small town (Palakkad) in Kerala[ii], this chapter aims to disentangle some of the rhetoric about values, global skills and ethnic identity from the diverse realities of children and young people's media, family and social experiences in contemporary Indian settings.

Researching the child audience

Surveying literature on the Media environment of children in India over the past three decades (Behl, 1988; Yadava and Reddi, 1988; Kaur and Singh, 2006) several issues come to the fore. The content of Hindi films (Banaji, 2006), debates about the effects of media representations (Unnikrishnan and Bajpai, 1996), technological differences between urban and rural areas (Dugger, 2000; Arora, 2007) and income differences between strata of the population have usually been the subjects of social research. More recently, the burgeoning of ICTs and mobile communications and the advent of digital satellite television stations have been debated, both in academia and within the media themselves. Again, in this regard, one strand of research has concentrated on the supposed impacts of 'cultural globalisation'. These have been thought to be brought about through first nationalist and then international (also called Western) programming and the internet on the 'Indian' life-style and 'psyche' (Johnson, 2001; Jensen and Oster, 2007). Another strand, which fits into a more economic paradigm, has either celebrated the entry of India into the global 'knowledge economy' or described and decried the slow pace of take-up of ICTs in particular areas and sectors. While children figure occasionally in both these types of discussions as adjuncts to adults, or as the 'next generation of the global workforce' and as 'quick' learners with little need for systematic tuition when it comes to ICTs (Mitra and Rana, 2001), they most frequently do so in a completely generalised and peripheral manner, with no attempt made to distinguish between their needs and concerns based on class, region, locality, gender or any other feature. In fact, so little has been made of the

child audience in India, except by commercial corporations, that although there is a Children's Film society of India, there is no known body with oversight of – or responsibility for rating – output available to children on television. Discussions in coming sections aim, at least partially, to indicate why this imbalance needs to be addressed.

Methods and sample

Researching with children in any setting can be tricky, particularly in relation to issues that might cause conflict between the interviewees and their parents. Ethically the imperative not to harm vulnerable research subjects is of paramount importance in these instances. For this reason, the researchers needed to be people who were trusted both by the children and by their parents, in the first instance, and, in the second, who would ensure confidentiality in relation to particular details of the young people's life experiences even if questioned on this score by parents. Much has been written elsewhere about the role of the researcher who is both insider and outsider in particular research situations (cf. Wong, 1995; Kauffman, 1994). In two cases in the present study, Bombay and Palakkad, the researchers were known to several of the children in the focus groups prior to data collection, through local school or neighbourhood channels. Recruiting new children was never a problem as there were numerous volunteers. However, establishing rapport and trust were key criteria when conducting the groups, and efforts were made by the researchers to reduce the relationship of power experienced by the children via the use of non-classroom settings for the interviews, food, and humour, as well as maintaining confidentiality from parents. In all cases, an effort was made to ensure a balance of genders and some homogeneity in ages, although in the Barsu sample the selection was based on pragmatic criteria (for instance, the boys chose not to volunteer; older girls were followed by younger siblings) and in Palakkad on friendship groups.

The Bombay interviews were conducted in Hindi and English. Responses were in English, Hindi and Gujarati and have been translated to

give as near a feel as possible to the colloquialisms routinely used by the children. For example, the phrase 'too much' in Bombay English means 'wonderful' or 'very much' as well as 'an excess'. The phrase 'English movies' refers not to British-made films but to any films in English; thus mainly Hollywood films. The Barsu focus group was conducted in Hindi and responses were in Pahadi and Hindi. The Palakkad interviews were conducted in Malayalam.

Selecting excerpts from discussions for analysis also entailed making decisions about which aspects of the children's media-related talk were more and which less relevant. Consequently, much of their discussion about educational settings, schools and homework as well as about leisure, gender and friendship is missing here. Similarly, given the repetition of themes in the Bombay and Palakkad focus groups, only one of each is quoted from here. The picture built up is necessarily fragmentary but nevertheless tries to do justice to the richness and depth of the children's original testimonies. In this vein, where possible, the same children have been quoted on several occasions, to follow through and link their ideas and opinions. There is no claim made here to 'representativeness' on the part of any of the groups of children. However, there is a significant way in which the ideas and opinions voiced by the specific children here can be seen to inform debates around children and media in India more widely, and to provide frames of reference that help in offsetting, assessing and/or understanding some of the current debates in literature on the subject.

Bombay: the cutting-edge audience?

The lower-middleclass, children (aged between 9 and 12) interviewed in the Bombay study have, unsurprisingly, the most diverse experience of media of the three groups. Most of them have been on the internet, especially in the past two years, looking up sporting websites, playing games on Disney and Fox Kids, downloading or listening to music or looking up information for school, and some have occasional but unfettered access to broadband or dial-up connections and computers while their parents are at work during

the daytime, and when they are alone at home looking after younger siblings. Computers, which are usually situated in communal spaces, are seen as necessary by their parents for skilling them for the modern economy, and hence especially the boys but even the girls are encouraged to do some work on the computer every day.

Television (with cable and or VCDs and DVDs) remains, by and large and with the exception of trips with friends to the cinema, the favourite form of entertainment, with everyone in the sample agreeing that they love to watch television, especially unsupervised.

> **Dhiren, 11**: If we are alone with friends, then we can laugh more: I can share the jokes with them; we can talk about it. Sometimes there are very funny things that are not that clean [vulgarities, innuendo] in the film or programme and we can talk about it.
>
> **Chirag, 11**: Cartoon movies I prefer to watch with my friends, Hindi movies with my mom, English movies with my dad. I don't like English movies.
>
> **Sheetal, 11**: I prefer watching all movies and playing games online with my friends only, not my parents at all. So that we can have a good laugh out of it, especially of some corruption [innuendo, sexual sequences] is there, we can have a good laugh out of it.

The children introduce a moral discourse into the interview unprompted – referring to 'things that are not that clean' but which they find amusing, and to 'corruption' (which was said in English). They are explicit that such sequences and jokes in films and programmes are impossible to enjoy when parents are around and explain (see below) their parents' reasons for disliking their viewing of such material.

The kinds of programmes watched here in this crowded lower-middleclass inner city neighbourhood vary widely from a plethora of Hindi films, chat-shows, comedy programmes and serials such as *Dhoom Machao Dhoom*[iii] (some with quite adult scenes and themes) to films in English (especially ones like *The Mummy* and the *Harry Potter* series), and dubbed American, Canadian and Japanese programmes: *Peppa Pig*, *Dora the Explorer* and the

Indian version of *Sesame Street* appealing to younger siblings, while *Hannah Montana*, *Drake and Josh*, *That's So Raven* and *The Suite Life of Zach and Cody* are favourites with the tween girls. The boys claim to prefer to watch sport, especially cricket, and always films. Fights with younger siblings about viewing time are routine and usually lost by the older children. Apart from the fact that Hindi 'family serials' are generally despised as being 'too much crying', there is little here that might not be encountered in discussions with urban children across the globe. But further probing revealed different contexts of viewing and responses to aspects of the programmes:

> **Interviewer**: This word 'corruption' – what do you mean by it?
>
> **Sheethal, 11**: Silly things – *come on* you understand – couples, silly faces, flirting
>
> **Chirag, 11**: bad words, teasing…
>
> **Interviewer**: You enjoy that with your friends but you can't watch with your parents?
>
> **Sheetal, 11 and Heena, 11**: Never.
>
> **Jeev, 12:** Never.
>
> **Interviewer:** Why?
>
> **Jeev, 12:** Parents think that we too are becoming like the corruption, thinking in that way.
>
> **Sheetal, 11:** 'Good girls don't watch bad things', my mom would say. And I don't want to watch such things with my father. I already get enough lectures about time-wasting.
>
> **Heena, 11:** It is boring for her to listen to the lectures from her parents about why is this not good, why is that a bad thing to watch. Better they don't know what she watches (all laugh). I don't watch such things because I don't enjoy them.

There was some shuffling and jostling at this construction by one girl of the other as transgressive while she herself is 'rule abiding'.

All the children in Bombay talked knowledgably about aspects of older teenage culture (both Western and Indian) and spoke in a sophisticated manner about issues as diverse as relationships, sex (which caused some shyness and much hilarity), potential careers, bullying, advertising, fashion, national identity, managing money and adolescent crushes. Children's television viewing, however, was said to be generally viewed by parents as

a waste of time or even dangerous. It was variously understood to be seen by parents to compete with doing housework, looking after younger siblings and playing outdoors. It was also suggested by some of the children that their parents thought it was teaching them 'foreign values' and encouraging them 'to behave disrespectfully and selfishly like Western teenagers'. However, the most overwhelming complaint reported was that their parents thought it made the children *lazy* about their homework. All the Bombay children interviewed – including those not quoted here – were routinely expected to study for five hours every day in addition to the time they spent at school. This was confirmed by all the parents and teachers I spoke with before and after focus groups. The findings about their television viewing, based on the children's descriptions of their parents' attitudes, are also consistent with the findings of Kavitha Cardoza's study in 1999 with Bangalore parents about their feelings towards and regulation of their children's television viewing (Cardoza, 2002).

In this battle over whether leisure time was permitted and what it should be filled with, the children viewed advertising as their enemy in that it ruined the content of programmes, extended programmes which should have been short so that parents got more angry or so that they did not get the satisfaction of viewing an entire film. Their responses are uniform:

Dhiren, 11: I hate the adverts. They make me want to break the television!

Chirag, 11: (simultaneous) Extremely irritated. They makes me so annoyed.

Jeev, 12: I too hate them. They are stupid (in Hindi – *a waste of time*).

Sheetal, 11: (simultaneous) Extremely irritated and frustrated. They interrupt our programme and the story, and then it's such a long time for them to go. Yesterday there was a advertise break of half an hour!

Heena, 11: And they come again and again, stupid adverts. All these stupid things to make thin, to make fair…

[they sing jingles and make fun of the ads].

Jeev, 12: And if you leave the room then suddenly the film will come on again! It is *sooo* annoying.

Interviewer: If someone said that you could have a channel without adverts then you would say…?

All: Yes, Please! Yaar [Friend]! Because adverts are *really* boring.

Interviewer: So, why don't you ask for this?

Sheetal, 11: We don't only want one channel!

Dhiren, 11: The government only wants profit, the companies wants profit, so we children can never get rid of the adverts if we want our programmes.

Chirag, 11: Even if we pay the government for one channel with no adverts, there will still be so many that have them. But I would still like to have that one channel.

Here, notably, the children's keen sense of the ways in which capitalist logic currently structures leisure and interferes with viewing pleasure suggests an interest in and nascent media literacy that could and should be given space within an educational curriculum. There are differences of opinion too, about the value of non-commercial channels for children, with a clear preference expressed for the fiction content of commercial channels but minus the advertisements. Questions about regulation and control in this seemingly internationally and commercially saturated media environment prompted me to ask how they would react if they were confined to viewing programmes specifically targeted at a child audience. Their responses were categorical.

Sheetal, 11: I would kick the television. I would be so upset. We are growing up. There are so many things we like to watch. I like to see how teenagers in other countries behave, how people in America and Japan live with each other. I like to see music programmes from everywhere and sometimes horror movies. It makes me think much more than my school books. The TV can teach different things that our teachers don't know. Could you see all this just on children's shows? By our age we may be children, but this does not mean that we should only watch baby stuff.

Heena, 11: I would like to be able to choose to watch both cartoons and adults films if I want. I like both of these *too* much.

Chirag, 11: I would accept it. It's okay. Whatever our parents tell us to watch is for our own good.

Dhiren, 11: I would find a way to watch Adults (A/18 Rated) films. Sometimes our parents don't know what we are watching and sometimes they let us watch with them without realising. Children's programmes are also good, but adult programmes are also exciting. I know about a lot of stuff about foreign countries and about the government from watching Hindi films and talk-shows and the news. And we see about boy-girl stuff (laugher).

Sheetal, 11: I would buy a VCD and watch it by myself. I would go on You Tube and watch clips of my favourite shows. Especially Harry Potter films.

Chirag, 11: We learn things from Hindi movies. Even the ones meant for those older than us. What is the point of only watching little kids programmes?

Dhiren, 11: Like *Lagaan* – it teaches about how we should accept everyone: that makes us stronger. We should not be against someone because of who they are. Their religion or where they come from. And *Chak-De* India is about overcoming our differences, every girl, from every part of India is able to give something to help the team win.

Jeev, 12: Like **Ta Ra Rum Pum**; It tells about the dangers of taking loans, what can happen if we take loans and then we cannot pay and how we should not tell lies. [general agreement] It was a very good movie. And it has children in it.

Chirag, 11: I've seen it [TRRP] four times. So has my little brother. He's *four* [as if that clinches it].

In this extended excerpt, the children develop multilayered rationales for viewing 'grown-up' content and not being confined to the equivalent of a children's curriculum on television. Learning about diversity and social cohesion, a clearly adult-sanctioned pedagogic message, is one of the primary lessons they refer to learning from Hindi films. However, although they mainly refer to fiction formats such as films, at points they mention the news, factual programmes and talk shows. Evidence collected previously (Banaji and Al-Ghabban, 2006) suggests that these are formats often watched with and framed for children by their parents. Indeed, Sheetal's statement that horror films, music videos and television in general make her 'think much more than [her] school books' is crucial in underlining the potential pedagogic role in stimulating imagination and providing what is seen as 'relevant' knowledge in a society where school text-books are frequently devoid of either. Thus, despite the fact that pre-marital relationships are not sanctioned in any of the households and that the children will probably not be marrying until they have finished college, there is an evident interest in viewing around this theme, as there is in popular music of all kinds and in the acquisition of mobile phones and video cameras. This is a finding which again connects these Bombay children to children and young people in studies about similar topics in North America and Europe (Buckingham and Bragg, 2004; Banaji, 2006) These children are all set to become teenagers in a media environment that can quite

plausibly be called 'international' and has most certainly been affected by digital convergence. But they are not 'typical' Indian children.

Barsu case study: heroic identifications

Barsu was selected for this study because it provided not just a rural location but also for its seeming inaccessibility, which might be thought to militate against the common use of the latest information and communication technologies. It is in the foothills of the Himalayas at a height of approximately 7500 feet but unlike Katmandu, discussed by Paul Greene (in this volume) for its urban youth music scene, Barsu is not frequented by Western tourists. It is, however, on a route popular with trekkers, as it is surrounded by Himalayan peaks, and the nearest town and district capital is Uttarkashi which is about 40 kilometres away. Uttarakhand's state capital, Dehradun, is 250 kilometres of climbing mountain roads away, thus making the village fairly inaccessible to 'townies', and the capital more so to villagers. On the estimation of a long-time resident, Barsu has about 800 inhabitants. It is a single-religion, single-caste village. Most families are related to most other families in some way, and intermarriage is not allowed inside the village. Agriculture and cattle rearing are the main occupations. Several of the boys and men work as guides or porters when climbers pass through the village. Most children attend the local primary school and some move on to the secondary school further down the mountainside. For higher education, if and when this is an option, they have to go to Uttarkashi. Some boys from the village do go to college, but it is, apparently, extremely rare for girls to have that opportunity.

The focus group analysed here took place with six girls, aged 10 to 12. The family of one of the 10-year-olds did not own a television and she watched TV at her cousin's home. The channels they mentioned receiving were: Star TV and Star Utsav, Zee Smile, Doordarshan National, DD Sports and the Disney Channel. Most of them do not seem to come into conflict with their parents about the amount of time spent viewing but, having

finished housework, watch whatever is on at home, which tends to be Hindi serials.

> **Interviewer:** Why do you like watching serials?
>
> **Minni, 12**: We like watching programmes about love, conflict. They tell you that love is good, and how to be good.
>
> **Interviewer:** Tell me about some characters you like in these serials.
>
> **Saira, 11**: Prerna in Kasauti! She is the bahu (daughter-in-law) and is very good. She looks after the family and loves everyone.
>
> **Interviewer:** Do you get any Ghadhwali channels? Or any programmes on Doordarshan that are set in your area or about your stories - like set in the mountains or in Uttaranchal or Gadhwal?
>
> **Gita, 10**: No. We get DD (the local channel) but we don't watch it very much.
>
> **Interviewer:** You said you watch *Sai Baba* – Do you watch anything else?
>
> **Gita, 10**: We watch *Ramayan* and *Mahabharat* on Star Utsav.
>
> **Interviewer:** Who is your favourite character there?
>
> **Gita, 10**: Ram. We really like him. [Others nod].

Again the children introduce a moral discourse about 'goodness' and 'love' very early into discussions of their preferred viewing. Unlike the children in Bombay who have a host of both adult and child stars to identify with, most of these children express a penchant for morally upstanding adult characters like the daugher-in-law Prerna in a Hindi serial, and mythological representations like the God Ram in the serialised version of the *Ramayana*. They represent their own television viewing as a way in which they learn about 'idealised' social relations quite outside the everyday sphere of their normal lives, akin to the discussions of devotional serials in Gillespie's 1995 work on British-Asian viewing of the *Mahabaratha*. Here there is little additional banter about relationships, or talk about audiovisual content dealing with romance and real life. While this may partly be due to shyness and to the fact they do not know the researcher particularly well, it is also reflective of their restricted viewing experience. Ironically, in this rural context, real representations of the women in each household would show independent working mothers, often running entire households for years while men labour in the pastures or down in the cities on the plains. Even Hindi films would have more chance of representing their circumstances

occasionally or in an idealised form; but, as this next excerpt shows, they have little chance of viewing films.

> **Interviewer:** When you're watching TV is there anything that makes you feel shy?
>
> [They all turn away and try to hide their faces. Long pause.]
>
> **Minni, 12:** We don't like it when in some songs women take off their clothes or when they wear too little. You know. [long pause].
>
> **Interviewer:** Does anyone try to stop you from watching those programmes?
>
> **Saira, 11**: Yes. Our parents. The older people. Yes, they do.
>
> **Minni, 12**: I get up and go out of the room when there is something I know they don't like.
>
> **Interviewer:** Do you ever go out to see films in a cinema?
>
> **Girls all**: No. Never.

Here the discourses of moral disapproval in relation to representations of women on television voiced by the children coincide more closely with what they think to be their parents' views. It is not easy to discern whether these girls would be more exploratory about their viewing given more privacy, but it is certain that they are highly sensitised to any romantic or sexual content by the overt disapproval of their elders. Additionally, although some of the Gadhwali girls enjoy some freedom in terms of being allowed to watch television if their contribution to family chores and school work has been accepted or is shared between a large number of siblings, what they actually get to watch is limited both in terms of type of media and of television format compared to what was described in the Bombay sample.

Most interestingly, they watch virtually no content that in any way reflects or relates to their own everyday lives, to their community in the mountains, to children or to their local dialect. Also crucially, these girls, like the children in Bombay and in Palakkad (see next section), are skilled at finding pedagogic justifications for a leisure pursuit frowned on as 'time-wasting' by some adults. It is also evident, however, that the actual learning which can take place from entertainment and popular media – as is amply demonstrated by the children in Bombay – is constricted in this case by the limited range of content viewed. The lack of anything related to their

local life, to education or to childhood and the experience of children, whether in other settings (as may be seen in Hindi films) or from similar backgrounds to themselves, is deeply problematic, in circumstances where most houses now do have access to television but not all the children have access to secondary and higher education.

Palakkad case study: language, learning and leisure

This focus group consists of four boys and four girls aged between 11 and 14. These children are from a rural area, and are studying in 7th to 10th grades in a small Kerala town. They volunteered for the focus groups because of their interest in and access to television, with a variety of channels watched such as Sun TV (Tamil), Sun Music (Tamil), Kairali TV (Malayalam), Doordarshan, Animal Planet, Star Movies, Star Utsav (Hindi), HBO, Pogo, Cartoon Network, Star Cricket, Surya (Malayalam) and Asianet (Malayalam). To put their viewing in context, most of the other children in the classes attended by these children do not have access to television in their homes and are, in fact, from such impoverished families that even radio, the primary medium available to them, is sometimes absent and the mid-day meal provided by the school is the incentive that persuades their parents to send them to the school on a regular basis for part of the year. Most of the children in this cohort hail from labouring families, and many themselves contribute to the (incredibly small) household incomes via their labour, both in the fields and as domestic servants or carers.

Parental feelings about television viewing tended to concentrate on it in a binary manner – Malayalam content, which is generally permissible and may be watched with elders, and 'other language content', which is described primarily as a waste of time and potentially by a small number of parents as a corrupting influence. Internationally, there exists a vast literature on children, parents and television, and on parental regulation of children's television viewing, within which this discussion might usefully be located given the time. Buckingham (1993: 107-109) discusses some of the findings from previous research into parental attitudes vis-à-vis their

children's viewing habits. He notes that in some instances there are gaps between what parents say they do to regulate their children's viewing the accounts given by children. There are also often notable discrepancies between the rational arguments for or against viewing given by parents to middle-class academic interviewers and their own actual practices (and possibly feelings) with regard to television. Susan Grieshaber (1989) has suggested that 'the discourse surrounding children's viewing of television is part of a much broader range of discourses which are used to normalize and regulate parenting' (Buckingham, 1993: 109). These discourses are inflected by class, location and culture, all of which are key features in this study. The children here in Palakkad appear to circumvent the proscription of viewing in other languages either by going to watch out of their parents' sight (which is not so difficult given that parents are often engaged in manual labour for upto fourteen hours per day) or by stressing the educative potentials of the medium, where parents are understood as being open to such rhetorics. Language, however, is the distinguishing feature of generational viewing, in that the children are willing to watch and attracted by a diversity of languages including Hindi, English and Tamil.

> **Anju**, 14: I watch Tamil and Hindi television mostly with my brother. Mother and father also join us if we are watching Malayalam.
>
> **Vijay, 12:** My parents watch only Malayalam programs. But I enjoy many programs in English and Hindi. We all sit together and watch Malayalam films and other programs. They don't allow me to watch Hindi or Tamil film songs as they say the scenes are often not suitable for children. But I insist on watching if the songs are really good! I'm not bothered about what's shown in the scenes, I enjoy the music.
>
> **Interviewer:** How do your parents react to that?
>
> **Vijay, 12:** When I was little they used to scold me for switching on such programs. Most of the new songs in Hindi and Tamil have vulgarly dressed actors and bad scenes. I switch off the TV if it's really bad, otherwise watch. But when I have to watch other language movies, like in Hindi or English, I go to my uncle's house. I like watching Hindi movies.[…]I learn a lot of Hindi words and usages from that.
>
> **Interviewer:** Why do you go around to all your relatives' houses to watch TV, when you have the facility at home?
>
> **Vijay, 12:** My parents don't watch TV much. They scold me. They don't understand English or Hindi, nor can they enjoy the programs that I enjoy. I enjoy watching quiz programs, and animated movies. But they are not interested, so I go to other houses to watch them.

Bindu, 13: I watch TV mostly with my younger sister. My whole family sits together at night to see programs. [Adults] will leave the place if we are watching Hindi programs. Otherwise they would sit in front of the TV and talk and talk and I won't be able to hear anything! I like to enjoy the Hindi programmes by myself and to learn from them about life. My family feel that I am learning the language, so they do not scold.

Two striking themes in this exchange are the complexity of learning and its embeddedness in leisure viewing – 'learning about life' is seen as an appropriate reason for viewing Hindi films, but learning the language is the reason acceptable to parents. Clearly pleasures are not acceptable reasons for leisure viewing in non-vernacular languages. The second is the lack of a peer culture in this setting for discussing and commenting on the programmes. Because so many of the children in the school do not have access to television at all, and because the few who do tend to watch quite different programmes in a variety of languages often not understood by everyone, television viewing for these children is quite a private and almost secret activity, sometimes but not always shared with a sibling.

The theme of getting embarrassed or becoming uncomfortable was picked up from their initial responses to questions about what programmes they liked to watch and stated explicitly by the researcher. This was done with a view to understanding how these working-class Malayali children perceived their own development in relation to the pedagogic potential of television and the social context of family life. Interestingly, gender does not seem to play an enormous role in differentiating either parental expectations or children's responses at this stage as both the boys and girls respond in the same ways.

Interviewer: Have you ever felt uncomfortable due to something that you watched on television?

Chirag, 13: Very often, when I am sitting with my parents and watching some film song, I feel very embarrassed when the scene changes to *vulgarity*. Many advertisements make me feel the same way. […]I leave the room. Or my parents soon switch off the Television.

Leela, 11: Many film scenes and dressings of heroines make me feel embarrassed to sit and watch. I leave the room if my parents are present.

Vijaya, 12: I too feel uncomfortable watching poorly dressed women in films and advertisements. I either change the channel or leave the room.

Dipu, 13: I would change the channel.

Vijay, 12: At times while watching some really educative program, like a program on AIDS – suddenly they show images of how the disease spreads, I feel very uncomfortable sitting there and watching with parents though it's very informative.

Anju, 14: Vulgar scenes in movies and some advertisements make me feel uncomfortable. I leave the room when it happens. [*Becoming shy*] We are not supposed to see such things.

Interviewer: Why?

Vijaya, 12: What would my parents think if they see me watching that? On my own – I could continue to watch.

Vijay, 12: They would not like us to watch. They are responsible for our upbringing. We might want to know more. But they think they know what we should not know.

The children's reactions in the early part of this segment are clearly as much to their parents' presence at the time of viewing as to the content of the programmes they describe. Something about the combination of the two in these circumstances produces intense discomfort and, sometimes, outright censorship on the part of parents who switch off the set or self-censorship on the part of the children who change the channel or leave the room. Here, like many of the UK children in Buckingham and Bragg's study 'Young People, Sex and the Media (2005: 70), there is an 'ideological dilemma' (Billig et al., 1988) evident: although these children wish to support their parents' decisions about what they can and cannot watch, and are themselves embarrassed to go on viewing anything with vague references to sex while in parental company, they also experience a growing wish to find out more, and to participate in viewing that is slightly transgressive. In fact, both children and parents in this village setting appear to be negotiating this ideological dilemma as suggested in the discussion of parental regulation of children's viewing in the previous section. This leads Vijay, a 12 year old boy, to watch programmes he feels might draw parental censure only when he visits relatives homes and can watch unobserved, but not at his own house, despite the presence there of a television. It also leads some of the others to leave the room when their

parents happen to be present and scenes depicting the body, sexuality or romance of any kind appear in televised advertisements, programmes or films. This disavowing behaviour occurs partly to convince parents that children have no desire to view such sequences and can be trusted alone with the television and partly because the discomfort of communal viewing in such cases causes too much embarrassment.

Awareness that the some of the 12 and 13-year-old girls are only a few years away from their marriages to much older men[iv] must, however, cause their responses to be read within a different frame from those of the children in Bombay. Given the lack of sex education in their formal schooling, the absolute taboo on speaking about this subject with or in front of adults, the absence of books on the subject and lack of internet within the community, their situation is clearly one in which the only knowledge gleaned with regard to sex and sexuality is likely to come randomly from television or occasional magazines. If this too is still censored by parents or self-censored because of embarrassment on their part, one implication is that some children might be more endangered by the lack of access to a variety of media and particularly the lack of sensitive representations of sex and sexuality than they would be by unsupervised access. This is clearly a claim that would be hotly disputed by those who are concerned primarily about what they see as the deleterious effects of media representations of sex on young people. However, I maintain, contexts of viewing can make all the difference. In India, and particularly in families and locales where girls and young people are 'married' in adolescence or sent to work alongside adults, the 'harmful' effects that might be thought to ensue from media viewing of films and programmes for adults need to be balanced against the dangers of uneducated, unsafe and/or non-consensual sexual encounters at an early age and an overall lack of autonomy and leisure.

What do these case studies tell us?

Participating in the adult world in many ways – for instance through their domestic and agricultural labour; the proximity of marriage for some of the

girls; and by growing literacy and language skills which will help the family in official situations – most of the school-aged children in Palakkad and in Barsu are not expected to enjoy leisure time media unless it is viewed alongside adults. At least in Palakkad, they therefore have to resort to subterfuge – or to fake or even real pedagogic justifications – in order to gain any privacy in which to engage pleasurably with television. Clearly, simply having dedicated children's channels in local languages will not ease this tension for such children, although it might help younger members of their families.

The children in Palakkad are clearly keen to experience aspects of India that are not completely linked to the local context of Malayalam channels that their families might be able to watch and respond to. They use the notion of learning other languages – English, Tamil, Hindi – to access programmes and formats not available in the vernacular and this again begins to separate them from the older members of their families, while making them feel more connected to the rest of India and giving them skills that might serve them well outside the local context of daily poverty and unskilled labour that they inhabit. Additionally, in the case of the children in Barsu, regional politics in broadcasting means that representations of their own lives, language and concerns on television do not exist. These children are triply absent from the televised public sphere either fictional or non-fictional: because of their location, because of their status as children and because of their class.

In other locales and contexts – for instance the lower-middle class families in Bombay – childhood is treated as a distinct phase by parents, and children are apprentice citizens, whose duty it is to become highly educated in order to fulfil the supposed demands of adult life – marriage, supporting parents and financial independence. The children in these households are used, in most cases, to more freedom within the home than their peers in other settings: and outside, they actually get to go to the cinema and enjoy unsupervised viewing. However, they are also seen to be in need of greater protection and supervision – from 'outside' influences, from 'bad' peers, from the media – particularly television, from their own 'laziness' and media

viewing which is understood by parents and many teachers to be a direct challenge to education and educational opportunity. The concept of leisure time for children, while acknowledged by adults with a certain level of income, is not popular or encouraged. However, because many parents work outside the home and do not actually have the time to preside over every aspect of their children's daily life in such lower-middleclass city settings, many of these children have the most diverse media environment across the country and make use of the internet, dvds, vcds and satellite television to access, enjoy and discuss a wide range of commercial media formats produced both in India and other countries and aimed both at children and adults.

But what do the foregoing case-studies teach us about the linkages between class, locale and children as a media public in India? Connecting the three cases, the issue of 'child labour' looms large in the sense that almost none of the children lives what would be considered to be a 'typical' western childhood: the lower-middleclass city girls care for babies and younger children alone for significant periods of each day and also have heavy study schedules in preparation for their entry into a 21st Century labour market. The village children in the mountains and in the small southern town labour in the fields, looking after livestock, carrying loads and doing domestic work in addition to school work. Class and location are evidently issues both in relation to the types of media technologies and texts at their disposal – from mobile phones and broadband in one setting to radio or television in the others – making generalisations about developmental stages in the use of technologies and in meaning-making quite misleading. In Bombay children as young as four are going to the cinema regularly and wielding the remote control or taking photographs on their parents' mobile phones. In Palakkad and Barsu, most of the children have never been to the cinema let alone sat unsupervised at a computer connected to the internet.

In some cases, calls for censorship of children's media use precede even the advent of technology to a community; and discussions of the negative pedagogic and social implications of so many Indian children's lack of access to a range of leisure media and to media education are rare indeed.

This final section explores some possible ways of theorising children's media viewing and the public sphere in a country encompassing widely differing political and social contexts of childhood.

Conclusion: Indian children, media and the public sphere

In the opening sections of her argument that the 'invention of children as consumers brought down the walls between childhood and adulthood' (2005: 163) in many countries and particularly in rhetorical constructions of childhood, Jyotsna Kapur directs us to consider two peculiarities of children's predicament. First, because of their physical vulnerability in a society marked by inequality, '[i]n spite of the aggressive corporate move to construct children as autonomous sovereign consumers, children are the most likely to be exploited in the market and susceptible to violence in the family' (Ibid, 42). And second, one of 'history's dialectics' as she puts it, 'childhood, itself an invention of modernity, [is often] also imagined as its antidote, as an unchanging state that exist[s] outside time, as if in another country entirely' (Ibid, 45). Kapur points to a dialectical relationship between childhood and adulthood, mediated by various aspects of capitalist society such as consumer practices, the family and the media. The case-studies in this chapter strongly support this view, further suggesting that the rhetorical constructions of childhood as a period of vulnerability and innocence might serve some children, in some contexts well if applied to aspects of their lives, while harming and stifling others if applied to areas in which they might conceivably display independence and autonomy.

In the opening chapter of the collection *Studies in Modern Childhood*, the editor, Jens Qvortrup writes about the 'Varieties of Childhood' (2005: 1-20). This discussion moves historically from assorted modern calls for 'child-free zones' in European public spaces backwards to the Arièsian vision of children's representation in medieval and post-medieval society, where children were present physically but childhood was not acknowledged (Ariès, 1962, p 398 in Qvortrup, 2005, 2). It situates the present reification

of childhood in some parts of Western society by tracing the origins and symbolic significance of the idea. In this view, lacking cohesion as a conceptual category or group in medieval society, children were part of public life – but *not as children*. Rather, their presence and participation in that society as part of a labour force signified the invisibility of childhood. Reflecting on the interesting historical change that has taken place in many cultures with regard to the children's presence in the public sphere, Qvortrup writes, 'children in modern society basically belong to the private family which is portrayed as a "Haven in a Heartless world"… . In this sense children have historically experienced a movement from visibility – as small adults, in open local communities to invisibility in public spaces in a modernity which is characterised by much more freedom and democracy and in this sense, openness' (2005: 2). Thus, as he explains, somewhere between the individualising modernity of the call for 'child-free' public spaces and the 'pre-modern' non-existence of childhood, the notion of the 'child' came to prominence and a variety of disciplines openly dedicated themselves to the study of children. Though the child now gained far more prominence in some ways than in the pre-modern social circumstances outlined and 'the much larger likelihood for survival increased the attention to and protection of the child', who was seen as increasingly vulnerable, paradoxically, apparently, 'children were denied the kind, amount and scope of participation that they were previously granted' (2005: 3). In Qvortrup's analysis, changing modes of production further reduced the need for children as a small adult workforce, and they were increasingly confined to a private sphere of family (as possessions or an investment for the future to be nurtured) and school, where their 'labour' as learners was demanded, sometimes vehemently, but with no tangible or (financial) rewards.

Though described in a particularly stark way that strips it of the softening rhetoric about caring and protection, this complex situation described above will be familiar from various accounts of middleclass family life even in urban areas in places like India and is particularly apt in connection to the sample of children interviewed in Bombay. But it needs to be pushed to its logical conclusion to give a sense of what many more

Indian children experience on a daily basis: what effects do the (new) discourses of 'protection' and 'vulnerability' have on children's lives?

The link between acknowledging children's vulnerability and exercising authority in supposed efforts to protect them has been made on various occasions in this chapter – in Palakkad the censorship of material about sexuality and relationships on television; in Bombay the discourse of 'laziness' which castigates media use – by the things children discuss in relation to school, family, work and television viewing. The existence across India of contexts (including amongst the children interviewed here) where below-minimum wage child labour is the norm and places where children contribute their labour or even their bodies to 'family' upkeep without remuneration and without any say in the family's future makes assertions about their 'participation' in the public sphere *via their labour* highly dubious. Child labour and child marriage do not equal 'participation' or guarantee any autonomy. Likewise, in India the rhetorics of 'protection' and 'education' are often linked, in practice, to increasing control over children's leisure. In this sense, the lower-middleclass urban children whose parents cannot be present to 'protect' them at all times, speak with and display the greatest sense of their own autonomy and efficacy.

Just as there are discourses locating children in a matrix of arguments about (economic) development and (cultural) authenticity, Olsen (2003) notes that research related to children frequently positions them as always and only 'developing through ages and stages' (2003: 19), in the process of being socialised, never quite fully formed. He argues, 'this developing child discourse tends to treat children's use of the media as a learning process in which children gradually gain experience and competence according to their age' (2003: I9). Despite their limited scope, the case studies in this chapter cast further doubt on the strongly psychological developmentalist position that Olsen critiques. Instead, the situation outlined by this sample suggests that children and childhood in India do not inhabit a single recognisably social context that can be theorised using a single socio-psychological frame. In some locales and circumstances children still exist in conditions little different from those in

medieval times, and 'childhood' itself is not particularly relevant either as a phase or as an ideology. Here children work, are married, contribute to household income through their labour, and appear in the 'public sphere' in this context. However, they have no control over what they do or do not get to learn at school, over whether or not they go to school at all, and are allowed virtually no 'participation' in the public sphere. Access to media is limited by class status; but, where it exists, it forms one of the only areas in which children can attempt to exercise autonomy and one of the only means by which questions about rights, children's lives and transitions to adulthood might be explored.

The strength of the children's feelings about the kinds of things they can learn from unfettered access to television and the internet is undeniable in this sample. However, currently, parents are not trusted to understand or explain much of what is viewed, and in many cases are completely removed from the sphere of what their children are viewing. Thus a number of Indian parents, whose concerns are frequently completely genuine (Cardoza, 2002), often both critique media use unjustly and miss the most problematic aspects of the texts available to their children. Seeing oneself and one's contexts and concerns represented is by no means straightforward, or an end in itself. Nevertheless, as theorist bell hooks reminds us in her study of black women viewers talking back to Hollywood (hooks, 1999) being absent, excised from or misrepresented in media texts can also have profound and damaging consequences. While the testimony of the small sample of child audiences in this chapter makes the dual case for dedicated, regional and vernacular children's channels and for media education in India all the more pressing, the absence, nationally and internationally, of plausible representations of real Indian children and their diverse life circumstances is an issue that can and should be addressed even without legislation by media producers across the globe.

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[i] The data in Barsu was gathered by Dr. Leena Kumarappan, London Metropolitan University.

ii The data in Palakkad was gathered by Chitra Kumarappan, a trained teacher and local resident liked by the local children.

iii The story of four young girls who come together to form a band 'against all odds'.

iv The researcher in Kerala has noted that while official statistics across the state for child marriage are lower than those country-wide, many of her female students – the classmates of those interviewed in the focus groups – leave school (unwillingly) at the age of fourteen or fifteen to be married off. NGOs and Human Rights organisations continue to protest against the practice with little support from government. http://infochangeindia.org/20070201244/Children/Features/CSOs-demand-a-more-comprehensive-child-marriage-bill.html

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