

Hear The People

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Viewers' Forum 1998 – 2004

A Community Response to Television



Centre for Advocacy and Research
New Delhi

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Foreword

The four publications in this series represent work conducted by the Centre for Advocacy and Research (CFAR) between 2002-2004 in the field of media research. The work was done under the aegis of Ford Foundation and would not have been possible without its unstinting support and encouragement.

The publications are:

General Elections and Media 1998-2004

Rape in *Kahani Ghar Ghar Ki* 2002

TV News and the Gujarat Riots 2002

Hear the People: The Viewers' Forum - A community response to television - 1998-2004

The subjects cover a wide range of issues, issues that have been of longstanding interest and concern to CFAR. We have been monitoring TV coverage of these, and many other issues since 1995.

Three of the publications are based on media research projects conducted over a three-year period. However, CFAR has never seen media research as an end in itself. As a public service Trust, our work has always been informed by a public perspective. Our aim is to conduct content analysis of television programming and analyse public responses to it. We believe that one without the other is incomplete, would lack a perspective that provides space for both television content and audience feedback.

Our commitment to provide a platform to the public from where it can voice its opinions on television content took the concrete form of the Viewers' Forum - a community-based viewers initiative that was set up in 1998.

The Viewers' Forum has provided invaluable feedback on a wide variety of subjects ranging from the depiction of women in TV dramas and the concept of beauty in TV advertising to TV news coverage of the Gujarat earthquake. This feedback has enriched CFAR's media research and seen CFAR/Viewers' Forum advocate with the Government, TV channels and individual TV producers on issues that concern the public with regard to TV norms.

If there has been one guiding principle at CFAR it has been ensure that our media work is community-based. For this reason, the last in this series of publications is a documentation of the Viewers' Forum- its successes, its development and its future ambitions - from the point of view of its members.

At a stage when the electronic media is often dictating the political, social and public agenda in the country, public opinion on the media has never been more important.

It will be our endeavour in all future media-related projects to remain faithful to our concerns and convictions as expressed in these publications.

New Delhi 2005

Akhila Sivasdas
Executive Director

Hear the People

Viewers' Forum - 1998-2004
A Community Response to Television

The Research Team:

Akhila Sivadas	Minal Hazarika
Vinati Bhargava	Sujata Goenka
Anuradha Mukherjee	Shashi Rawat
Vimla Rawat	Lalita Barooah
Shailaja Bajpai	Girija Kumari Sahu

Edited by : Mridula Sharma

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Satellite Television in India

Framing the Concerns

Indian TV in the 90s: The Gulf War in the early 90s marked the advent of cable and satellite TV channels in India. These channels brought the war action right into our homes and added a new dimension to TV viewing in India. From the staid, mostly educative and informative fare dished out by the state-owned Doordarshan, there was a sudden influx of foreign news channels like the CNN and BBC beaming news round the clock. The more entertaining Star TV televising popular western daily soaps like the *Bold and the Beautiful* and *Santa Barbara* brought home a new genre of entertainment.

The Era of Satellite Television in India: The 90s was also an era of major changes and upheavals in Indian society. Liberalisation of the economy brought with it unprecedented consumerism and the placid household became a volatile site. The civil society underwent a dramatic transformation, having to deal with hitherto unaddressed issues. Many urban households saw fragmentation and a subsequent shift in values and beliefs.

The homemaker, who till now was isolated from the market segments and perceived to be an uninformed individual was suddenly the primary target of both the media and the



CFAR/Viewer's Forum meeting, New Delhi

sellers of consumer goods. Programmes were now being slotted with women as the specific target audience, both as viewers and consumers. There was a noticeable change in defining profiles and the woman was steadily being perceived as a savvy manager, an integral audience for tele-marketing. With this barrage of imagery in the 90s, one needed to cope with not only the content but also understand the civil society's engagement, specially the role of critical groups like women and the marginalised and vulnerable segments.

Television as a medium played a huge role in creating this new kind of engagement with information and knowledge. Viewers hooked on to the entertainment format, shifted to news and current affairs programmes. Suddenly the "couch potato" was exposed to a whole new world through fascinating colours of the visual medium. Television was giving a first-time opportunity to peek into the outside world at the touch of a button.

International Interest in India as a Market: Given the vast, untapped potential in the subcontinent, big international media conglomerates were eyeing the region with much interest. Having penetrated the elite and upper echelons of the society with foreign software, the media houses went on to Indianising their programming to appeal to the wider audience. Subsequently, a number of local and regional satellite channels proliferated within South Asia. This barrage of channels opened a totally new vista for the viewers. Generating much excitement and enthusiasm was the power wielding REMOTE, which transported the viewers from a chat show to game show to the household politics or current affairs...all in a jiffy. The audio-visual medium was captivating eyeballs and turning viewers into passive watchers even converting them into consumers of products with its power of repetition. This was a period of transition; viewers were bombarded with information and had few tools to cope with this sudden explosion.

However, it has to be kept in mind that while other countries took over 30 to 40 years to get accustomed to the satellite environment, it was a jump for the Indian viewers. The evolutionary experience of the other nations was encapsulated to reach out to the Indian viewers within a short span of one to two years. Even before they could cope and adjust with the initial bombardment of images, lifestyles, issues, values and belief systems across foreign soaps, there was a fresh onslaught of images contextualised in the Indian environs.

A section of society felt threatened by this "cultural invasion" and concerns were raised about the representation and more so the nature of these representations of different segments, especially of women.

Questions were raised about the "reality" of the media representation and depiction; the stereotypical portrayal of women and other marginalised, disadvantaged communities; about its cumulative impact, especially on impressionable young minds, among others.

Centre for Advocacy and Research

As researchers dealing with media content, treatment and representation, we at the Centre for Advocacy and Research felt the need for consistent viewer feedback. We needed to understand how the common average viewer, who enjoyed viewing the various soaps, thrillers, chat shows, game shows and news programmes, responded to them. Were they able to cope with the portrayal or were they getting worried about its impact on their family or community at large? Such feedback, however, could not be gathered by treating viewers as objects of research and study, but with their active participation in the process.

A 1995 survey among over 340 school¹ and college² students in the 15 to 20 age group in Delhi indicated some of the viewing trends and parental apprehensions around television viewing.

- 74 percent were watching television on a daily basis.
- Almost 90 percent watched after 8 p.m.

In terms of channel preference, Zee³ with its Hindi soaps topped the list - 79 percent, followed by Star Plus⁴ - 63 percent, Doordarshan 2⁵ (Metro channel) - 62 percent and Doordarshan 1 (National) - 44 percent. Over 80 percent of young people surveyed were hooked to serials while 68 percent watched news and 50 percent films.

This need led to the formation of a voluntary collective, called the Viewers' Forum or *Darshak Manch*, as early as 1995. It is a platform for viewers to place their concerns about the media and help them dialogue and negotiate space with the industry and policy makers.

By 1998, this viewer-centered initiative took a more formal shape and in 2004 it had snowballed into an effort where viewers were monitoring television and conducting research.

Before we go into the details of the Forum, let us examine the observations of a recent study undertaken by CFAR on the coverage of the general elections in 2004. This study involved members of the Viewers' Forum.

April 2004: The nation gets ready for Lok Sabha polls. The poll dates were spread over a period of one month: from 20 April to 10 May. Having completed their first full term

1 Among the schools surveyed were Mother's International, Mater Dei, Springdales and Ramjas School.

2 The colleges surveyed included Indraprastha College, Jesus and Mary and Lady Shri Ram

3 On Zee, some of the popular programmes were *Sa Re Ga Ma*, *Campus*, *Daraar*, *Hum Panch*, *Tara*, *Hasratein*, *Banegi Apni Baat*, *Dastaan*, *Andaaz*.

4 The popular shows on Star Plus were *X Files*, *Doogie Howser*, *Star Trek*, *Beverly Hills*, *Baywatch*, *Picket Fences*, *Bold and the Beautiful*, *Oprah Winfrey*, *Small Wonder*.

5 On Doordarshan 2, news and current affairs programmes like *Aaj Tak*, *Tonight*, *Newstrack*, *Eyewitness*, *The World This Week* were popular with the young people besides comedies like *Tu Tu Main Main*, *Shriman Shrimati*, and serials like *Kashmakash*, *Shri Krishna*.

in office, the upbeat ruling coalition splashed advertisements across the print and electronic media, hoardings and billboards.

Suddenly, the nation was taken over by the “Feel Good” factor and “India Shining / Bharat Uday” slogans. Not to be left behind, the media joined in for the first ever extensive coverage by multiple 24-hour news channels.

Given this wide-ranging coverage, Election 2004 can be termed as the first ‘live’ TV election in the country.⁶

From the citizens’ point of view, too, this was an interesting ‘media’ electoral battle. For Lalita Barooah, Delhi’s Vasant Kunj resident, who was not a keen follower of politics, watching the innumerable news programmes and analysis led to the realisation about the understanding of the election process and more significantly, the importance of such an understanding. On a lighter note, she reflects, “having watched the news I was amazed at the way these politicians, who cut each other to pieces would soon be shaking hands with each other, once the elections got over.”

Pratima Shah felt that earlier on, the election news used to be ‘dry’, “but now they show bits of news related to parties and politicians of particular constituencies. Earlier they would mention only numbers. Now the media was showing and giving additional information, which made the news interesting. For instance, one day on the TV, they showed the assets of Maharaja of Mysore and what makes him the richest candidate.”

“Over the years, there has been a conscious move by the media towards simplifying ‘hard news’ related to politics, business, economy - to make it understandable and more appealing for the general audiences.”

In her mid 30s, freelancer Sanchita Pal appreciated programmes like *Kante ki Takkar* on Doordarshan where leaders were included but were not allowed much time to speak. “Mainly the common people of the particular constituency do the talking. Here the main issue is water and electricity.”

Lalita, Pratima and Sanchita were among 18 women, including homemakers, journalists, social workers, associated with the Viewers’ Forum from Delhi, Ahmedabad, Guwahati, Lucknow. These volunteers monitored news bulletins in Assamese, English, Gujarati, Hindi, and Tamil, over a period of nine weeks across 10 national⁷ and regional⁸ channels.

6 The importance of the media can be gauged from the fact that political parties such as the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and Congress set up television news monitoring cells to track the coverage.

7 National channels monitored included Hindi news bulletins on Aaj Tak, Doordarshan News, NDTV India, STAR News and Zee TV, besides English bulletins on NDTV 24X7.

8 Regional channels included Prag Channel (Assamese), Sun TV (Tamil), ETV (Gujarati) and Sahara Samay (Hindi).

Some of the monitors felt that the coverage on specific channels was biased, while others found it to be 'crisp', and 'not beating around the bush'. Some channels were found to be repeating the same news across bulletins. In terms of presentation style, the channels differed to a great extent.

As a Viewers' Forum volunteer, Tabassum, a housewife with three young children, took time off her daily chores to monitor recorded bulletins. Sudha Aggarwal, a single mother with two daughters, who up till now watched news for information "learnt what is going on in elections."

Though not trained formally in research, Shashi living in East Delhi's Dilshad Garden, monitored live news. "Earlier on, I never watched the news, so when I started this monitoring study, I used to find it boring. But now because of this monitoring study I have started enjoying watching news."

Like most women viewers disinterested in news, and especially political news, Tamil news monitor Meenakshi would usually switch channels after watching the headlines. "But for this monitoring study, I had to sit through the entire news. Initially I found it very interesting, but later on the news channel kept repeating the same type of news. I started losing interest (in watching news)."

Lalita, who was also part of the team compiling the report, questioned the content of the news and current affairs programmes. She admits, "I did gain knowledge out of it, but that was because I had to monitor it and therefore listen to all of it seriously. Otherwise who cares?"

Asked to give their wish list on preferred coverage, they were ready with responses. Shashi wanted information on how voters without I-cards could exercise their adult franchise. Pratima disliked the parties "bashing" each other on the small screen and would have preferred the same time being devoted to development issues. On the whole, most viewers disliked the widespread "criticism" on television and mentioned their preference for highlighting the "good work" done by individuals and parties to help them choose their "leaders". The need for more "people's voices" and stress on issues like "education, youth, disabled, health and food security" was also reiterated.

Did media impact the voters? Media critics, political commentators have commented that these elections were contested on television rather than on the ground. However there is no clear-cut understanding of how the media coverage got translated on the ground. One view is that the voters decided not to get influenced by the widespread coverage and exercised their own judgement.

Another point of view that emerged was that given media's role in exposing the 'truth', it successfully swung public opinion. For instance, the claims made by the government as part

of the India Shining campaign were seen as a measure to counter the anti-incumbency factor but with media's constant grilling and challenging the politicians, the voters got the true picture.

The findings of the study, shared with the Election Commissioner, channels and media watchers, were very well appreciated. The election monitoring empowered the viewers to be informed citizens who are aware of their rights, the political manoeuvres and capable of exercising their franchise in a discerning manner. The entire process was an eye opener - right from demystifying the content, analysing it and ultimately looking at the credibility that they were reposing on the audio-visual medium.

It also demonstrated how a viewers' collective could play an important role by monitoring media's content and analysing the way media shapes, packages and generates debates and discussions on political events such as the parliamentary elections.

So, 'who are these viewers and how do they unpack the influence of the media from the viewer's perspective'. What is their gain in this entire process?

These were some of the concerns that Viewers' Forum of CFAR took upon itself to unravel.

Concerns of Television Consumers: For Minal Hazarika, a trained engineer and homemaker and as a mother of a teenaged daughter, the major concern was the impact of media images across the channels on young children. She illustrated her point with the example of a popular comedy show on Zee TV, *Hum Paanch*, which showed the five siblings doing everything but studying. "My child feels that no one in the reel world is studying, and questions why her parents insist that she study".

Given the typical Indian scenario of one television set per home, parents and younger people, at times, found it embarrassing to watch serials, films and even advertisements with other family members. At the same time, young people were imitating media - boys going in for long hair and earrings and girls taking fashion tips and learning the latest dancing steps.

A school student responded, "parents seem to be convinced that MTV and Channel V are bad and don't want us to watch it. But everything is not bad, and the parents don't seem to understand that."

For Vimla, a social activist living in East Delhi and working closely with the *basti* women, the concern extended to the impact on the community. Mothers with young children complained about their wards taking control of the remote and not paying attention to their studies. Advertisements for sanitary napkins led children to ask questions about the product much to the discomfort of their mothers.

Referring to increased violence in the community, Gyanwati, a social worker from Jahangirpuri, said, "the television only shows violence as part of the reality. They do not

show any resolutions to the problem. The television often exaggerates what is happening. This further encourages men to indulge in these undesirable acts. As a result such incidents are increasing by the day. My question is: is television offering any solutions to these problems?"

Television viewers from the less privileged segments of society have been asking for sensitive handling of issues like dowry, alcoholism and rape, shown in serials that reach out to society at large.

Serials like *Stree*, which handled women's issues, their struggles and left an impact on the audience and encouraged them. Kusum Jain of the 'Parents for Meaningful Education' while being nostalgic about serials like *Hum Log* and *Buniyaad* felt that the "liberalisation" of the media was "bringing glamorous fiction into our homes". In contrast, a mother of two daughters, aged 6 and 12 years, Anita Khosla was delighted that the "television has brought the world into our homes. With a range of 30 to 40 varied channels, the viewer has the option to choose". While her daughters were glued to *Disney Hour* and comedy serials, she was hooked to the Zee TV soaps.

There are also those for whom the TV has been a positive influence. For South Delhi resident, Mondira, a teacher by profession, the television "has both positive and negative fall outs. In my family, for my mother-in-law, I think it is very good. It is a nice way for her to pass her time. Many a time I want to give her company but am unable to due to other pressures. The TV works as company for her. As for my son, I feel many programmes are educative and informative but at certain times he is distracted. As for us, both of us have less time to watch but whatever programmes we watch we do enjoy. It gives us a lot of entertainment and also some kind of a relief. I do not feel that we should do away with television but it should be monitored in ways that keeping in mind the producers' and consumers' interest we get balanced programmes."

One common concern amongst these people was the representation of woman on the small screen. The construct of the modern woman - influential, powerful, bold, handling her business and family with equal ease with shades of grey across serials, was gaining ground with the viewers and also generating discussions about issues like extra-marital affairs, bigamy and violence.

This translated into harassment on the streets - "It is very difficult to walk out of homes as boys pass filthy comments and make life miserable. They pretend to sing songs that are shown on TV," lamented a young viewer working with an NGO.

Broadly, viewers felt that the media was creating problems at two levels:

1. Misinformation on legal and medical aspects, leading to misrepresentation
2. Lack of representation to marginalised and underprivileged sections of the society

The Policy Debates: At the policy level, there were on-going debates on the need for a gender sensitive media policy and some form of a regulatory mechanism. In 1995, there was a landmark ruling by the Supreme Court that the airwaves belong to the public and not the government and ordered the government to take immediate steps to constitute an independent, autonomous, public authority to govern broadcasting.

It is 2005, and nothing has happened so far. A continually expanding and ever changing television environment was constantly throwing up new challenges for viewers. With the government uncertain in action, a TV industry eager to capitalise on the explosion, a cable distribution network spreading like wild fire through the bigger cities, the viewer at the centre of the maelstrom found himself passive and powerless.

A crucial need was felt to address the issues of the vulnerable and marginalised segments of the community - homemakers and professional women, children, young people, people living with disabilities, migrant communities and those living in less privileged and rural areas among others.

Hence, it was important to create space for the viewers to intervene on issues related to content, treatment as well as technology. For any meaningful consumer intervention, it was essential to not only create awareness but also to ensure media education to enable viewers to deliberately engage and cope with media imagery.

And finally these concerns needed to be conveyed to and advocated with the various stakeholders - the production houses, channels, advertisers, the creatives such as scriptwriters, directors, as well as journalists; the policy makers; civil society organisations and of course, the viewers or consumers of media.

These needs had been identified by different groups of viewers at different times but it was in 1998 that their apprehensions, anxieties, angst, fears and confusion led to the formation of the Viewers' Forum in Delhi. Ahmedabad, Lucknow, Mau and Guwahati are the other centres where the Forum became active and has been gathering response in a sustained manner besides occasional responses from viewers in other cities and towns.

The Viewers' Forum brought into its fold people from different strata and circumstances, institutions and individuals - academicians, journalists, parents, media watchers, the marginalised and underprivileged; men, women and children. Within a short span of its existence, it was realised that viewers could no longer be ignored as one of its key players by the media industry.

Coming back to 2005, the scenario has not changed much and the concerns continue to be similar. Obscenity in the Hindi film songs has given way to remix videos, serials and advertisements. Issues regarding misinformation and the absence of the marginalised segments of society continue to be raised. Violence in films and serials has extended to

news and reality shows. Policy decisions are awaited on regulatory mechanisms, even though censorship has been rejected as a viable option.

Advertisements with derogatory representation: The advertisement for Wheel detergent showed a young man disappointed about not getting a job and taking his frustration out on his wife. Bursting into the room, he throws his dirty shirt on her and blames her for his failure. The wife, in turn, brings out her wrath on the bar of soap. The magic appearance of Wheel detergent changes their fortune – the husband gets a job and the wife her share of love and respect.

Girls from different strata of society resented the depiction in the ad – Mohini, living in the biggest resettlement colony of Delhi - Jahangirpuri, pointed out that the nature of depiction was such that while the woman is being held responsible for the setbacks, the moment there is a turn for the better the credit goes largely to the product. Her friend Gudiya felt that such portrayals on media encouraged men to “behave like a male chauvinist.”

However the boys differed in their opinion. “Let us face it, the ad is merely reflecting a social reality. In most Indian households, it is the women who wash the clothes. So there is nothing derogatory about the projection,” stated Amitabh, a student at South Delhi’s Deshbandhu College.

The medium on the whole has changed drastically. But can viewers or consumers of media really make a difference?

Do they wield enough power to take on the influential media conglomerates managing the industry or be heard by the policy makers?

Can they ensure enforcement of regulations within the industry?

In the following chapters, we would be dealing with the different platforms within the broader Viewers’ Forum - the *Forum of Viewers’ with Disability*, the *Basti Manch* and the *Forum of Middle Class Women*.

Initiated as neighbourhood meetings to gather viewer feedback, the effort led to viewers educating themselves to analyse images, interact with the media to advocate on content and treatment, and finally conduct structured media research like the election study of 2004.

Basti Manch

A Case for the Missing Representation

In 1998, the Viewers' Forum went through a process of regrouping to ensure an incisive representation of concerns and issues of varied segments of television viewers. One such segment identified was the group of people living in resettlement colonies or the *bastis*. The Forum collaborated with women's organisations working in different *bastis* and resettlement colonies across the city. This was done with the intention of sensitising them to media, gender and social issues. Hence, in early 1988, *BASTI MANCH* came into existence, with an aim to voice concerns and gain visibility for their issues in the media.

Very broadly, the Viewers' Forum found that for the women living in overcrowded *bastis*, the ground realities were harsh and deplorable. Living standards had over the years deteriorated in reverse proportion to their problems. Besides health care, which was a far cry, they did not even have basic facilities of clean drinking water, electricity and education. **Their concerns were not related as much to the media but to their day-to-day struggle for survival.**



Basti Manch meeting in progress, New Delhi

In the realm of media, it was these women from the bastis more than any other section of the Forum, who believed that the representation of their lives was disappearing on TV. When they did have a presence they were only seen as victims of Government apathy, caste, class and communal oppression. From the media standpoint, their value lay in human interest, emotional peg of the story, while their real achievements and capabilities were ignored. Even more worrisome, from their point of view, was that their opinions were not reflected in the media nor was any sustained effort made to campaign for their cause.

With TV soaps moving into opulent business households the depiction of the less privileged was restricted to household helpers - these too were very few. Serials set in rural India or reflecting the reality of the marginalised sections in an urban environment were conspicuous by their absence.

Evolution of the Basti Manch: Women from Delhi's resettlement colonies felt the need to assert themselves as a collective entity to enable them articulate their concerns and help them to cope with TV images. They needed a platform where they could voice their reactions to the TV content offered to them, and negotiate with the media.

Realising the importance of media as a tool to shape public perception, opinion and attitude, the women from resettlement colonies formed the *Basti Manch*. "We want our day-to-day struggles and problems with different institutions to be reflected in the media so that the general public becomes aware of our experiences and needs, and we get included in the mainstream discourse," the *Basti Manch* members reiterated vehemently.

The *Basti Manch* started in Seemapuri, a resettlement colony in Delhi. The formal institution of this *Manch*, was more than a mere working towards an increased and more complete representation of social and gender issues. It meant having their space to voice special concerns about the manner in which they and their problems were being projected and treated by the media. "The main problem with TV programmes for our group is the projection of sexiest images of women and increasing violence. How can we encourage the young in our group to see all this with their families? I feel that all of us, along with the media representatives, have to work out something. **Why show what is already happening? Media must work out a new approach, create a new direction for the society,**" said Vimla way back in 1998. She formally joined the *Basti Manch* as a coordinator in 2000.

"How we respond as viewers is central. Only if we are sensitised, informed and critical can we constitute an intelligent public opinion and be in



Akhila Sivadas, Executive Director, CFAR

a significant position to shape Government policies with regard to the quality of the electronic medium on one hand and help create self regulatory and viewer remedial codes on the other," says Akhila Sivadas, Executive Director, Centre for Advocacy and Research.

The objective of this Forum was that the women from these colonies be made part of the larger media discourse. In a statement they said, "Though we do find occasional representation to our problems in some programmes like *Awaaz* and *Helpline* clearly this is not enough. We want the media to take up issues of *bastis* so that the Government and administration take note of these. If even one tenth of the airtime is spent highlighting our issues and concerns, it will help us greatly. The media must not forget its social responsibility. Even in a city like Delhi, we, the poor and underprivileged, constitute 70 per cent of the population and the media, at the most, caters only to 30-35 per cent."

At the time, this effort was initiated, it was envisaged that the Forum, (*Basti Manch*) though part of the larger amorphous Viewers' Forum, would grow as a collective of its own and draw attention of the media to issues of the marginalised sections and in the process sensitise them to their reality. Members were carefully selected and many of the founder members, were activists who had several years of experience in community work.

Unique problems of the *basti*: Women living and working in Delhi's overcrowded *bastis* faced many violations unique to their situation. To mention a few: despite having paid for permanent electricity connections they were yet to get one. They had been issued ration cards but did not get their quota of rations. Such violations had the potential of triggering off controversies, but went unreported in the media.

If at all these issues snowballed into major headlines causing consternation in official circles, the issues were short-lived. For instance, during the onion *crisis* of 1998 when the Government



Basti Manch members, New Delhi

started selling onions against ration cards and at special outlets, these woman found they were being discriminated against. Those who paid more were given preference.

The *Basti* dwellers' comments about media coverage of this crisis were focused exclusively on the insensitivity of both the Government and the media to their needs and problems.

News programmes like *Aaj Tak*⁹ and *Ankhon Dekhi*¹⁰ were popular with viewers from these less-privileged colonies but they felt marginalised, as the programmes did not focus on their peculiar living conditions and problems. When they did focus, in situations like the onion and mustard crisis¹¹, only specific events were highlighted. Though the establishment was embarrassed, the media could not and did not build a sustained campaign to make the system answerable to ordinary citizens. During critical moments, like the onion crisis that hit the middle and lower class groups the hardest, the standpoint of the common person did not get reflected as prominently as it should have. As a result, issues like official bungling and apathy, which hurt the less-privileged groups the most, receded into the background. People felt that though official explanations were always given, little effort was made to solicit opinions or to get to the root of the issue. At times, due to conflicting standpoints of different media houses, the viewers from the *basti* were left in a dilemma. As they said in 1998, “we often feel very confused because we find newspapers report differently. There are factual differences even in the same day’s reports carried by different papers. What we see on TV and read in newspapers is very different from reality. For instance, mustard oil was still not being sold (even though the news informed us that it was available).”

Who is accountable to us? The women felt very strongly about their representation on media - not just as women, but also as women belonging to a specific socio-economic group. In reality, while the women living in these resettlement colonies faced problems similar to those faced by women from middle-income segments, they were more vulnerable. For example, while acknowledging their vulnerabilities to issues that relate, however indirectly, to sexuality, their concerns were not merely of female subordination but of sexual crimes. For residents of Delhi’s resettlement colonies, rape and violence were more prevalent in reality than depicted onscreen. “Our locality is witness to frequent instances of such kinds of incidents but media does not always support us by highlighting or exposing these violations to the extent where the system is forced to render justice and bring the culprits to book,” pointed out Santosh, an activist with the NGO Parivartan in 2003.

These women say that though media reports violations like rape in less privileged areas, its approach is not as aggressive or its campaign as sustained in building public outrage as it would have been if the victim hailed from a middle class background. Reacting to the media reporting on the rape of a Swiss diplomat and a 17-year old girl in Buddha Jayanti Park in October 2003, and the fact that issues concerning the ‘so-called upper income group’ receive more coverage, these *basti* members asked, “Why was this particular rape case (Buddha Park) given front page space? Media should

9 *Aaj Tak* was telecast at that time as a half an hour news bulletin on the Doordarshan channel. Later it became a 24-hour news channel.

10 *Ankhon Dekhi*, a five minute news capsule, was telecast on Doordarshan.

11 The mustard crisis in 1998 in Delhi led to many deaths in the city.

play its role fairly. Do they know about the number of rapes that take place in the *bastis* and *jhuggi* clusters? Who cares about us?"

The person who suffers may be a girl of 10 or 12 years of age, says Vimla, a NGO worker in the resettlement colonies of Delhi who has been at the forefront of the *Basti Manch's* activities. The perpetrator of the crime may be a familiar person - a brother-in-law, uncle or neighbour, and at times even father. **Enraged, the women living in Delhi's resettlement colonies said, "whenever the media comes to us, they twist and turn our words. We are hurt when the full truth is not presented properly.** Our perspectives are never reflected and the presentation leaves much to be desired. If rape is shown it should be done in a sensitive manner and not ugly or provocative. This is an issue which concerns the entire society."

Media reinforces notion of women as sex symbols: The dominant construct of women on the electronic media entertainment shows, music videos or TV commercials, often reduced them to objects meant to titillate men. Such depiction often gets translated into male voyeurism and disparaging behaviour in the public space. This not just affects personal relationships but violates public norms. As Sarita, who works in the highly congested *jhuggi* clusters of the capital complained, "thanks to the sexist images on TV, it is becoming impossible for older women to work in *bastis*. Young men and even boys are looking at us differently and we are no longer the good old *mausis* (aunties) of yesteryears; today we are women who are being viewed as sex objects by young men, just as they look at celluloid nymphs or heroines."

2003: The situation had not changed. Remix songs and music albums like *Kanta Laga*, *Chaddhati Javani* showing scantily clad women dancing sensuously reinforced such imagery. "In *Mere naseeb mein tu hain ki nahi*, a model is shown in a wet short skimpy top. She discards her jacket and dances on the tabletop. These women do not reflect emancipation and we feel alienated," the *basti* dwellers complained at one *Manch* meeting. They added that the remix music videos only instigated eve teasing and girls feared to tread out alone. The members of the Forum voiced the need to ban such songs or to bring a change in the attire worn by the models. They said, "TV viewing is called a very intimate family medium and if such songs are shown on TV, far from bringing the family together, they embarrass us."

The younger adults in these *bastis* were found to have their own pulls and pressures - be it in terms of economic, social divides or unfulfilled aspirations. If caught watching provocative images, they are accused of enjoying them. There is hardly a platform where they can consistently articulate or conduct a meaningful dialogue. At another level, many so-called social analysts and market researchers assume that the youngsters are ready for all this 'adult viewing'. As a result, they are often misunderstood and there is no space for self-clarification. The messages were packaged for the young, but these youngsters often found their understanding in collision with what was being conveyed.

Seventeen-year-old Gaurav, a standard 11th student, who lives in one of these resettlement colonies, complains about media publicising everything. "*Baby Doll*¹² was pictured in a song wearing a short skirt which, in fact, is a school dress. What signals is this sending to the younger generation? Media should not take us for granted. The result of such images is that we are not motivated to achieve higher things but seen as people who constantly want to unwind."

Further, the impact of such imagery in the absence of quality care for children and teenagers in nuclear families of working parents was that young people found themselves mired in the quicksand with no one to turn to for counseling and proper guidance. Nineteen year old Om Prakash from Seemapuri, studying for his graduation said, "as such they do not show anything for the youth but when I see songs of the music albums on MTV or Channel [V], I get extremely involved but there is no one I can turn to for clarifying my emotions or sharing my ideas."

While some adults were convinced that young people would come to terms with these images, others were apprehensive that they might be emboldened in a wrong way and instigated to commit crimes like rape.

These issues have been debated ever since. In 1995, Vimla said during a focus group discussion, "recently we had a discussion with two groups of children, boys and girls in the age group of eight and 14. We tried to find whether they had any association with issues like rape. Much to our surprise we found it was not the media but closer home - their environment. Young boys said they had overheard older boys discussing how they had raped a girl. One of them even said he had raped a girl in the hospital. What do you think is the net effect of all this imagery when they see these things happening around them?"

Children need proper guidance on issues like sexuality and it is essential that the media does not reduce the entire process to just 'crude sex and sexism'. It should show the path by creating an environment where children are initiated into sex education. While the media defends itself by claiming it is raising awareness, viewers feel the awareness is not within the value framework. As 17-year old Nivedita, pointed out, "the TV does not give us information on sex, but with such depictions just titillates us. We ask ourselves, what is it? Why is it? When should it take place? These questions are left unanswered. Television should be able to give us information on the subject. If they give any kind of wrong information and signals in the name of entertainment, it is at a huge human cost."

Questions on sexual exploitation and discontentment among the youth were the concerns shared by community workers during the initial phase of the Viewers' Forum. At a focus

12 *Baby Doll* was the name of the remix music album featuring teenager Deepal Shah in the song *Kabhi Aar, Kabhi Paar*.

group discussion in July 1995, Elizabeth Vatsayan from AIDS Awareness Group mentioned, "we say that the children should not be given sex education as it will corrupt their minds but at same time we are exposing them to such scenes on TV. Therefore, the children are neither protected nor unaware of these matters. Isn't it better to give them full knowledge rather than half-truths and many a time extreme facts?"

'We identify with the protagonist': Besides children and teenagers, television enjoyed high viewership among women - the largest target audience for advertisers. A TV set is present in nearly every house and most houses have access to cable. Those living in resettlement colonies, when spoken to, admitted that TV and films were an integral part of their lives. ***Basti* dwellers were committed viewers of several serials and found themselves identifying with many of the protagonists and situations.**

Discrimination against women is common to all irrespective of class, caste, etc. The *basti* dwellers acknowledge their vulnerabilities to issues like sexuality, rape, marriage, extra-marital relationships and societal pressures among others. Every discussion on sexual imagery led to heated discussion on sexual crimes - rape, incest, molestation and eve teasing. Viewer after viewer was found to be confused bewildered and disillusioned. Like Sunita said in 2003, "a film lasts only for three hours. But the electronic media reinforces such images daily or weekly in our homes, thus leaving a greater impact on our minds". "Who is accountable for making us tense," ask viewers from the resettlement colonies.

Sudha, from one of the resettlement colonies, during the focus group discussion in July 1995, narrated the real life story of a woman from her *basti* that was very similar to that of the protagonist of *Dard*¹³ who had to choose between two men - her husband and her lover.

"The female character in *Dard* has been shown as bold in not only expressing her desires but also fulfilling them. A similar incident happened in our *basti* when a married woman fell in love with a young man. Her husband brought this man home. The result was like the protagonist in *Dard*, this woman divorced her husband and married her lover," told Sudha.

Manorama, another resident of the resettlement colony, says, "The *basti* women make very quick decisions in these matters. They are not indecisive. If they feel that they are in love with a man and a relationship is over they take a decision to live with him." Very often these women are judged wrongly and like all other women, guilt is imposed on them.

However, serials like *Dard* help them confront reality and themselves. Like the protagonist in *Dard* who drifts towards the other man, and through the narrative explains her

13 *Dard* literally means 'pain'. Neena Gupta played the main protagonist in the serial. While married to a much older man, she has a young lover and the serial looks at her dilemma.

circumstances to the viewers, these women have their defining moments, they reach a crucial stage when they personally take a decision feeling the narrative is going to follow the same path.

Many of these viewers, in similar circumstances, feel betrayed when the protagonist decides to change track. The protagonist of *Dard* stays behind with her children, after her husband's death and leaves the man she loves. This leaves the *basti* dwellers feeling they have been taken for a ride and unceremoniously dropped. They wonder whether there was any other way the producer could have shown the narrative progress such as the use of flashback where they could have been taken into confidence.

Basti dwellers feel let down: These women who live in a world of reality and not reeity - as broadcast on the electronic media - also felt let down every time the producer takes undue liberties with the depiction of the female protagonist's character. Two women from Seemapuri found reflections of their lives in a relatively new serial - *Yeh Meri Life Hai* telecast on Sony TV. They could identify their struggles with that of the protagonist, Pooja, who hailed from a middle class background. Yet they felt betrayed when Pooja, like other female protagonists on the screen, broke down under pressure and gave up her ambitions and decided to conform. A woman's strength, according to those living in resettlement colonies, is something that is innate to her. This strength is necessary for a woman's survival in the harsh world of reality in which they live.

"Pooja is portrayed as a progressive girl of strong character. With her mother's support and her own determination, she makes her strict father relent. She has proved that one can progress in life by speaking in Hindi too," says Vimla. "However, her involvement with a rich boy, Ronit, and the tragic incidents, which follow after her to-be brother-in-law Milind's accidental death, leave her shattered and crying forever. This proves, that the serial is not any different from the others." Another observation was "isn't it strange that Reema and Ronit's mother has no maternal bond with her children? She has kept an ayah to look after them? This sends out wrong messages to the public about the lives of women from the upper class. As it is they have their own perceptions of these women, and such imagery only reinforces and strengthens this notion."

Like Vimla, Nivedita says, "in the beginning Pooja was like one of us. We saw her struggle. We could identify with her struggle. Then she fell in love. Unfortunately, now (in the serial) she is under tremendous pressure - these pressures arise from her love life, family and work. Following these repercussions, her life has become simply bizarre. In the form of love, they are showing violence on her. Seeing her dither under pressure, our confidence to go ahead has also diminished."

The Viewers' Forum interactions revealed that the *Basti* dwellers were bewildered with the kind of representation women were given on the small screen. In a fraction of a second, a woman's character could change shades like the colours of a chameleon. A woman

portrayed as a gentle and benign person could suddenly become a cunning villain. Avantika in *Kahani Ghar Ghar Ki* (Star Plus) was shown as her husband's murderer. Ramola Sikand in *Kahin Kissi Roz* (Star Plus) was capable of murdering anyone. "These images are beyond our comprehension," the members said during a neighbourhood meeting in August 2003.

In the name of drama, the *basti* dwellers did not want the producer to take undue advantage of the way the narrative moves. They understood the imperatives of the producer and that one of the chief elements he or she uses is drama - i.e. there will be a 'tension of opposites'. What they objected to was the element of drama becoming so predominant that whatever meaningful narrative the producers' had been developing was compromised. **The *basti* dwellers want the essence of the struggle to be distilled.**

Even in *Dard*, they realised that Neena Gupta had to conclude the narrative in a particular way. Although she did not trivialise the narrative, they felt betrayed by the way she handled it. Their argument was "once a meaningful discourse has been established, the narrative should continue and be consistent." **For the *basti* dwellers, all this becomes very painful because to a great extent it is not entertainment, but a personalised engagement.** The situation has only grown worse now. As Ramola and others keep changing shades - their characters lose logic and the situation gets compromised. The *basti* dwellers want the discourse of the drama to be realistic and the characters must portray that struggle.

"In *Sara Akash*, telecast on Star Plus (2005), producers have shown a lot of negligence and recklessness. They have shown a duplicate of one of the protagonists, Monica. Two infiltrators from Pakistan enter the Indian Air Force headquarters. How could they have entered such a high security area? *Unhone kanoon ki dhajijan uda di* (they violated the law so easily)," says Lajmi, 48, a resident of a resettlement colony in Delhi. "People like me start wondering that this is the institution one relies upon for the defence of the nation and something as dangerous as this can happen here so easily - it's simply horrific."

Though the producer may insert a disclaimer saying the story is fictional, yet viewers like Lajmi face a dilemma since there is not a single day in their lives when newspapers do not carry news on terrorism or tensions with Pakistan. And when the producers adopt news-breaking discourse into fiction, without giving adequate explanations, viewers like her are left stranded between the world of reelity and reality.

Television content and children: Violence in serials, family dramas, horror and supernatural shows and even cartoons was another concern parents shared with the media. **The 2001 five-city study conducted by CFAR indicated high incidence of violence on television shows, computer and video games,** a tremendous increase in children's TV viewing habits - anything between 2-10 hours a day, across programmes, channels and time slots. Children were hooked on to highly emotive family dramas, suspense and horror thrillers.

Parents interacted with representatives from the television industry including Madhavi Mutatkar, Head, Zee TV; Markand Adhikari, CEO, SABe TV, Deepak Segal, Creative Director, Star TV, Mukesh Khanna, Proprietor, Bheeshma International and Dr. Vishwamohan Thakur, an Ahmedabad-based psychiatrist.

Responding to parents' grievances, these representatives acknowledged that they had a social responsibility and that they needed to address issues of appropriate programming for children and actively dialogue with parents. Parents wanted ratings and statutory warnings across channels.

As gatekeepers, parents also had to take up the responsibility of regulating the viewing time as well as content. They should also help their wards to connect the on-screen fantasy world with the real world around them.

Children's favourite icon *Shaktimaan* on screen stunts were often imitated. While Mukesh Khanna who played the super hero saw his serial as a "platform for kids", to convey value-based messages like not consuming *gutka*, *supari* (tobacco, betelnut) or drinking milk regularly, parents were apprehensive about the impact on the vulnerable minds of their wards.

At the same time, as pointed out by mother of a seven-year-old boy from Seemapuri, it was not easy to explain to a child that he should not imitate the 'super' actions but follow the tips at the end of the show.

Since they were watching these projections daily in the media, these pictures were fast becoming a reality for them. "Through the various workshops and surveys that we held, we explained to the children that these images represented the reel world and not the real world," explained one of the workers.

Basti Manch wants more than *saas-bahu* themes: The sense of betrayal was particularly pronounced in the case of these marginalised viewers who want the TV to project reality like issues of discrimination, violence, and not just delve into *saas-bahu* themes. **The point was not the content but the treatment of the content. Any depiction of violence on TV must justify the need and not be there just to titillate or entertain viewers.** It must help the woman equip her to cope in a similar situation.



Meeting on impact of Media Violence on Children organised by CFAR/Viewers' Forum, New Delhi. Actor Mukesh Khanna (extreme left) in the audience.

For these women docu-fictions like *Bhanwar* formed more substantial watching since they portrayed their world of reality. The socio-economic issues visually depicted in these programmes - dowry, unemployment, poverty, etc - both within the family and outside, were basically the same that they have dealt with in their daily lives. However, even in such docu-dramas, they said that a "mere dramatisation of the court case is not enough". So strong was the desire among viewers from Delhi's resettlement colonies to find answers to their queries that they wrote to Sanjay Ray Chaudhary, the director of *Bhanwar* in 1998, that the programme needed to go deeper into the socio-economic problems which the perpetrators and the victims continue to face.

Basti women were hooked to popular serials like *Kasautii Zindagi Kay*, *Kumkum*, *Bhabhi* and *Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi* (Star Plus). But they said that under the pretext of realism, producers seem to take liberties with the presentation of the conflict and the use of violence. And channels glorify these violent acts by repeatedly broadcasting them in the promos. "In *Kasautii Zindagi Kay* on Star Plus, Perna despite being married to Anurag meets Mr. Bajaj clandestinely. In fact, in most of the serials the male protagonist maintained relationship with two women - one his wife and the other his mistress. How could Mr. Bajaj marry Perna without legally divorcing his first wife?" point out viewers like Vimla.

***Basti* dwellers don't relate to pomp in pujas:** With the upper class homes dominating the small screen, *pujas* and celebrations were a major preoccupation. This depiction of *pujas* in serials invoked a feeling of faith and commitment amongst viewers from less privileged areas. Naaz, a Muslim member of the *Basti Manch*, likes the *pujas* shown in serials so much that she makes it a point to attend religious ceremonies at her friend's place.

However, they could not relate to the pomp and show of these *pujas*. In fact, most homes shown in serials had a separate puja room. Viewers opined "*puja man se hoti hai naki dhan se*" (one worships with mind, not money). During a meeting at Dakshinpuri in January 2003, members expressed concern when Parvati, the protagonist of *Kahani Ghar Ghar Ki*,



Vimla Rawat

participated in a Ganesh *puja* wearing sandals. Though appreciative of programmes relating to Indian history and culture, these women were not particularly appreciative of religious or mythological serials. The members pointed out that religious serials celebrate polygamy and illegitimate children, sending wrong signals to the public. Critical of dresses worn by women in mythological serials, they say, set wrong precedence for young girls.

Election 2004 was fought on the media: By election 2004, *basti* dwellers had become critical viewers of television and could analyse the way they perceived an issue and the way media projected it. "Elections earlier were fought on the ground, but Election 2004 was fought

on media," says Vimla. "We could critically analyse the messages - the way leaders were being projected and what the media was saying. And eventually the people delivered their verdict."

On the eve of elections, a feedback survey was conducted amongst 250 men and women from less-privileged backgrounds in Sundernagari, Seemapuri, Dilshad Garden, Kalyanpuri, Dakshinpuri and Badarpur Border of Delhi. The survey was done to assess the core concerns of the voters, quantify their priorities and enable the target group to communicate its needs and aspirations to the media.

It was found that there was a growing disillusionment amongst the less privileged segments about the near and complete obliteration of home run, small-scale industries (rubber, plastic) by the government on different pretexts (curbing pollution, for instance). Disappointed by the election coverage, those living in resettlement colonies accused the media of over emphasising the political leaders, celebrities and showing scant regard for the concerns of the downtrodden.

Anil Kumar of Dilshad Colony said, "the media should focus on the lack of basic amenities like electricity, water, employment, roads, etc., instead of giving repeated coverage to political leaders." Ramdulari of Seemapuri went a step further as she cautioned the leaders, "it is pertinent for the Government to understand that for anybody to come to power the support of the poor is crucial because they form the numerical majority among the electorate."

The *Basti Manch* members vehemently reiterated, "We want our day-to-day struggles and problems with different institutions to be reflected in the media so that the general public becomes aware of our experiences and needs, and we get included in the mainstream discourse."

Understanding the Media: A series of interactions, neighbourhood meetings, forums, symposiums and public debates helped the leaders and members of the *Basti Manch* become aware of their rights as consumers and the accountability of the media towards them. "In the beginning, I could not comprehend anything," recalls Vimla in an interview in 2005.

Suhas Kumar, an activist working with resettlement colonies and a founder member of the Forum held weekly and fortnightly meetings with *basti* dwellers and explained the concept of the Forum to them. In a recent interview in 2005, she said, that during these meetings TV in its entirety was discussed. Genres and cross-connections were explained. For instance, it was explained how advertisements sold not only products but a lifestyle too. Similarly, the serials besides showing a lifestyle, promoted products like jewellery and clothes. **The members discussed how these images affected the common person.**

"The crux of our Forum was that if we have to get to know the media, it is essential to be educated about it and understand what media education is all about. So we attended several educational workshops where we learnt to understand the workings of media. These workshops, in turn, helped us deconstruct clips from serials, advertisements and news and helped us visualise how different characters could be portrayed differently. It went further to elucidate what the media wanted to portray in the news and how the public perceived it. Then we went to the *bastis* and held discussions there."

Community leaders like Vimla first comprehended the issues for themselves and then went to the *bastis* to help members cope with the images. They collated their feedback and then negotiated on their behalf with the media and also disseminated the media's viewpoint to the Forum members.

The series of workshops, neighbourhood meetings and interactions the *Basti Manch* organised taught those living in resettlement colonies the concept of 'reality check' as clips from serials and news were deconstructed. The viewers learnt to demarcate the thin line between reality and reality. "As the viewers understood the different shades of reality, they realised that it was only in the fictional world of media that a protagonist could climb the social ladder as easily, i.e. from a middle class family to an upper income group by way of marriage," said Vimla.

Like its sister forums, the *Basti Manch* did extensive mobilisation and slowly expanded to other less privileged colonies like Kalyanpuri, Dakshinpuri, Sharad Vihar and Sundernagari. It was also realised that the Forum needed to include children and young people since as mothers most of the viewers were concerned about the media's influence on impressionable minds. "*Mere bachche chahtein hain ki saare din TV dekhte rahein, agar mana karo to ladne lagte hain. Kahin khelne nahin jate. Kisi ke ghar jana nahin chahte. Koi aa jaye to namaste tak karna nahin chahte, time par homework nahin karte. Kissi bhi kaam ke liye break ka intezaar karte hain*"¹⁴," lamented a young mother.

Clusters of meetings were organised for youth - young boys and girls - irrespective of age, so that like the adults they could understand, interpret and critically analyse and negotiate the images beamed by the electronic media.

Following terrorist attacks on the twin towers in the USA on September 11, 2001, a series of interviews were conducted with children from the less privileged colonies like Seemapuri, Kalyanpuri, Dakshinpuri and Tigri and institutions like Deepalaya and Prayas, to find out how the children responded to 9/11 coverage. This was part of an ongoing intervention supported by UNICEF and revealed significant changes in children's viewing habits post 9/11. The study revealed that given the media hype the younger generation was worked

14 My children want to watch television all day. If I try to stop them they fight with me. They don't go out to play or to other people's houses. If somebody comes to our house they don't even come out to greet them. They don't do homework on time. They wait for the commercial breaks for doing any work.

up about the possibilities of a larger war. In their eagerness for information, they were hooked on to the 24-hour news channels.

The study and concerns were shared with the news media during an interaction with parents in October 2001 with Pankaj Pachauri from NDTV, Sudha Sadanand of *Aaj Ki Baat* and independent producer Radhika Kaul Batra who gave the *Basti Manch* a fair and patient hearing.

Cementing new equations: For youngsters like Om Prakash, 19, attending the *basti* meetings helped him establish a new equation within the joint family of nine members. "Earlier, everyone at home obeyed me. They did as I said. But after attending the meetings, I have started giving equal importance to the views of my mother, brothers and sisters." Another change he noticed in himself was that he started addressing his elders as *aap*¹⁵ instead of *tu*¹⁶ (the former is far more respectful and less familiar).

A willing learner, Om Prakash says that the media had a very positive influence in improving his inter-personal relationships. "I realised the value of a relationship only through the relationships depicted in the serials. Now, if I say something that is incorrect I go up to my sister-in-law and ask for forgiveness."

It emerged that it was essential to have advertisements in the media but the portrayal needed to be more sensitive and not so brazen. Members of the *Basti Manch* wrote to channel heads and subsequently they noticed remarkable changes.

A clash between generations and a small victory: Dissecting the media had another fallout. **Subjects that were taboo and not discussed in *basti* homes, suddenly entered into these dwellings via the TV.** Advertisements of sanitary napkins have been a cause of much debate between mothers and daughters. While the older generation disapproved of

A vocal community leader and resident of New Seemapuri, Nirmala has been associated with the Viewers' Forum since the initial phase. "The Forum has immensely helped us be associated with the media. There was a water scarcity in our area. A programme on NDTV highlighted it, and the issue was resolved," she recalls.

She proudly reveals, "This helped me to create my own identity and people have started calling me *netaji, netaji*, (leader) which I quite like." Even her two children, Tarun, 12, and Sunny, 14, have been associated with the Forum since 2001.

The mother noticed tremendous change in the sons after they started participating in the Forum activities. Sunny, who was an introvert earlier, opened up. For him, the high point of the association was his meeting with celebrities like Sushma Swaraj and Kiran Bedi, besides attending theatre workshops.

"We children staged a drama *bachchon ki duniya* (children's world) in 2001 and whenever anybody appreciated it, I felt very happy. In fact, Doordarshan even beamed our drama on its network" as part of the International Children's Day of Broadcasting, he recalls with nostalgia.

15 A term of respect used to address elders.

16 You

advertising a 'personal' product like napkins on a family viewing medium, the younger girls were happy that the media provided them with vital information and exposed them to the range of products available in the market.

The Modern Woman: The question of modernity and its clash with traditional ways of life and belief has been raised time and time again with the growth of satellite TV. Be it in terms lifestyles, relationships or consumerism, viewers were continually being asked to make choices and face up to new portrayals.

The *Basti* women have responded to modernity on TV in a fairly positive manner because they perceive it as a tool for empowerment. However, this did add to their pressures. Given their lack of privacy and their extreme physical, emotional and mental vulnerability to sexual harassment and abuse, modernity was not always helpful.

As some of the members commented during one of the meetings, "why do they always show girls going astray after one mishap? Why can't they depict that there are other alternatives available and that she doesn't necessarily have to end up in a *kotha*?" **The basti dwellers felt that the TV programmes never showed the hardships women have to face: how they negotiate between a career and family.** The result of such lack of depiction is that it compromises on their achievements and does nothing to increase the image of women in the eyes of men.

The women were extremely comfortable with the concept of modernity as independence of mind and thought. They wanted the modern protagonist to be financially and emotionally independent. Therefore, during the meeting with Neena Gupta in December 1998, they raised the concern that in serials like *Saans*, the modern woman, Priya, gave no thought to where her finances would come from when she separated from her husband Gautam. It was for them, the most jarring note of the serial. Especially as she was not working and had no source of income. Her only option was to be supported by her husband or help from her mother whose financial support she rejects. **In reality, however, finance is a crucial aspect and the chief constraint for women to take an independent decision.**

The single woman: Slums and resettlement colonies have a fair proportion of single women, many with children. **The Basti Manch members mentioned that tele-fiction did not pay attention to single women and their problems.** Baby, 34, estranged from her thrice-married husband with two children said, "a single woman's life is depicted in a very different manner in serials. Second marriages and romance are common in bastis but the portrayal of a single woman on TV is very different from reality." Rana, agreeing with Baby said, "This is where we get hurt. For instance, a widow between 25 and 30 may still be desirous of sex. A widow between 40 and 45, who has children, has the ability to cope without her husband. We have our desires and think differently. But the television portrays the issue differently. That is TV and this is our life."

The need of basti dwellers is 'real' TV: Vimla, a *Basti Manch* coordinator, explained that a young girl who elopes and marries a boy in a temple, as is seen in countless TV serials, is ignorant about the fact that the status of such marriages is null and void. She emphasised that the TV must take up social issues, which explore various implications of such hasty decisions, instead of glorifying them and sending wrong signals. Young girls are not aware and informed. TV, as a medium, has a social responsibility to increase awareness on these issues and not mislead.

The empowered viewer: Informed of their consumer rights through neighbourhood meetings and workshops, the empowered and confident viewers began to negotiate with the media independently. Geeta from Dakshinpuri, wrote to Ekta Kapoor (Balaji Telefilms) of *saas-bahu* serial fame in 2002,

Dear Ekta,

Why aren't you making any serial about the younger generation and its problems? We are now tired of watching tele-dramas of two women fighting over one man.

The *Basti Manch* members wanted media personalities like Ekta Kapoor, Smriti Irani (Tulsi) and Sakshi Tanwar (Parvati) to come to their Forum for a dialogue. "We want to give them a feedback on the characters they create or play as well as question them on the dimensions of reality these characters depict. We want to tell them that they are accountable to us for what they show on screen," said Vimla.

During the meeting with Star channel representatives in Mumbai, a member had mentioned, "the days when they (those living in resettlement colonies) could only access Doordarshan are over. Many of them are getting cable connections."

Mainstreaming issues in news media: Current affairs and news were the other media sections that the viewers wanted to be included in and made a part of the mainstream. Shashi Mehta, Producer, *Khaj Khabar*, a current affairs programme on Doordarshan, gave the *Basti Manch* members a piece of valuable advice during a meeting in 1998. She said, "We should never expect TV to work the way we want it to. The way you look at issues you are working on and the way media

Aaj Tak always enjoyed a mass following among the Hindi speaking communities. In fact, when TV Today decided to launch as a 24-hour channel on 31st December 2000, it was a blow to the basti dwellers, who did not have cable connections. Earlier *Aaj Tak* was slotted as a half an hour Hindi news bulletin on Doordarshan.

Lamenting its loss, those living in resettlement colonies wrote to the producers of TV Today and Doordarshan. "*Aaj Tak* is leading to fights in our home. We were its regular viewers but since it has become a satellite TV channel, my children are pressing me to buy a new TV and install a cable connection. Please ask them to resume their 10 p.m. Doordarshan bulletin," said Rajni from Seemapuri.

perceives it, is different. Your commitment is different and so is your approach." She asked the members to send her a list of issues that interested them so that whenever programmes were made around them, they could be called.

Armed with this assurance, the *basti* dwellers in a subsequent meeting with Alka Saxena of Aaj Tak later that year, expressed concern that a news story on sexual violence at the workplace and the Supreme Court directive on it, ignored women living in *bastis*, working at construction sites who were constantly sexually abused. Saxena after listening to the views of the *basti* dwellers, admitted the story was not complete and invited suggestions from the participants in order to make the show more relevant to their lives.

Sensitising the news media: A feedback survey on *TV News and Women of the Basti: What they watch, What they like to watch, What They Don't* in the resettlement colonies of Sundernagari, Seemapuri, Dilshad Garden and Kalyanpuri was conducted. The objective of the survey was to profile the TV viewing habits of *basti* women, to find the programmes and channels that best articulated their concerns and the manner in which they as voters were influenced by the way media projected electoral candidates.

Aaj Tak emerged as the most preferred channel amongst the *basti* dwellers.

Conducted in view of the impending state assembly elections in 2003, it included in-depth individual feedback of 91 women. The responses revealed that the ultimate choice of the people when it comes to exercising franchise is their own and not determined by the media.

They recommended that television coverage of events and news be more appropriate, that it look at solution to the problems which persist in the society like unemployment, poverty poor health conditions and sanitation. They felt that the media should function as a forum for voicing the opinions of the poor and not only of political leaders.

The *Basti Manch* wanted the media to respond to their queries and subsequently, an interaction was organised with Sunil Awasthi, Aaj Tak; Amritanshu Rai, Star News; Pankaj Pachauri, NDTV India; and Preeti Mehra, Hindu Businessline.

Recalling the success of this meeting, Vimla said, "we have come a long way since the meeting on Terror on TV, organised at Jamia Hamdard in 2001. Back then we were learning. By now, we had understood the finer nuances of the media and how to negotiate with it. We were well-prepared, had questioned nearly 115 respondents in the *bastis*, had learnt the art of engaging the panellists and extracting answers from them."

Added the coordinator, "panellists were of the opinion that since we were from the *bastis*, we wouldn't be able to participate in a dialogue. But the *basti* dwellers raised question after question, leaving them impressed." These ranged from issues like extensive coverage given to Lakme India Fashion Week, to inadequate follow up on development stories, to violation

of voting rights of the women in *bastis* and a gap between the expectations of the people and performance of their MLAs.

The result of this endeavour, of the *Basti Manch* sensitising media on issues critical to them, bore fruit when the panellists acknowledged that "the fact that media gives so much importance to these stories (like Lakme India Fashion Week) is symptomatic of the dominant capitalist mindset in this country. Media should abstain from showing this kind of class bias. We will try and rectify our mistake if you think so negatively."

The panellists also expressed the need for audience surveys and feedback as it helped them draw a guideline on viewers' expectations. They gave their contact numbers and asked *basti* dwellers to inform them about the developments in their area. "Only then will we be able to bridge the gap which prevents your views from reaching us," they said.

Elections 2004: The *Manch* played an active role in monitoring media coverage as part of the Viewers' Forum - CFAR study *General Elections, 2004: Monitoring TV Content, Citizens Response*. During the course of the study, they realized that development issues of core importance to them viz.- unemployment, education, infrastructure - received merely five percent of the total coverage of election news. Their hope of a more substantial coverage on issues like development and gender were belied, as across channels the coverage of these issues was poor.

Subjects such as agriculture, unemployment and corruption came up in the course of other election related stories but none got systematic and thematic focus. The Indian media had the opportunity to highlight these issues after the results of the opinion and exit polls, but it missed the bus. Shashi, one of the monitors of the study during a post election interview said, "they spoke about rozgaar¹⁷. The issue mostly came up as parties blamed each other for what they had not done".

Observations on the Study: Over the years, the *Basti Manch* made the national media realise that their concerns cannot be ignored. They are as much a part of the mainstream as other socio-economic groups of the society. "When I started initially, I did not think that we would be able to make a difference. But as we interacted with people and monitored the media, we realised that we could make a difference," says Vimla reflecting on her decade long journey with the *Manch*. "The *Basti Manch* has shown that if people want to do something, they can do it. This was a small experiment of discourse with the media, which if implemented on a massive scale will make even a weapon as powerful as the media heed to the concerns of the common man."

"Our victory was on two fronts," says Suhas Kumar. "First, we taught the viewers not to accept media projections on its face value. Next we were able to address the apprehensions about the impact of sex and violence on children as depicted in the media."

For the members it has been an enriching experience and they have travelled a long way since 1998. "This was a small flame we lit a few years ago and I am seeing the results now," said a basti dweller. As Vimla puts it, "now the vision for *Basti Manch* is to empower every viewer as an individual where he or she can negotiate with the media. We can also form a larger collective where marginalised sections like ours are able to levy pressure to highlight more issues of the common person at the grassroots level and ensure accountability."

Critical acclaim: In their long journey, the *Basti Manch* won critical appreciation from members of the sister forums. Krishna Rajendra, a member of the Middle Class Forum from Vasant Kunj, said, "In the post election analysis meet, I noticed members of the *Basti Manch* participated vociferously. They were aware of their rights, they had become smart, they knew whom to vote for, who is misleading them and how to make the best of the situation."

Lalita Baruah added, "**The members of the *Basti Manch* know exactly what they want. They are aware, focussed, well prepared and to the point. They discuss things, dissect and bisect issues.** They are blunt. In the post election meeting, they said '*angrezi mein kahe ko bol rahe ho? Hame samajh me nahi aata.*'"¹⁸

18 Why are you speaking in English? We cannot comprehend anything.

Television

Arterial Link for the Physically Challenged

The Genesis: The 2001 Census report indicates that 2.13 percent of the Indian population lives with some form of disability. It further reports that a significant section of this population remains confined to the home, either due to the nature of disability or the social discrimination faced because of the physical challenge.

In such instances, media, especially the television, assumes an important and powerful role in their lives, providing them with information, knowledge and more significantly with entertainment. It connects them with the outside world; acts as a prism that offers a kaleidoscopic view of the universe beyond their homes. For quadriplegics and other severely challenged people, television is a window to the world.

With their lives revolving around the television for most part of the day, and recognising it as a powerful tool, the electronic media quite obviously needs to be sensitive to their concerns, help them integrate with the mainstream populace and garner public support for their cause.



Meeting of physically-challenged Members of Viewers' Forum, New Delhi

Forum of Viewers' with Disability - A Voice of the Disabled: The Viewers' Forum initiative of Centre for Advocacy and Research brought together many groups working on the issue of disability. These included institutions like the National Centre for Promotion of Employment for Disabled People (NCPEDP), Action for Autism (AFA), Concerned Action Now (CAN), Spastics Society of Northern India (SSNI, now AADI) and prominent individuals and activists like Dr. Anita Ghai, Javed Abidi, George Abraham, Merry Barua, Ali Baquer, Jagdish Chandra and Mridula Murgai among others.

The need for a separate forum for the viewers living with disability was strongly felt: their issues were more specifically related to the depiction of disability in news as well as fiction, the lack of correct information and more often misinformation about their disabilities. By May 1998, this took the formal shape of **Forum of Viewers with Disability** with some of the above-mentioned individuals forming the core group. The guiding principle of the forum was to persuade the mass media and in particular television, to use every opportunity to mainstream their issues, concerns related to disability and accurately portray their experiences, needs and aspirations.

The members visited the different groups such as AFA, CAN, SSNI among others and spoke about their vision and ambition to provide a platform where the views and opinions of disabled viewers on TV and its ancillaries could be expressed. "The response was enthusiastic and our group was formed," recalls Mridula Murgai.

Media is a microcosm of society and projects the prevailing mindset. 'Normal people have a patronising mindset towards disability and this is reflected in the media. Thus, whenever the media projects people with disabilities, they are shown as 'different'. Viewers with disabilities strongly believe that the electronic medium, if used properly, has the potential to represent their problems as well as strengths, ability and potential. In Dr. Anita Ghai's words, "isn't media the all-important link? Can it make the difference that we

Twenty three year old Poonam Gujral is the youngest of four sisters. Living in West Delhi's Patel Nagar, she is part of a joint family with her father sharing the house with his brother's family. Her maternal grandmother also lives with them.

Confined to the wheelchair because of cerebral palsy, she used to go to the Spastics Society till six years back. The family occupies the first floor and so it is difficult for her to move out. With no vocation and limited mobility, she spends most of the time at home. Being completely dependent, her mother is her caregiver while the entire family pampers her.

Poonam does not read the newspapers or listen to the radio. The telephone provides her the link with outside world and helps her keep in touch with friends, who are also living with cerebral palsy. Television is one medium that occupies most of her time and her sisters easily give in to her TV programme preferences.

The Viewers' Forum provided her an opportunity "to be an active member of the society." Since she watches a lot of television, she could recall the programming and advertisements and actively participate in the discussions. She is enthusiastic about the larger public interactions but found the smaller neighbourhood gatherings as interesting.

constantly strive for? Can't it ensure acceptance, inclusion and finally enforce the rights long overdue to the disabled?" Ghai is a Reader in the Psychology Department of Delhi's prestigious Jesus and Mary College.

Media and the physically challenged: Does the media inspire viewers? Talking about the impact of television Neelam, a teacher by profession and living with polio says, "15 years ago, in a soap I saw a girl struggle to overcome her disability. The programme gave me hope and inspired me to study. Today I am leading an active professional life and got married a few months ago."

But there are others. A segment of viewers living with disability differ - they do not see the media as a source of inspiration and insist that its impact varies from person to person. However, a majority of them still seek both refuge as well as anchorage in the electronic medium.

Mohit, 18, living with cerebral palsy, had to face several challenges before he became a karate and swimming champion. At times, he was even denied permission by authorities to use the facilities. His father says, "such children cannot be cut off from the society. The media must raise public awareness and encourage them."

Like Mohit, several others living with disability looked up to media to reflect their emotional and psychological conflicts. In other words, to help them break their isolation. They viewed it as a platform to voice their concerns, and would like the channels to beam programmes catering to their needs. They conveyed an overwhelming desire for their physical challenges being sensitively and accurately portrayed with dignity through characters in various serials. Thus helping them assimilate with the mainstream society - by treating them at par with the normal people.

Sharing a vision and a perspective: Those living with physical challenges related very closely to characters portrayed on television. Anita, affected with polio, said at a Viewers' Forum meeting, that "both as a viewer and as a woman with disability, when I watch television, I find that I can empathise with the pain and anguish of Priya in *Saans*, Kavita in *Thoda Hai Thode Ki Zaroorat Hai*, the extreme helplessness of Santosh in *Amanat*, and so many other characters. I am a woman and a disabled one at that. Hence, I have to contend with two marginalisations."

Documentaries and movies generally evoke sympathy for the disabled but the community does not want mere sympathy. "This in fact is the attitude that the Forum of Viewers with Disability wants to change. We want the serial producers and channel heads to understand the issue of disability. Media should get the disabled people into mainstream programming," says Sujata Goenka, who works as a special educator for children and is living with cerebral palsy.

"I saw the Viewers' Forum as an opportunity to intervene in the depiction of women, children and people with disabilities. We should aim for a media which includes the voices of all



Anita Ghai

concerned for greater mainstream representation," says Anita, one of the founding members. However, she also realises that the media is but a corporate enterprise that is consumer driven. "So one can only attempt to invoke their sense of social responsibility but you cannot guarantee it," she says.

Inspired by Sujata's advice during neighbourhood meetings, held between October 2000 and October 2001, that if "you would like to see a different image of disabled being portrayed, you will have to influence the makers," Meenu, a physically challenged member, wrote to the Sony channel which was telecasting the popular serial *Ghar ek mandir* in 2001. She was dismayed over the portrayal of a woman who leaves

In his mid-40s, wheelchair bound Sunil Arora, a retired bank employee living with the 'progressive disease' of muscular dystrophy, took voluntary retirement from the banking sector because he "could not continue working for long hours." Life is not easy for those living with any form of disability.

Sunil is passionate about travelling and visiting new places. "The basic impediment to travelling is the inconvenience I face in the trains. The entrance door of the carriage is narrow and it is difficult for the wheelchair to be taken in. There are no ramps connecting platforms to the railway stations. To reach the train I have to go through the track facing a bumpy ride. The coaches do not have toilets that are wheelchair friendly." His recommendation to the Railway Ministry, "make travelling easier for the disabled. Just providing concessions on travel tickets is not enough."

Given his limited mobility, television provides him company for most part of the day. The black and white television set entered his household way back in 1978 and his earliest association with the medium was 'movies'. "Those days movies used to be shown only on Sundays and we used to anticipate and watch with great interest," he recalls nostalgically. Another much awaited television show was the "New Year programme. The whole family used to look forward to watching this grand programme."

An early subscriber to the cable channels (1992), the family bought a second television set in 1994. "After the cable invasion, with surplus channels family's viewing pattern changed. Each one has his or her preferences. Now it is only once in a while that we sit together to see some common programmes - Kavi Sammelans or the cricket matches."

"TV for me was just a source of entertainment but gradually it has turned but to be a big source of knowledge and information - just by switching on the TV I know what's happening all around the world." All the same as a critical viewer, he found the images disturbing his sensibility at times.

Sunil lives in Delhi with his parents and younger brother, who has the same disability.

her husband because he was not good looking. However, there was no response from the channel.

How the Forum Worked: Two distinct groups of people constituted the disability group; those who were disabled (mentally challenged, autistic, living with muscular dystrophy, polio and visually impaired) and others who were caregivers or working with the disabled.

The Forum, a part of the larger Viewers' Forum, provided a platform for such viewers to interact with media practitioners, policy makers, media planners, sponsors and broadcasters, so as to make media, particularly the television, sensitive to their concerns and alter the general perception of those living with physical challenges.

A collective forum: While Anita Ghai provided a vision to the platform, Sujata Goenka's coordination and networking brought together the disabled persons as well as caregivers together as a collective. They realized that in unison they could make small changes in the media. "What I did was to collect individuals who were actually watching television for four to five hours with nothing else to do - my only criterion was that they viewed TV daily," says Sujata. It was difficult for different segments of the disabled to come together. For instance, the visually impaired did not always want to attend meetings with the mentally challenged, yet Sujata's persistent efforts to build a collective forum paid off.

Media education workshops: Besides providing the community of physically challenged a platform where it could find a voice, the Forum imparted training to disabled viewers

A travelogue for the disabled: "Travelogues never consider disabled persons as prospective travellers," was one of the complaints of the Forum members to the producers of the travelogue *Musafir Hoon Yaroon*, on Star TV. "We are a travel group. People living with different kinds of disability travel with us. We wish you could include us in your travel programme. This would encourage those who have not dared to do so. **Bound at home, they are exposed to such beauty and a deeper sense of loss is felt** by them," reiterated Anjali Agarwala, a member of *Samarthya*.

The members explained to the producers that travel acts as therapy for the disabled and suggested greater coverage of places accessible to people with disabilities. The show could provide helpful tips like existence of ramps, disable friendly hotel toilets, availability of wheel chairs as part of their information package.

Sanjeev Sachdeva, who has mastered the art of travelling despite being on a wheelchair, cited examples of how places seemingly inaccessible to normal people like the Naina Devi Mandir, in fact had a gradient. "We look for alternative routes. There is a side lane where it is not so rocky to the rock gardens at Chandigarh," he said.

The young producers were open to the suggestions of the group. As Debashish Ghosh responded, "We did not realise the need of the disabled. We are sorry and will certainly try to incorporate your ideas. **We would like you to send us information about the places, which are disable friendly. If we shoot in those places we can include the fact that the spot is accessible to disabled.**"

to monitor the media by creating specific, customised media education modules. Audio-visual exercises were developed using representative clips from well-known serials, which dealt with the problem of disability. Workshops and seminars were held to deconstruct the portrayed imagery.

"We were made to understand the thought process behind each advertisement and how it tried to manipulate our reactions towards them. I was surprised at how well the advertisers understood our gullibility," says Murgai.

Between August and December 2001, several institutions were informed about media education workshops being conducted to comprehend the importance of media in the lives of the disabled. Many of these felt that the media was of no consequence in the lives of the disabled and that such media education would not in any way help their students achieve the goals they had set for themselves. The institutions that agreed to support the initiative were aware of the power wielded by media and these workshops enabled them to evaluate the extent of media influence.

The impact of the media workshops and neighbourhood meetings on different age groups was evident from the fact that following a meeting with parents at the Spastic Society of India in 2001, the adults, clearly impressed by the educative role of the Forum, wanted their wards to attend the next meet.

Broadening horizons - Research Studies: The Forum initially began by closely monitoring the representation of the physically challenged community. Down the line it was realised that a mere articulation of ideas or mere sharing of ideas and concerns would not suffice. Media is an industry that relates more to data than other methods of Observations. Hence, with the support of Action Aid, the Forum conducted research studies.

Media habits of people with disability: To understand the individual and collective media habits of the disabled and their representation on television, this study was conducted among 55 respondents living with disability in the age group 11-70 years. A sample of 10 caregivers was also included in instances where the disabled person was not the primary provider of the information. It highlighted the fact that there was no difference in the ranking of the top 20 programmes among the disabled and the general viewers. Fifty eight percent of the respondents indicated that they were not satisfied with the disability representation.

Media habits of people with disability:

Average Viewing Time per day	Male (In %)	Female (In %)	Total
2-4 hours	77	75	76
4-6 hours	13	12	13
6-8 hours	3	—	2
8-10 hours	—	8	4

The studies *Media Habits of People with Disability*, *Impact of the Perfect Body on Persons Living with Disabilities* and *Man-Woman Relationships as Portrayed on the Small Screen - Their Impact on People Living with Disability*, were conducted in 2001. **The purpose of these studies was to set benchmarks for disabled viewers' viewing habits, assess their actual engagement with fiction and advertisement and enable a comparative study of the disabled and non-disabled.**

Favourite channel: Star Plus was voted the favourite channel with 58 percent viewership, followed by Zee TV (42 percent) and 40 percent viewership for Sony. Surprisingly, the women interviewed did not watch sports channels, MTV, Discovery, Cartoon Network, National Geographic and Discovery channel.

At the neighbourhood interactions during 2000-2001, viewers deconstructed media clips, debated at length on them with the objective of understanding how images are crafted, and packaged; and also critically analysed the media. The Forum's strength increased from 25 individual members in 2001 to 60-65 members in 2003, besides the involvement of various NGOs.

The camaraderie within the Forum grew. Poonam, whose voice may not have been heard in a larger audience because it takes her time to respond, found the neighbourhood meetings an excellent medium to convey her ideas. A facilitator was always there to help her. Moreover, these meetings were the only opportunity for the wheelchair-bound girl's social interaction with the outside world.

The Media and I: Viewers living with disability viewed the impact of media in their lives differently. Manish, 23, perceived media's role as an educator. **"I can only learn about sex and adult behaviour from television. Why do they want to censor adult scenes? They can have separate time slot for them"**, he believes. While young people like him interpreted different images of the media from an educational perspective, the older ones saw media as a source of information and entertainment. Forty-year-old Rekha, who is affected by muscular dystrophy, watches TV for four to five hours every day. She says, "I invest in the share market, and tend to watch CNBC. It is very informative."

"We would like the media to cover stories like the Fashion Show done by disabled persons. The models were wheelchair bound. It would boost the image of the disabled." Anuja, a 23 year old, non-verbal person with cerebral palsy who communicates through a CD Board; expressed this opinion at a media education workshop in July 2001. Like Manish, she watched television regularly and learnt a lot of things from it. However, she felt discriminated and longs to be part of the mainstream.

"The truth is that in media depiction, disability is almost invisible. In the competitive commercially driven electronic industry, not even one per cent of the characters portrayed on television have a disability."

"The media has not been consistent in projecting disability as an issue," says Sunil Arora, who took voluntary retirement due to his disability a few years ago. "A week before the Disability Day on December 3, the media starts giving coverage to concerns of those living with disability. And then the issue fades away."

Besides the electronic, the print medium was to be blamed as much. Lalita Panicker, a journalist with the country's leading national daily, *The Times of India*, says, "the space for development, under which disability is categorised, is getting less and less because the focus of the English print media is politics, economy, celebrities and lifestyles."

Negative portrayals: "If at all the disabled have been portrayed in the electronic media, they have been inaccurately characterised in a negative mould. They are often portrayed as passive, bitter beings, leading useless, unproductive lives. The representation seen from their perspective is derogatory. As a disabled viewer puts it, "I think the depiction of disability on media is completely ridiculous. These are normal human being who just has something different about him. Whenever media shows people with disabilities, they are shown wearing half pants, drooling, lisping and so on. In my experience with hundreds of people with disability, I have never seen a person behave like that."

Insensitive and crude references to the hearing impaired, dumb, visually impaired and physically challenged in the fictional world of television and films tended to undermine the confidence of those who are challenged and sent out wrong signals to the public. A 12-year old girl went into a fear syndrome on meeting an autistic boy. When asked why she feared the boy, the girl said, "In *Ayushman* (a serial on Sony), a mentally challenged boy, Bodhi, murdered his brother's lover as he did not like her."

"In some cases, stereotypes created and nurtured by the media lead parents to stigmatise their children," says Anita, a parent of a spastic daughter. **The impact of such stereotypical portrayal when combined with religious elements in serials is that the vulnerable parents start questioning their karma, and tend to stigmatise the child,** opines Hema Bhatt, a coordinator working with the Handicapped Children's Parents Association. "The media needs to be sensitised to disseminate more information about the differences in the abilities of such people. The physically challenged can be productive, provided they are dealt with differently," she adds.

Says Anita, "in such a scenario, even if one is able to make a headway and the media carries items concerning marginalised groups, we should have achieved what we set out for." Earlier in the popular quiz programme *Kaun Banega Crorepati*, anchored by superstar Amitabh Bachchan for Star Plus, a question "*Andho Mein Kana Raja Kaun?*" hurt the sensibilities of the visually impaired viewers in Ahmedabad.

The media ghettoises us: Unlike the United States and United Kingdom, where special shows focus on ways to integrate lives of the physically challenged with the lives of 'normal' people, the **Indian media is guilty of reinforcing images of helplessness and despair. And it is these very attributes that the people affected by disability wanted to constantly break away from.** Many disabled viewers saw the depiction of the powerful but villainous character of Lankesh, played by Ashish Vidyarthi in the Zee TV serial *Dastaan* in the late nineties as problematic because his disability was linked to his evil nature.

"The special episode of *TVS Sa Re Ga Ma* (telecast on Zee TV in 1998) featuring blind singers was appreciated. But why devise separate programme. I do not know why a physically handicapped lady cannot be a newsreader or a blind person an announcer," asks George Abraham, Executive Director, Society for Communication and Research, and Chairperson, World Blind Cricket Council. "By ghettoising us, the media tends to emphasise our disability rather than our ability. The fact that all the four contestants were given prizes instead of one winner treats us as 'other' than normal", says Sanjeev.

Two years ago, a channel on Disability Day showed a visually impaired anchor reading news. His speech was clear. After he finished reading, the actual anchor re-read the entire news all over again. Was the visually impaired anchor given space as a mere token to read the news? This reflects the attitude of the channel. i.e. we have no faith in the capacity of those living with disability. "How many people know that US President F.D. Roosevelt, the renowned composer Beethoven, ace cricketer Jonty Rhodes were disabled in different ways? Polio has not deterred Jaipal Reddy from becoming a successful politician nor did visual impairment negatively affect Ravindra Jain's music" states Sujata.

Voices of disabled remain marginalised: In a globalised economy, where profitability is the ultimate criterion, the voice of the disabled remains marginalised. In instances, where the voices have been heard and the lives have become visible, two distinct but predictable images have been evoked. One set of images constructs the disabled as 'problem', the other set of images at best symbolises the threshold of human challenge, rendering disability as heroic and admirable. The former suffused with an element of tragedy has been compelling, and the latter has been inspirational.

The media had not been able to get to the root of disability experiences in a social, political and economic context. Consequently what emerged was a stereotypical treatment that left those affected with disability highly dissatisfied.

The past few years have changed the comprehension of disability as a purely medical category to a socially constructed category. Disability is now understood as a phenomenon created by society that historically has had architectural, occupational, educational, communication and attitudinal barriers to prevent the disabled people from being integrated.

"Social stigmas and attitudes haven't changed. We are not supposed to have any sexual or emotional responses and involvements. Because I am disabled, men who are intellectually and professionally my equals don't come near me. If at all a disabled person is considered for matrimonial prospect, it's because there is some monetary or social advantage being held out to persons willing to take them on," Anita observed during a Forum meeting in July 1999.

Within this perspective, the focus shifts from an emphasis on physical differences vested in the person to an evaluation of societal structures that perpetuate the traditional notion of 'disability'. For this representation to change, it has become vital that the community be empowered and made an integral part of the mainstream. "A disabled viewer feels frustrated when the media does not address the issue," says Sujata, adding that they felt their voices went unheard as they are not perceived as "newsworthy". A viewer in this group once commented, "even US President George Bush's dog features as news."

The anti-incumbency factor: Responding to the State of the Nation in India Talks telecast on CNBC, on 24 August 1998, the challenged members opined, "the programme showed how the disabled form an 'invisible minority', and how the government merely prepares policies on paper rather than providing practical services. More such programmes should be shown to enable sensitive interaction between the disabled and the able-bodied so that something concrete could emerge from these exercises."

However, till 2005, the Government has not moved much beyond providing policies on paper. "Those living with disability must learn to use the media as a tool to gather public opinion on issues of concern," says Sujata, "It would be beneficial if an official channel like Doordarshan could telecast a programme for those affected with disability that highlight the facilities available for them so that they do not have to run from pillar to post," she adds.

The Perfect Body: The study also sought to understand how deeply the

We, Amitabh and Pepsi: Differently abled children from *Udaan* (organisation working with the disabled from lower income group) performed a spoof on the popular Amitabh Bachchan Pepsi campaign (September 2001). Everyone present was surprised at the maturity with which the children explained how advertisements pushed the viewers into buying products.

"The meetings in which the viewers with different disabilities came together on a platform sharing their fears was something that made me realise the larger issue with which we were dealing. While preparing them to speak I realised how much the advertisements influenced us. Not just as consumer of products but what they left with us. They taught us to think in their language and imbibe what they fed us with," says Sujata.

"Another impact was the way in which children with different abilities reconstructed the ads. It was amazing to note that a child who otherwise was in a special school could relate to the Pepsi ad as any normal child. The media took interest in the voices of these children was an encouraging fact for me. Till then it made me wonder if at all we could make a difference," she adds.

disabled viewers were seduced by advertisements on the electronic media. The focus was on emotional impact of story line and the message that perfect health and body were a must to perform well. "The advertisements focus on aesthetics. One cannot use a disabled person as this would be moving away from the homogeneity of normality and perfection," says Anita. Focus group discussions were conducted with respondents drawn from various educational and training institutions catering to people with disability.

The 'perfect' bodies displayed in ads left the audiences, men, women and children with a sense of inadequacy. While on one hand the 'macho, in-control' imagery reminded the men of their own disability, on the other they sought validation of their masculinity through them. Inspired by the daredevil macho image of Bollywood actor Salman Khan, as he demonstrated his love for a woman by jumping from great heights, some physically challenged males enrolled in neighbourhood gymnasiums to improve their physique.

A member said he bought a Reid and Taylor suit after seeing James Bond, the invincible Hollywood action hero, wearing the attire in an advertisement. He admitted he felt more attractive and masculine in the suit.

The women living with disabilities sought more sensitive, alternative images and messages. Responding to advertisements of creams like Fair and Lovely, Fair and Glow which focus on a woman's fair and radiant complexion as attributes essential for a woman to survive - be it to find a suitable marriage partner or an attractive job, the female respondents said, "the underlying message of these advertisements that 'men like the best' has created a whole set of discriminatory values among the men".

Many disabled girls said they experienced negative catcalls such as '*kali kaluti hai*'. Others said they avoided social gatherings and felt doubly marginalised as a disabled as well as a woman, supposedly lacking the attributes expected to have as a person to be noticed by the opposite sex. "How can we expect normal boys to even look at us when all they want to see is a perfect body, which I can never have even in my wildest of dreams."

Many female respondents countered the assumption that women with disability were less interested in their appearance. They do like to be well groomed. It is not the products, but the way they were presented that the respondents found questionable.

A study on man-woman relationships as portrayed on the small screen - their impact on people living with disability: The study conducted to understand how the disabled viewers perceive their relations with images portrayed on popular serials came up with several findings. One of the findings was that the presence of the extended family had a strong influence on the quality of marital relationships. Much of the source of conflict, its negotiations and resolutions was dictated and shaped by the family structure. The observations reflected that there were many challenges these couples had to face in their personal relationships.

Most couples felt that their relationship was not viewed with any measure of confidence by the extended family.

A male respondent confessed that his attitude towards his wife had changed since the time his disability set in. "I used to object to her working, but her job is what saved me. Where would she have suddenly got a job? We would have fought a lot. But now she has proved that she is capable of not only looking after me but also our finances."

Till the neighbourhood meetings started taking place, the disabled viewers had not realised that the media had 'boycotted' them. They watched serials but there was very little portrayal of issues of their concern. After attending the meetings and events of the Forum as a collective, the members realised their potential. The disabled form a small segment of society, but given a chance they realized that they could make a difference in some way even if it was a small one.

Sunil Arora after attending neighbourhood meetings learnt to analyse the media critically and to convey his reactions if he found a portrayal unsatisfactory. Despite a hectic schedule till 2000, he made it a point to attend neighbourhood meetings whenever he got an opportunity. He said that the Viewers' Forum had given him a platform to talk about problems, to share views and doubts freely and frankly. He described it as a forum to channelise grievances and to analyse them.

An interactive discussion with Star: During a meeting with Star representatives in Mumbai on April 6, 2000, Anita Ghai on behalf of viewers with disabilities said that narratives needed to reflect lives and concerns of the disabled. This, she clarified, did not mean the details of people's lives but the "emotional and psychological challenges people face in their lives". This could be in the form of death or separation, which is a more permanent loss or in other forms of loss or gain such as getting disabled or working toward a relationship etc. It was here, she said, the viewers had a lot of expectation from the serials. "It is hoped that the serials will not only help people to identify issues, which in many cases they do very successfully, but also help the viewer to steer through or learn to deal with them," she stated.

She pointed out that Star News taking advantage of the "Disability Day" on December 3 telecast many small features for their *India Matters* series. These features dealt with various shades of the lives of the disabled ranging from mobility to very intimate aspects such as sexuality. Women and men from diverse disability were featured and there was a sense of participation as well as representation in these series. Thus, she said, it was possible to engage the viewer.

The channel representatives gave an assurance that they would make an effort to be more "inclusive" towards people living with disabilities and would consciously work towards better representation of this section.

Disability Representation: 58 percent of the respondents were not satisfied while 13 percent viewer's found enough representation of the disabled.

Inputs for media: A key demand of the Forum in 1998 was that issues relating to disability be given greater representation in the media. All private channels having news programmes should have one bulletin for the hearing impaired. They should show those living with disabilities as part of every day environment to sensitise the viewers about the concerns of challenged people. The Star TV network, which carried the news bulletin produced by NDTV, was found to be most disabled friendly, yet they felt that even this channel placed disability in post-weather 'soft news' space.

Programmes that selectively handled issues related to disability were slotted in the afternoon when many disabled viewers could not watch. Sudha, whose daughter is challenged, said during a meeting **that the trials and tribulations of the parents were not highlighted. The lack of information or misinformation among parents leads to a late identification of disability in the child.** The Forum in its meetings mentioned that Doordarshan - the national broadcasting agency with its wide reach - had the special responsibility of providing public service broadcasting space to marginalised groups like the disabled.

Speaking from a practitioner's perspective during an interactive session in 1998, Radhika Bordia, a correspondent with NDTV, mentioned about her tough fight to get news and features about disability in a prime slot. She narrated a shot she had taken of a woman with one leg standing on crutches behind the dais reading poetry. The shot, taken from the back, accentuated her disability. Several viewers expressed concern over the shot as it reinforced popular perceptions about disability by zeroing in on the disability at the cost of her being a poet. Bordia admitted that "this is a constant dilemma we have to face. We know that sometimes the sort of shots we use can highlight disability, but they are essential for making the feature more visible. That's the kind of compromise we have to constantly make."

Small Steps, Small Differences: After the disabled viewers' made a series of representations to those concerned with the media, including Doordarshan and Star TV, issues related to disability started getting prioritised in the news. "Media is a composition of different kinds of people. While Bordia was extraordinarily sensitive about disability, others may consider issues other than disability of greater importance", says Anita. She adds, **"when we met the representatives of Star, they were surprised**

An all India sign language:

Doordarshan's weekly news bulletin for the hearing impaired has improved since 1998, yet much needs to be done to improve its quality of presentation. Since India is a multi-lingual country, and the weekly news bulletin is in North Indian lingua - it has become essential to develop an all India sign language, pointed out Samir Roy of the All India Federation of the Deaf. Roy acknowledges though media has become more sensitive after the Act on Disability was introduced in 1995, yet the pace of development has not been satisfactory

and asked if the tape recording (airing the concerns of the disabled viewers) were genuine," says Anita.

Seeing is believing - Misleading stories in serials and poor characterization influence gullible viewers, felt Forum members during neighbourhood meetings. India's first daily soap *Shanti*, telecast on Doordarshan in the mid-90s, featured a boy with Down's syndrome. The boy started leading a normal life after getting married. The result being, parents of children with Down's Syndrome started believing that marriage could make their children lead a normal life. This is incorrect.

"It is not just about depicting problems, it's about exploring the right solutions as well; and that depends on serious research, knowledge and some vision of the whole problem. I think that the character of the mentally challenged boy, as shown in *Shanti*, is a caricature. For the last 30 years, I have been in touch with such people, but this particular one is a joker. He repeats everything that is said and that is regarded as mental retardation. I can't understand why such things are allowed to be screened on a government channel," a member reacted.

Acknowledging the need for a dialogue with Forum members in Ahmedabad in 1998, B.M. Vyas, scriptwriter of popular serial *Tere Mere Sapne*, said, **"both the audience groups and the industry have different perspectives and different constraints, but a dialogue between the two needs to be explored.** We must accept the reality that TV is in its infancy and be patient in our expectations. As a matter of fact, our society is also in a similar state as far as our sensibilities are concerned. We must grow together."

Ashok Pandit, director and producer of the serial, after the interaction carried back with him stories of the disabled group. At least one producer seemed to have listened to him: when Aroona Irani made *Mehendi Tere Naam Ki* she cast a disabled character as the protagonist. Thus, the desire of the

Don't portray us as easy victims:

Poonam Gujral enjoyed watching *Kahani Ghar Ghar Ki* since its beginning. The entry of Khushi, a visually challenged girl, brought her greater joy, as she was someone Poonam could relate to. However Khushi's rape shattered her.

"I felt so angry while watching that I wanted to kill the man myself who did this dreadful act. I was upset but watched helplessly. I can't sleep and feel very depressed. The scene keeps coming back to me. I am scared of being left alone now. This fear is new to me.

Khushi became quiet for some time. In her place I, too, would have lost my will to live. But I was hoping that Khushi would be brave. I was glad when she was strong in front of everyone during the Holi scene.

I liked the family members who were with Khushi and comforted her. But there were many wrong things that they did. The doctor was not called in, she was not even covered as she lay on the bed after the rape!

I hope the rapist is punished. But I would like to tell the serial producer that as a person with disability, **I strongly object to such depictions. This way people would think that disabled women are easy victims. No action can be taken as nobody would believe them - not even their own family members!"**

disabled viewers to help change media's perceptions did receive some response from the industry.

"Many of our meetings saw the active participation of the members. Neena Gupta was surprised to hear their views and their enthusiasm. She sat with them and patiently listened while they enjoyed their moment of reflected glory," Murgai recalls. However she admits, "there were a few disasters also. At one of our meetings we invited a lady who had done a series of TV documentaries on successful especially able, gifted people. Somehow the meeting turned into a very critical one, and she left shattered by the criticism. Being a highly articulate and a deeply sensitised group, they often tend to dominate the general meetings."

Multiple Channels, Complex Issues: The issues concerning those living with disability and the media had only become more complex in 2005. In 1998, one had to negotiate with a few channels and the concentration was on products. Today there are numerous channels and the concentration is not on products but people per se. The result being, one deals with complex and competitive media that constantly beams images reflecting competency - be it a mother, a professional or a child in the playground. The need to excel and to be perfect is constantly being harped upon. "These images blown up in 24 hour channels through serials, advertisements, news lead to further alienation of those living with challenges since they know they can never overcome this. The result is that the challenged viewers feel depressed and isolated from the mainstream society. Such images of perfection provide less space for the non-disabled to adjust to persons living with any kind of deficiency."

"As there are multiple channels, so are there multiple issues. It is often overlooked that disability is not a singular marker but is embedded in the matrix of caste, class, urban, rural and gender. Consequently, the portrayal has to be much more nuanced which unfortunately is not happening because of the complexities involved. There have been new forms of media and the issues are only becoming singularly complex".

The Forum and I: "After interacting with various media people through Viewers' Forum, my outlook has changed and I have become more frank and open. At home also things look brighter. It was generally perceived that all that a disabled needs is food and shelter - he or she has no desires or aspirations. It is not through TV but the Viewer's Forum that this change in mindset has come about", says Sunil Arora.

After interacting with others, several of the fixed notions that Arora had in mind got dissolved. He dreaded going out because he was afraid. Nor did his family encourage him. "All that has changed now. My family has come to the conclusion that I too need to meet my friends and I need a space of my own. Attending these meetings proved a big boon."

The **Forum of Viewers' with Disability** helped break the world of isolation for many living with disability and who spent considerable hours in front of the television. It gave them the

unique opportunity to vent their feelings as well as interact with others. Although the disabled viewers were dependent on their caregivers for transportation, it was difficult and 'disabled friendly' places were hard to find.

"I saw the media as a tool to change things. I would like the media to exercise more responsibility," says Sujata and the Forum gave her a perfect opportunity to bring like-minded people together. "Even today," she says, "people ring me up and ask me when are we going to revive the meetings. Since the Forum provided them with a platform to exercise their discretionary powers, the disabled viewers want to get together again to debate on the serials and other programmes depicted on TV."



Sujata Goenka

A Public Hearing on People Living with Disabilities: Public hearing on people living with disabilities, organised on 9th December 2003 in Delhi, was presided over by retired Justice K.N. Saikia. It provided an opportunity to express their concerns. Their petitions focused on the following areas - education, vocational training, skill building, recreation, barrier-free environment, and livelihood and employment. Justice Saikia gave his observations after listening to the gathering which consisted of disability activists, organisations working on disability issues and representatives from administrative echelons such as the Ministry of Justice and Social Empowerment, Ministry of Human Resource Development and the Delhi Development Authority,

Education, vocational training, skill building, recreation: "There is no provision for the mentally challenged to open a bank account. Those of us who can should be allowed to open a bank account. I went to vote but I was told that my vote would not be counted. I have always wanted to exercise my franchise but never got the permission to do so," said Sachin Sharma, a 35 year old physically challenged. Sachin who does odd jobs like candle making and masala (spices) packaging was concerned about gaining access to more meaningful employment and alternate avenues for social interactions.

Arti, a 30-year-old woman living with Down's Syndrome who is being trained as a receptionist at a hospital called Abhaas said, "My problem is how do I make friends. I find myself always dependent on my mother. What will happen to me after she has gone? I request the government to make friendly spaces and shelters for people like me, a place that we can call our home."

The Judgement: Hearing the various concerns, Justice Saikia said the central problem is the lack of a definite authority to whom people can register their complaints. He suggested the Central Government considers having separate portfolios for the

disabled. Also, the Ministry should have within it a special wing to facilitate the cause of the disabled. It is the responsibility of the State to provide the disabled with some measures of economic and social security. The banks and financial institutions have no right to disallow accessibility to bank accounts to a disabled. Under the People's Representative Act, it is the fundamental right of every person to exercise his franchise. Hence any authority conducting elections has no right to deny this to a person whose name is there on the electoral rolls.

Barriers free built environment: "The basic impediment that stops me from travelling is the inconvenience I face in the trains. The entrance of the carriage is so narrow that it is difficult for the wheelchair to be taken in," says Sunil Arora.

Anuja, 20, who is affected by cerebral palsy, and is receiving her education in Udaan, wants the information disseminating machinery of the state to be strengthened so that she is aware of the disabled friendly programmes launched.

Anita Pal, an architect, petitioned, "Being a woman and that too handicapped were reasons enough for people to question my capabilities and I had to constantly prove myself. I know of a family who are getting their house made for their handicap girl but the girl's name does not even feature in the registration of the house. Also, the house has not been designed in a way that provides any convenience to the handicap girl. The handicapped children cannot always express their emotions."

The Judgement:

- Adopt disabled friendly measures for the benefit of persons living with disability.
- Public parks and resorts should have disabled friendly arrangements. Building organisations are to be required to fix a minimum percentage of buildings for people living with disability and allot these at concessional rates.
- Need for creation of a disability wing and posting disable friendly personnel at important railway stations, airports and ports to render assistance to the disabled. Disability friendly measures have to be provided on the railway platforms, toilets, compartments etc.

Livelihood and Employment: "After my graduation, I joined a course being conducted by the Blind Relief Association. I also did my B.Ed thinking that being a vocation course, it would help me in getting employment. ...I had cleared the written examinations for jobs in Central Schools and was even called for the interview. However, the interview board told me that since I had not done a general B.Ed (but a B.Ed course designed for the visually impaired), I could not teach the visually impaired and the post was given to a sighted person. I want to ask that why was I made to do this special course in the first place if ultimately it had to prove this futile," questions Sunil Kumar.

Vijay, in his testimonial said, "My colleagues won a case in High Court in 2002. We were entitled to around 500-600 jobs under the Delhi Government. When we tried to convince the university to implement the directives of the court vis-à-vis employment for the disabled and went on strike, section 308 was imposed on us. We camped for three months but all we got were dates. So if we can't get our legal rights, then who needs any sympathy."

Supporting submissions: Himani Devi, whose 14 year old daughter Kavita is disabled, said, "I haven't got any information from any TV programme as to what are the provisions available for children suffering from my daughter's disability. I ask the government to provide us with mechanisms to help our child."

As far as employment is concerned, it has to be generated not only in the government sectors but also in private establishments, industrial concerns, banks etc. These organisations should be sensitised and made conscious to modify their jobs to suit the disabled persons. This aspect should be borne in mind also while imparting training to the disabled. This is an obligation, which the State has to fulfil and hence actions taken by the State should be assessed with this perspective.

A vision for the Forum: Those associated with the Forum have different visions for the Forum. "My vision is that this Forum becomes an ongoing activity whereby it can interrogate, understand and then may be change the representation of disability. I would like it to create an environment to direct the representation away from the charity, of the 'pity model' towards an engagement "which looks at disability as a kind of difference," says Anita.

Sujata wants the Forum to become a data bank of information that represents the facts on the disabled and the various kinds of disability accurately. The media, in turn, can use the well-researched information to present the facts correctly. If a director is portraying a mentally challenged person, he can do the same accurately. Or else the viewer may lose connection, she says quoting the example of *Kasautii Zindagi Kay*, telecast on Star Plus, where a seven-year-old visually impaired child belonging to a rich family didn't go to school and stumbled in her own house.

Sensitising the Media: *Koshish ek Asha*, another popular serial, telecast on Zee TV, also portrayed a normal girl getting married to a mentally challenged boy, Neeraj. A sequence showing Neeraj being subjected to frequent electric shocks as part of his treatment was criticised.

During an interactive meeting with Forum members in Ahmedabad in 1999, *Koshish ek Asha's* director, Anurag Basu said the incident of electric shocks to the main character Neeraj, who is mentally challenged, was incorporated to show a deeper conspiracy against the boy. He assured members that further episodes, henceforth, would show treatments and exercises beneficial for the disabled.

Although the fictional world of television showed Neeraj's recovery, the Forum felt the abrupt change from mentally challenged to emotionally traumatised was impossible. An autistic person was shown to be a murderer in *Ayushman*, being telecast on Sony. "Such persons do not have the capacity to plan and execute murder independently," says Sujata.

In December 2001, the group interacted with Varun Badola who played the role of Neeraj, during a public event Television and Disability - Past, Present and Future. It proved to be a big boost for the members of the disability community. **"The members realised the media's limitations. It dawned upon them for the first time that the information about disabilities was so little that the makers relied on previously made Hindi films for projections,"** says Sujata.



Participants at meeting of physically-challenged members of Viewers' Forum, New Delhi

During a recent interview, the actor himself conceded that a majority of actors would rather watch Hollywood movies where a challenged person has been cast than visit institutions to get to know more about them. Badola, who crafted his character on his challenged cousin says, "if I were to play the role of a person living with disability, I wouldn't generalise anything. I would be more specific. But you need to work with very sensitive people on such subjects." He acknowledges that his perception changed after meeting the members of Viewers' Forum. "What struck me was the resilience of this group. As far as the wrong representation is concerned, I feel that any disabled be it mentally or physical - we, the general public, put them in the same bracket."

Appreciation for the Forum: The Forum received kudos and recognition from different quarters. It was cited as a noteworthy intervention in the field of public interest response to mass media. Margaret Gallagher in the book *Gender Setting - New Agendas for Media Monitoring and Advocacy* made a special mention of the Viewers' Forum as an innovative practice and in this connection has referred the Forum of Viewers with Disability as an example of an effective viewers collective. A similar mention has been made of the Forum in the UNIFEM study 2000 on best practices in the field of media and communication from around the world.

Over the years, the Forum has proved that concentrated intervention with the media can make a difference. It was able to test the media's reaction and its own capacity to make a difference. It was also able to bring about an active dissemination of the experiences collected from studies it undertook as also its members. The Forum, furthermore, worked towards motivating viewers to join its groups and create public interest on the issues and concerns of the disabled. It even brought out a newsletter in Braille for the visually impaired.

By organising neighbourhood meetings, workshops and interactions with media personnel and thereby strengthening the disabled members' understanding, knowledge and information of the media, the Forum aimed at empowering the disabled to dialogue and negotiate independently with the media vis-à-vis content and placement.

Reflecting on the years gone by and activities of the Forum, Anita concludes, "We did succeed in reaching out to the media. However, the fight can never be over because the issues change with the transition of society. If one set of operations are over, there might be another set that needs attention." Although the disabled are being given space in the news, yet it is essential to increase the level of 'media inclusivity' and project several of those living with disability as role models.

TV and the Middle Class

Vibrant Voices

"Youngsters of today find it difficult to imagine an era when television did not exist. So pervasive has television become, so visible its presence and important its effects, that urban and even semi-urban India can hardly conceive of living a life without the TV set. Yet, in all but a few small parts of India, television is only a quarter-century old. Over this period, the TV set has become an essential fixture in all upper and middle-class households, and is not uncommon even in poorer homes in urban slums."¹⁹

I cannot remember the day I lived without TV: Television has become an extremely popular form of cultural entertainment. For millions of Indians it is the most important piece of furniture in their homes. "TV has become an inherent part of our lives. Somehow we



Middle class members of Viewers' Forum meeting in progress, New Delhi

19 *Conventional television in the time of convergence*, Kiran Karnik, Managing Director, Discovery Communications India, *Strategic Marketing: An Economic Times - Brand Equity Presentation*.

do not seem to remember the days when we lived without it, when we entertained ourselves or recreation was provided from sources outside the confines of our homes," says Mridula Murgai, a Delhi-based homemaker, who was earlier working as a stockbroker.

In some cases it has become such an addiction that a few minutes absence of the 'idiot-box' can create havoc in some households. Krishna Rajendra, a Delhi-based homemaker who also reads the newspaper for 15-20 minutes, considers the television as her main source of information and "like a good friend "I go through my spare time watching programmes on various channels. Through this medium I receive a lot of knowledge. I feel it's a comfortable way of witnessing events."

As week after week the television engages these viewers, their involvement with the TV has deepened. Way back in 1998-99, a viewer from Ahmedabad made a very candid confession, "any kind of interruption during my favourite TV programmes by anybody is intolerable. If someone drops in at my home, I do not feel like talking, sometimes even curse him or her! I also avoid visiting other people during prime time." **Thus, for such viewers television has taken precedence over social interactions. "The gupshup²⁰ sessions have died. TV is in a way a good diversion - it keeps us away from gossip conflicts!"** Ironically, for others, such as, young students from Delhi and Ahmedabad TV has become a topic of discussion, fuelling *gupshup*: they talk about the serials they have been watching over the telephone with their friends.

"Sometimes, I wonder why TV viewing has become so important to me. There was a time when I used to avoid television. But slowly it has become, to me, a magic box. News, views, information, live presentation of events in some remote corners of the globe - what more could we ask for?"

Initially, I used to switch it on, just because it was there. Then I started watching it because it was on. Next I started tracking specific programmes: I would watch a serial because I had seen the previous episode and so on. And now I have become an avid watcher."

Raksha Shukla, social activist, Noida

The first thing I do in the morning when I wake up is to go through the newspapers and decide which serials am I going to see after finishing my housework - something that will not impinge on my time and give me peace of mind as well," says Vimla Goel, a Delhi homemaker in her 50s.

Yamini Dholakia also in her late 50s is still nostalgic about the good old days of TV when *Hum Log*²¹, *Mahabharat*, etc., were telecast on Doordarshan. Although she dislikes the saas-

20 Gossip

21 Literally 'We the People'. It was India's first soap opera, telecast on the sole state-owned Doordarshan, from July 1984

bahu²² sagas, particularly *Kahani Ghar Ghar Ki* and *Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi*²³, her aged mother (in her eighties) wants her to watch these two serials with her every night. "We do not talk very much but this gives us a chance to interact. I have allocated time between 10 and 11 p.m. for her." In this instance, television has helped create a bond between the two women and a meeting ground.

Building leaders within the community: At a meeting in January 1998 the need was felt for a Forum that would represent viewers as consumers of television and provide them

The Viewers' Forum meetings were usually held at a member's house. Sometimes they watched recorded tapes of programmes and then reacted, in other cases, they had already watched the shows at home and came prepared for a discussion. A frank, sometimes heated exchange of views ensued that saw them agree, disagree, learn from each other, amidst considerable merriment and bonding. The meetings were recorded and transcribed, then given a format. Below is one such example of a meeting

Domestic violence - neighborhood meeting

Date - 30th July 2002

Venue - Defence Colony

A group 10-15 of viewers (average age 40)

- Lalita Baruah felt that producers of serials were moving away from their social responsibility by taking up controversial subjects like 'sati' in the serial *Har mod par*, because the Government did not take action and follow up in real life cases.
- The *Kahani Ghar Ghar Ki* clip that had the elder brother in law badgering his younger sister-in-law, received the strongest reactions of all present on two counts:
- Breach of social code - viewers were taken aback that a relationship that is held in such esteem is so badly portrayed.
- Invasion of privacy was another issue for the sensibilities of the viewer.

The women could not understand why the elder brother in law who in the normal course of events, seldom speaks directly to the women in the house should be so rude and put a pregnant woman under psychological pressure.

- The *Kkusum* clip of emotional blackmail by a woman raised concerns among the viewers about the portrayal of women.
- The women were also worried that these kind of situations were watched by their children who learnt such behaviour from television and that they cannot be stopped from watching it.
- In reference to *KSBKBT* and *Kutumb* where a working wife, who is pregnant, is told by her husband not to take business trip, raised a few eyebrows.

Pratima Shah widened the domestic violence issue by bringing in old people who are ill-treated in their family by their children. "Neglect can also be an area to look at in defining domestic violence."

Extra marital relationships were deemed as mental harassment not only for the person involved but also the respective families.

22 Mother-in-law-daughter-in-law

23 The two 'K serials', as they are popularly known, produced by Balaji Telefilms and telecast on Star Plus, have been enjoying high TRP ratings.

with a platform for expression of their opinions. We were in the process of understanding the media, its finer nuances and content, besides learning to negotiate with it but we realised that something concrete would emerge only if we worked with a wider community of viewers and represented their concerns." So it was decided to institutionalise the concept. There was also need to identify some participants of the Forum meetings as people who could lead the Forum forward so that it grew and diversified.

Once the core members - Suhas-Kumar, Vimla, Anita Ghai, Mridula Murgai, Madhu Prasad, Estelle Desai, Vijaya Shastri and Minal had worked out the details amongst themselves, the Viewers' Forum was born in 1998.

"When regular interactions took place, we realised we had a host of concerns regarding media imagery." Minal felt the need to understand the media and the issues it raised for a wider audience. "For instance, did other middle class homemakers share our concerns?"

The Viewers' Forum grew and established itself in Ahmedabad and Lucknow in 1996 and later in the rural centre of Mau. In 2002, Guwahati joined the Forum. This Forum was subdivided into three separate collectives - Middle Class Forum, *Basti Manch* and Forum of Viewers with Disability - to help each group raise their specific concerns with the media.

Amita Buch who helped set up the Ahmedabad chapter of the Forum, is a journalist. "The city has the highest number of cable subscribers. People, especially the ladies of the households are addicted to the TV set and so are the children," she explains. She felt that if there was one city that needed a Viewers' Forum it was Ahmedabad.

Shallini Mathur, who coordinated the Viewers' Forum in the city of Lucknow, had similar views.

A Reader in Philosophy at Delhi's Zakir Hussain College, Madhu Prasad was one of the



Minal Hazarika

core members who joined during this early phase. Excited by the kind of work done by the MAG group, she became an active member. "The idea of the 'Forum' came later, but we started with neighbourhood groups. I always saw these neighbourhood meetings as the base. Suddenly women whose opinions had not mattered to anyone were getting together to discuss something about which they felt confident to speak."

Madhu recalls that there were signature campaigns, analysis, and interactions with TV personalities - producers, writers or actors, which it was always, attracted a good audience. "We were not yet a

Viewers' Forum because that would evolve only over the next few months. Initially, there was just this bunch of TV watchers," she recollects.

"I attended a few meetings. We watched while MAG members analysed and dissected advertisements, TV shows, discussion shows. We were made to understand the thought process behind each advertisement and how they tried to manipulate our reactions towards them. I was surprised to learn how well advertisers had understood our gullibility," recalls Mridula in 2004.

Other women who attended these informal meetings felt that the media created both a sense of identification and exacerbated conflicts. They said the manner in which the media handles an issue is important because people judge real life experiences through its representations.

"Each of us who attended the meetings organised by MAG in those early years, was concerned about the way media depicted images day in and day out. We were worried as to how it was affecting our families," says Minal Hazarika, the Delhi-based coordinator of the Middle Class Forum. Minal, a trained engineer, had monitored TV fiction from the viewer's perspective for the group.

From the outset, the neighbourhood meetings functioned within a very democratic framework - there was space for plurality of views and the members, who were volunteers and keen media watchers, enjoyed the freedom to set their own agenda for the meeting.

"The initial discussions pertained to the changing media scenario with influx of the new channels. I remember MTV had just started 24 hour music. There was quite a strong response from people about the kind of visuals MTV had, because it was quite different. That was the period we were growing out of *Hum Log* and *Buniyaad* and being exposed to this very different kind of culture. There were things, which evoked strong reactions, and you wanted a 'Forum' where you could talk about it. When we asked people how much TV they watched, they invariably would say 'oh, not much'. When they actually calculated, it was nothing less than 4 to 4 1/2 hours a day, which out of your waking life is a huge amount of time," Madhu recalls.

The idea for the Forum was that not only could people exchange views, talk about their reactions, but to form itself into a pressure group, that **would interact with media professionals-make them responsible to us, as audiences. Viewers' Forum wanted them to realise that "you're not just making your money putting those programmes out there. You are crafting software that our children and we are looking at and it's about time we had some interaction.** It was not to be a kind of civil society police force, but a kind of interactive media," says one of the Forum's early studies.

Suhas defined the role of the Forum as 'facilitating the coming together of representatives of the media and the viewers on a common platform so that the viewers' voice could be heard'.

The aim was to “create a leadership within the community through training. By 2004 some of the Forum members were equipped to shoulder the responsibility of monitoring the general elections for a research study,” says Minal.

The restless viewer: At the numerous neighbourhood meetings in 1998, viewers admitted that they were addicted to TV. They said that as the number of channels increased on the cable network, so had their viewing habits. They were watching Zee, Sony and Star Plus although the latter was still partly an English channel. Movie channels and the local cable operators’ channel were also among the most watched. Some of their favourite shows were *Saans*, *Hasratein*, *Amaanat*, *Aashirwad*, *Aurat*, *Bhanwar*, *Thoda hai thode ki zaroorat hai*, *Waqt ki raftar*, *CID* among others.

While these women were grateful that television had offered them a source of continuous entertainment and distraction they were also becoming increasingly uneasy over the content and its treatment of various issues. Punch lines like *sab kuch dikhta hai* in the Rotomac ball pen ad and *Yeh andar ki baat hai* in Lux underwear were some of the ads cited to illustrate this point.

“When we went into the community, we found that many women who were hooked to TV were intelligent viewers and were asking questions on the depiction of women,” recalls Minal, the Coordinator of the Delhi chapter of the Forum.

During these local interactions, the leaders found that although members were involved with the stories and characters of the serials and soaps and looked forward to watching the next episode. They were disturbed by the way the story unfolded or the stereotypical treatment of the characters. **Forum members were appreciative of the bold, assertive new Indian woman, dealing with issues like extra-marital affairs or in search of her individual identity and living life on her own terms. Yet they disagreed with the depiction or the treatment of these issues and the stance taken by the protagonist.**

“In our meetings, we raised the issue of the impact of television on children: we talked about the issue of extra-marital affairs depicted in serials like *Hasratein* and *Saans*, the issue of modernity versus traditional values as shown in serials like *Amaanat*.

Why do serials, including *Saans* not show the personal growth of the protagonists? Be it Priya or Manisha, they sit at home waiting for their husband’s return”, viewers asked Neena Gupta, producer, director and lead actress in the serial. Her response was: “I do not wish to tell lies or give false hopes. Hence, what I show, I do so because if I show what you ask me to then most husbands will push their wives out of the house.”

Many members in their 40s had a problem with the depiction of extra-marital affairs in serials and started to question the glorification of extra-marital affairs such as in *Saans*. We felt we had to project the viewers’ anxieties and point of view to the producers,” says Minal.

In an effort to build a bridge between concerned viewers and content providers, the Forum decided that it would be a good idea to invite creative people to interact with viewers so that both could gain an understanding of each other's perceptions.

The Forum invited people like actress-producer-director Neena Gupta (*Saans*), director-producer Ajay Sinha (*Hasratein*), director Ashok Pandit (*Tere Mere Sapne*), producer-director Ravi Rai (*Sailaab*) among others to zonal meetings and public events.

During this phase, Neena Gupta's *Saans*²⁴ had created a lot of interest among viewers and the serial came up for discussion at many interactions. Ravina Suri, a lady in her 50s and President of the Lioness Club, NOIDA, wanted Neena Gupta to give "the story a different twist. She shows how her children came to terms with their parent's separation and in the process, I felt they started hating their father for what he did to their mother by abandoning her for another woman. It could have been that they became close to their teacher and maybe their teacher could have filled in as the father figure in their lives. Something different would definitely have been better."

For writer and activist, Suhas, "this twist in the story has been very disappointing for me. Ultimately all the responsibility of either 'saving' the family or 'destroying' the family has come on the woman's shoulder. If the wife (Priya) accepts the husband (Gautam), we will blame her and if she refuses, we will still blame her. I can't understand why Neena Gupta has never shown Gautam realising the seriousness of the mistake he has made."

Shashi Arora strongly identified with Priya's mother. "My daughter has been married for 13 years. Whenever I see this serial, I wonder what would happen if my daughter had to ever face this?" Members like Suhas, Ravina and Shashi developed a symbiotic relationship with the protagonist's daily predicament related it to possible situations in their own lives and found themselves eager to participate in Priya's decisions.

When protagonists like Priya in *Saans*, despite being the wronged wife, chose not to adopt the course viewers thought best for her, they felt disillusioned. In their own lives, they found they were negotiating many of the issues that the television depicted. They felt the protagonist had compromised on several ethical issues. As the chasm deepened between the protagonist and them over the handling of issues, many Forum members felt that the producer had let them down.

For the Forum's leadership it became essential to understand that the viewers wanted to go beyond protests - they wanted answers to their queries and it was essential to help these viewers disengage themselves from the dramatic constructs. This is where the Forum provided

24 Literally meaning 'breath', the serial dealt with a middle aged protagonist Priya, played by Neena Gupta herself, with two teenaged children, trying to cope with her husband's extra-marital affair and the breaking up of the marriage. Having been a homemaker all her life, she struggles to enter the professional arena and lead an independent life.

I remember we had a meeting with Neena Gupta. Her *Saans* was doing pretty well and she walked in, confidently. Suddenly, some young girls from the *Basti Manch* began to fire questions at her: 'why does this woman give a pencil box to her son for his birthday because she can't afford anything else. She's living in a house, which is so upmarket, it's just amazing. Do you think these problems are only faced by women of that background? Why do you raise these issues?'

'If you want to show the economic problems of a woman who has to leave her husband and the economic security of a marriage, it is equally important for a woman from a lower middle class background.'

Neena Gupta became defensive. At one point she actually said, 'We have to do it for the advertisers, because they want homes like this'. We were shocked. Here is this woman, who is an actress of high standing, a professional. And here she's saying I reduce the credibility of my serial in the interest of commercial requirements."

Madhu Prasad, Delhi

members with the space to articulate their thoughts. As Mridula puts it, "for me, the Viewers' Forum became a place to meet people and talk about something that occupied most of my evenings. At some point I began to watch shows, news or soap operas, more critically. I began to note down points that I would raise at our next meeting."

This interaction gave our members a chance to express their views, they learnt about the compulsions and constraints of TV - they became media savvy and informed viewers," believes Minal.

From the working women's prism: As the Viewers' Forum grew and spread in the late nineties, its profile changed. The women who attended meetings came from varied backgrounds, and social strata - they were middle-aged housewives and working women, single women and newly married girls, mothers, sisters, daughters. **As more women were moving beyond the confines of the house to the workplace, the portrayal of the professional women became an issue: it was seen as disturbing and problematic.**

Viewers, many of whom were pursuing careers, increasingly felt that there was a conspiracy to malign working women and project them as home wreckers, divorcees, seeking numerous (sexual) relationships or unable to lead an independent life. Some of them were already facing opposition from their husbands and families about working, they felt that the portrayal of professional women further compounded their difficulties.

As a viewer pointed out that on screen working women were portrayed as 'super women', "always decked up, no matter what!" The advertisements were to be particularly blamed for this superwoman image. Meera Sapra said, "When I have to go out, half an hour before leaving I am a total mess. I have to shampoo my hair, set it, and scrub my face and apply make-up. All this is adding much pressure in my life. And this doesn't end here. Not only should one have beautiful hair and a glowing face, one has to be doing all those

exciting things for the kids, for the house, you have to try all those recipes, you have to handle the washing machine, fridge and be a working woman.”

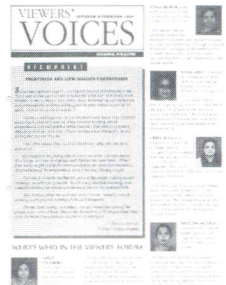
The depiction in soaps does not differ much as viewers felt that in the context of the professional women, the focus was more on family rather than exploring the woman's point of view. Viewers were disillusioned by the manner in which TV producers created a sub-text that said “women who went beyond their traditional role, as homemakers were ‘bad’.”

An exception in this category was director/ producer Ajay Sinha's *Hasratein*, in which the protagonist Savi, although portrayed as the ‘other woman’, was taken seriously as a working woman and provided space in the narrative, to explain her actions.

Forum members, who had met *Hasratein* director Ajay Sinha and discussed such issues with him, subsequently noticed significant changes in the characterisation and the storyline of the serial. This encouraged the members to send their feedback to other production houses and broadcasters.

To formalise the process, the Forum launched a newsletter, *Viewers' Voices* (in English) and *Nazariya* (in Hindi), and the website www.viewersforum.com. These provided alternative channels of communication for the viewers and the industry. They were based on the activities of the Viewers' Forum and allowed viewers from the different chapters to interact with each other while providing the TV industry a public feedback.

From the homemakers' angle: The homemakers - both working women and housewives - were unhappy with the depiction of domestic and marital lives of the characters. They felt TV soaps had created two types of women: either the self-sacrificing women or the ambitious, self-obsessed ‘I’ women. Characters like Mrinalini (*Ghutan*), Radha Shourie (*Banegi Apni Baat*) fall in the former category. Svetlana (*Swabhimaan*), Tara, Devyani (*Tara*), Savi (*Hasratein*), Lola (*Daraar*), Minnie (*Junoon*) are all depicted as ambitious women with attributes of a vamp and ‘bad’ mothers and wives on the home front. This characterisation of the ‘I’ woman also allowed the scriptwriter to justify the male characters' adultery.



Reacting to the depiction of Tara as the typical portrayal of the modern, working woman on television, viewers said, she “is projected in a very negative way. She is seen as a house breaker, separated, possessing separated children; she is also portrayed as one with numerous relationships.” In contrast was Munshi Premchand's central protagonist, Nirmala, in the serial by the same name was depicted as “a straightforward woman. She gets married and goes

"I am interested in sensitising the media about the viewers' preferences. I want people to look at the media in a more mature way. They should be able to select and make the best of it. And my feeling is that I can achieve it only through the Viewers' Forum."

Amita Buch, Journalist, Abhiyaan

to her in-laws' house. There she follows all customs and traditions without any opposition and tolerates everything."

The women attending Forum meetings found this depiction of the bold, negative woman offensive and far from realistic; they were equally disturbed by her portrayal as an enemy of other women. It wasn't that they objected to the politics within a family being explored through these serials. This had been

beneficial in the sense that certain issues that they felt unable to talk about at home were raised in these serials. However, the homemakers were concerned with the manner in which the narrative framed the conflict between different value systems. They were confused and agitated.

For instance, "relationships like extramarital affairs are presented as normal which is not so in reality," viewers lamented, admitting that "such women do exist, but are few, 10 percent evil exists. However, serials emphasize such things 90 percent, and the rest of the problems and characters only 10 percent. The portrayal ought to be the other way around."

"Women are shown struggling in life in different ways which is a reality", but viewers had problems with the treatment of these struggles. "Though in our country, marriage is considered a sacred tie, in serials, the women have affairs whenever they wish to. They seek divorce at the drop of a hat. Mothers don't even understand the needs, aspirations and feelings of their children. If the children are going through a marriage, the parents are simultaneously going through their own other marriages."

"In neighbourhood meetings held 1998," recalls Minal, "viewers raised questions about the depiction of women in the serials. We sensed the need to help them understand the imagery. The media needed to be demystified."

Demystifying the media: To help demystify the media - news, current affairs programmes, ad campaigns, and fiction - a series of events were organised in Delhi and at other chapters of the Forum. In depth leadership training of the members as media educators and advocates was conducted across Delhi, Lucknow, Mau and Ahmedabad to make those who attended these meetings informed viewers armed with developed skills of strategic advocacy. The latter was an invaluable asset if viewers were to negotiate with the TV industry in an educated and pro-active manner. **Out of these workshops, a number of media education modules related to different aspects of the media were worked out as ready reckoners for viewers.**

These modules gave members a critical perspective from which they could relate to the representations and depictions on media. It consisted of five components:

- Semiotics or image deconstruction
- Legal education - understanding the role of the law in regulating media institutions
- Understanding the business management of television
- Construct of the news and current affairs programme and development stories
- Technological aspects of the media.

“Media education was very much a part of the Viewers’ Forum, but it was media education from the point of view of the viewers. We weren’t going to train them to be great professionals,” recalls Madhu, “As part of the workshops, the process of production of television became more transparent to viewers. It forms a very important part of empowering them. I remember there were excellent modules on advertising, on production of news. We went to schools too and held workshops on advertising and serials for the students, because children were watching.”

In Ahmedabad, Amita Buch observed, “we started with small zonal meetings which built up into big public meetings. Gujaratis are fond of celebrities and when they found that the forum brings in celebrities they continued being part the Forum all along. The women were glued to the medium. They enjoyed the meetings and felt that there was something they were learning.”

Jahanvi Vyas, a computer professional, who has been part of the Forum coordinating city level interactions for a few years mentioned, “before I became a member of the Forum, I used to look only for entertainment and information, but now I look at many factors such as its impact on me and the people around me. Earlier, I used to watch anything and everything, now I have learnt to select and reject. I enjoy TV watching better now.”

The Kwality Feast campaign: The Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI) is a self-regulatory body within the advertising industry which has laid down guidelines for consumers to report violations.

The Viewers’ Forum has often used this mechanism for redressal of grievances. In 1999, the members referred the television commercial for Kwality Walls Feast, ‘Mate Your Stick’ campaign, to the Consumer Complaints Council (CCC) of ASCI. Viewers objected to the series of three advertisements telecast at that point.

One of the ‘Mate Your Stick’ ads showed a girl who is seemingly inspecting the crotches of men lined up in front of her and visibly expresses her distaste. Later she picks on the one she likes and then the punchline appears on the screen: ‘Mate Your Stick’ Just before this message, the men were actually holding ice cream sticks. The Viewers’ Forum members felt the visual portrayed gestures and the voice over conveyed messages which were considered indecent.

On the basis of the complaint, the CCC directed the advertisers to withdraw the advertisement.

The Forum and Advocacy: Time had now come for viewers to negotiate space for their views and even initiate campaigns. These initiatives took different forms and covered the

period from 1996 onwards. In each instance, the provocation had come from television and agitated members of the Forum felt that as a group they now needed to shift gears. They had channelised their views, they had interacted with media professionals to better understand the production process and the compulsions of this nascent industry. They have learnt to critically analyse what they saw on the TV. Now, they needed to put the wealth of this experience and learning into an advocacy package. The interventions made by members and chapters of the Viewers' Forum was based on the belief that since viewers watch TV, they should have voice on what they watch.

"The first phase of our journey, which formally began in 1998, was over in 2000. We now had well trained, critically alert community of viewers who could give us informed feedback on a host of issues across three cities. Neighbourhood discussions and the series of interactions we had had helped demystify the media to them. In 2000, we embarked on the second phase of the journey. We felt confident of being able to enter into negotiations with TV channels on an equal footing and tell them what viewers wanted to see," says Minal.

Engaging a channel - Star TV: The Viewers' Forum realised that its efforts in sensitising and influencing the media could be sustained and pursued only if it initiated and sustained dialogues and exchanges with the decision makers within the media. Thus the negotiations and interactions they had with creative people - TV producers, directors, actors and scriptwriters finally culminated in a meeting between members of the Forum and representatives of Star TV in April 2000 in Mumbai.

"There was transparency in our meeting. We shared with their representatives our collective and individual anxieties, concerns, expectations as viewers. Our concerns ranged from the very general to the specific. The channel executives were most receptive to our suggestions and feedback. **The question was whether their commercial compulsions would allow them to act on the observations at all,**" says Minal.

The channel representatives admitted that more than the sponsor; it was the creative process that governed the entertainment industry. So strong was the influence of Hindi cinema that television producers were not able to create soaps and serials that engage with many of the contemporary issues. **In a small victory for the viewers' representatives, STAR promised to reduce the extent to which familial conflict between women was projected, so that the stereotype of "women being worst enemies of women" was not reinforced. The channel also agreed to ensure that serials would not project the upper class urban lifestyles only but would give a wider representation to all types of ambience.**

Disaster Reporting - Gujarat Earthquake: Post 2000, Viewers' Forum had a network of viewers in different cities. Confident to negotiate on different aspects of media, VF took up the challenge of working on larger issues - producing feedback reports, negotiating with

the advertisers, channels, and even the Government on several issues from a position of strength derived from research and feedback.

Television is a very powerful medium and the visual images it beams leave a deep impression on the sensibility of the viewer. With numerous news channels broadcasting 24x7 in a competitive environment, there was a barrage of reports, images often confusing and contradictory and sometimes, provocative. Given the change in TV software and the tremendous growth in news coverage on TV from 1998 onwards, Forum members found that while they appreciated this new source of information, it was creating problems of a new kind, very different from the issues raised by TV fiction.

Member of the Viewers' Forum wondered whether the TV news professionals had any idea of the impact they could have on viewers, especially during times of human distress like natural disasters like earthquakes, cyclone or tsunami.

In its first foray into disaster reporting, the Ahmedabad Viewers' Forum represented by Jahnvi Vyas, Ranchod Bhai and Sayra Khan along with its sister chapter in Delhi, represented by Minal, Estelle and Madhu, decided to produce a viewers' feedback report to the coverage of Gujarat Earthquake in 2001.



Ranchod Soni, Jahnvi Vyas

Based on individual interviews with over 40 respondents in Ahmedabad, the report analysed the quality of the coverage, its impact on those affected by the earthquake and how viewers perceived the role of the media. Besides an animated interaction with channel representatives from STAR, ZEE, DD and Aaj Tak, the final feedback report was also sent to them.

One of the significant findings was that the coverage was good to begin with, but later became sensational and lacked direction. One of the respondents pointed out that the images appeared 'contrived' to suit the TV news story. She cited the telecast of a story on a leading news channel, which showed a camera team following an NRI looking for his family. As a viewer she felt that the story appeared 'unconvincing and unrealistic' as if the crew was trying to craft a 'human-interest' story, not spontaneously, but as a re-enactment for the benefit of the camera.

Viewers objected to the gory images of collapsed buildings and bodies being telecast, repeatedly. Kajal Patwa, 50, a social activist said, "Although true, the repeat of the images was unnecessary. It increased anxiety in children and old people."

Usha and A.P. Bhat pointed out that this resulted in people switching off news channels. Also quake-hit areas like Kutch were not adequately covered, and there was an uneven

distribution of relief efforts, leading viewers to feel that the media focus should be more even-handed. For blind school Principal J.B. Kavi, "Rivalry between channels led to half-baked stories, half truths and over reactions." He said channels' political biases were obvious. "DD (Ahmedabad), Zee and Star Plus gave their own angles to the same story."

The Forum report urged TV channels to make disaster coverage more representative. It also recommended training for covering disaster events so as not to hurt the sensibilities of the viewers. TV channels should explain to the public the challenges and constraints they face and **statutory warnings should accompany disturbing images.**

The bold and the beautiful²⁵: TV ads had often been the source of irritation to Forum members who were not only concerned with the consumerism that these ads encouraged - especially amongst children - but also with the aspirations they sold. Of particular concern was the exploitation of women in these ads. With both serials and advertisements projecting the 'perfect' body and constantly hammering at the need to use cosmetics in order to look good, young people felt vulnerable to these messages. Advertisements for creams, lotions and moisturisers had increased on television and made girls beauty conscious and caused anxiety among parents.

In early 2001, in response to the concerns of viewers, Forum members conducted a study in Delhi, Ahmedabad and Lucknow among students, homemakers and working women in the age group of 16-30, entitled *The Business of Beauty*. **The study revealed interesting insights into the question of identity and the importance of fairness as a vital pre-requisite.** Young girls said advertisements for fairness creams caused them serious anxieties but more than that it was the stigma attached to dark complexion that caused them the greatest distress. To address the anxiety of the viewers, the Forum decided to put pressure on advertisers of such products, who had always defended themselves by saying they were merely reflecting a social reality. The Forum petitioned them.

Another step in this direction was when CFAR collaborated with the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung to organise a seminar - *Portrayal of Women and Men in Advertising and the Image of Self*, in 2001. At the meeting, Meera Sapra, a postgraduate student admitted, "whenever I see my face, I wonder whether it is a face of a homemaker or a working woman. As such I am very comfortable with my body. But television creates a lot of conflict, a lot of pressures. I have a history of acne and skin allergy and I have tried all kinds of creams. Now these fairness cream ads make me crave for a glowing skin and who so ever I meet I ask - does it really work?"

25 Advertisements, technically well crafted and able to narrate a story within a short span of 30 seconds have always attracted viewer attention. As consumers of products we enjoy knowing about new products in the market, but it's not just the product that is being sold to us: lifestyles, aspirations are also being conveyed through the ads.

"We would like to reiterate here that we find these advertisements for fairness creams not only discriminating but also using unfair trade practices. By creating this kind of differential values, this business of superior and inferior and using a social stigma to sell their products, these advertisers are violating commercial norms. Every single advertisement for fairness cream that we have traced in the last two years has visually depicted dark complexion as a painful experience," viewers reiterated in a release to the media.

While there was no immediate reaction from the fairness cream manufacturers, this kind of initiative by the Forum worked towards building an informed, sustained, strategic consumer response, based on dialogue and sought to educate public awareness.

Kaun Banega Crorepati: Besides advertising cosmetic products, the middle class members found that new genres threw up new challenges, leading to several new concerns. At times these had to do directly with specific programming. For instance, STAR's flagship programme 2000 *Kaun Banega Crorepati*, a highly interactive quiz show, anchored by superstar Amitabh Bachchan, had developed an instant bond with middle class viewers. It had catapulted the channel to the top of the viewer ship charts, yet it raised questions on ethical and corporate responsibility. For instance, many middle class viewers thought it encouraged middle-income groups to hanker after instant mega prize money.

Viewers Protocol

- With the genre of horror, crime thrillers making a comeback on prime time, the presence of occult and superstition was a major concern. Besides proper parental guidance, gatekeepers wanted these programmes scheduled in the late night slots and avoidance of repeats during the day.
- The language used in the translated version of cartoons was found to be problematic.
- Family dramas are extremely conflictual and melodramatic with loud background music and violent dialogues. The themes are adult (marital stress, negotiating relationships) and since they use elements of suspense, intrigue, children find it compelling to view. As these are slotted in the prime time, parents find it difficult to keep children away. Children should not be misled about how conflicts can be resolved with the use of violence or easy solutions.
- Reality-based crime thrillers like *Kahani Jurm Ki*, *Bhanwar*, *India's Most Wanted*, *Aap Beeti* project violence in real life. The gory details of how a crime is committed give ideas to both children and adults. These programmes should be scheduled for late night with no repeats during the day.
- Imitation of acts of violence or pranks on screen by children has been cited as a major problem by caregivers of the disabled. Media needs to be sensitive to the special needs of these children as they innocently assume that images on-screen reflect reality.
- Children are playing violent computer and video games. Games like *Mortal Combat*, *Street Fighter* in which one gets points for running over people, killing them, are widely popular.

Some Forum members said that never before had common people dreamt of acquiring such huge amount of cash at such short notice. A concerned viewer commented, "today it is one crore, tomorrow it is Rs.10 crores and what is worse is more than the producers, the viewers continue to support this deception that it is just a game show." Another said, "Hamare bachchon ko yeh itna lalcha rahe hain ki woh ek hi raat me amir banne ka sochte hain²⁶".

The quiz show also opened Pandora's box for other channels to start similar programmes with huge prize money on offer - especially, when Zee was to start a *Sawal Das Crore Ka* with popular star Govinda.

Mridula found the meeting with the Star Network a memorable experience. "This was prior to the Ekta Kapoor factor when the network was still looking for the right formula to improve its ratings and image with the viewers.

"The initial lukewarm response changed once they realised that our presentation was backed with research and audience feedback. They were surprised at how well we were prepared and at the amount of homework we had done before we went to this meeting," she said.

The Viewers' Forum invited the producer of *Kaun Banega Crorepati*, Anita Kaul Basu for a meeting in November 2001. The highlight of the meet was Basu's personal apprehensions about what money could do to a person, especially when it is earned in just 25 minutes!

"I live in a normal DDA flat. My kids go to a normal school. I keep them off all this glamour and magic," she revealed. Hearing this response, the members felt more confident in coping with the media since they realised that Basu, as a parent, shared their concerns.

During the meeting, the viewers asked Basu to explain the different stages the show went through - from the time that people dialled the required telephone number till they reached the hot seat and on how the questions were framed. To invoke the concept of corporate social responsibility, members suggested episodes like the Diwali Special in which Amir Khan and Sonali Bendre donated their prize money, should be held more often so that one gets the feeling that the money is being used for good purpose.

Media Violence and its Impact on Children: One of the major focuses of the Viewers' Forum was the impact of TV on children. Since the majority of its members were parents, they were deeply concerned about what watching 3-4 hours of TV a day could do to their children.

As children, these adults had never been exposed to television so they were all at sea - they had no reference point by which to judge the influence of TV on their children. From 1998 onwards, viewers complained about the levels of violence on TV.

26 They attract our children so much that they want to become rich overnight.

The adolescents who watched TV for particularly long hours imitated action programmes like WWF (now WWE) and *Shaktimaan*. Viewer Forum members sought to sensitise the government and the industry at a public hearing on the *Impact of Media Violence on Children* in Delhi in March 2002.

Parents demanded the introduction of a rating system, regulating the time of cartoons on the 24-hour TV networks and the avoidance of promos for adult programmes during children's programmes. The meeting was attended by Deepak Segal, Creative Director, STAR Plus; Markand Adhikari, CEO, SABe TV; Madhavi Mutatkar, Head, Zee TV and Mukesh Khanna who produced and played *Shaktimaan*.

Bindu Prasad, a psychologist, pointed out, "The language being used on Cartoon Network has a negative impact on children. To what extent can we lessen it? Kids also have more nightmares, psychosomatic symptom due to increased violence on TV. Controlling the time of viewing is a secondary factor but the ultimate thing is your accountability as the producers of the programmes."

Popular programmes like the dance show *Boogie Woogie* came in for some amount of flak because parents felt that in the name of identifying new, young talent, the dance show was encouraging children to imitate very adult body movements.

In a milestone achievement for the parents, the panelists from the TV industry agreed with several of their grievances. Madhavi Mutatkar admitted, "supernatural and horror serials get a lot of rating points. Whether we admit it or not, we are all in the game of viewership ratings. But I feel that we, channel representatives, should sit with you and formulate a plan for slotting them."

Ekta Kapoor's *Kahani Ghar Ghar Ki* and *Kasauti Zindagi Kay*, revolve around *saas-bahu* relationships, questioned the basic edifice of these relationships, and in many instances, gave rise to new fears and insecurities amongst viewers.

By 2002, the disgusted viewers started raising questions like, "*Parvati is shown as too noble, no one in real life is so great*"¹. "*In our own homes, if daughters in law do not receive equal importance, we feel bad, but on TV they exaggerate it.*"

At one Forum meeting Divya Pandey said, "*All Balaji serials disturb us. They are creating strange fears and insecurities with regard to marriage.*" The Forum found that though its members belonged to different communities and age groups, they had common concerns raised by such portrayals.

The producer was criticised for regressive images shown in violation of the law - she depicted sonography, the desire for a male child. To counter these allegations, on the second anniversary of *Kahani*, the channel resorted to a PR exercise by profiling three real families similar to the Agarwal family in the serial in different towns of North India. Forum members took this opportunity to further the discourse on media

Most of the respondents in these cities were irked by the portrayal of women characters in Balaji serial. A few specifically complained about their being "unrealistic", reducing the drama to all kinds of improbabilities. Anjali Dargar, the *badi bahu* of an extended family in Bikaner, said "Though, I have got into this habit of watching it, I find the serial totally unrealistic. Rs.200 crore ke baat karte hain - how can it be a *Kahani Ghar Ghar Ki*?"

"TV is a powerful medium, we should be responsible about what to show the child. I have taken this responsibility very seriously," promised *Shaktimaan's* Mukesh Khanna.

Depiction of Domestic Violence in Telefiction: By 2002, Ekta Kapoor with her K-series had arrived on the electronic media. Depiction of violence against women and children on the tele-screen was increasing by the day. Forum members had been giving a feedback on the increasing portrayal of violence in the last two years. They raised concerns on depiction of domestic violence and women-to-women violence on television during various neighbourhood meets.

The Forum got an opportunity to raise the question of how television had a role to play on instigating domestic violence at the official and national level when the Parliamentary Committee on Human Resource Development, in a public notification, invited suggestions from the public on the Protection from Domestic Violence Bill, 2002. The members saw this as an opportunity for the Viewers' Forum to contribute to the public debate.

A written memorandum and oral testimony was presented jointly by the Viewers' Forum and CFAR before the Committee. The deposition before the Standing Committee of Parliament was an achievement for members of the Forum for it recognised their contribution to society as a collective of responsible tele-viewers. An opportunity to depose in front of the gathering also gave them a chance to raise the question of the media's accountability at a national level.

Before making the presentation to the Parliamentary Committee the Viewers' Forum set up audience panels across Ahmedabad, Delhi and Guwahati to monitor prime time programmes. "Viewers were clear that not only physical violence but also mental tortures, body expression are all part of violence. Also, viewers felt that this had an effect on family life." **In the monitored sample, there were 10 scenes depicting domestic violence in which women were the victims and men the aggressors.** The Viewers' Forum and CFAR produced a tape of TV clippings for the Parliamentarians to watch. The latter found this highly educative and persuasive.

Thus, the Standing Committee took note of the various recommendations put forth in the memorandum by the Forum, including the need to check gratuitous portrayal of domestic violence on television, the need to discourage trial of the women by 'Family Courts', the need to respect the existing laws in letter and spirit and the need to depict women as individuals with rights and their struggle.

The Standing Committee in its final report submitted to the Parliament on December 12, 2002 made the following recommendation, **"Excessive use of violence in TV serials tends to lend legitimacy to domestic violence. It should be strictly monitored and wherever the women are portrayed objectionably, it should immediately take up the matter with the appropriate authority."**

World Cup Fever: In cricket crazy India, viewers of all ages get hooked onto the game whenever it is played. The media adds to the excitement and popularity of the event by creating hype. So much so that important aspects like the ICC World Cup clashing with children's board examinations are forgotten. The entire frenzy of excitement builds a different kind of pressure on the viewer. In the past, we had explained to our members how they could cope with the issues raised by various serials and programmes. This time we sought to understand how children and parents were coping with the pressure brought about with the World Cup. Was it leading to tensions?"

"With our feedback study, we aimed towards building civil society advocacy and viewer interaction so that channels could get a feedback on how children, already under duress, were coping with the pressure of exams and the excitement of the World Cup. We hoped that in the future they would formulate their programming and marketing strategy keeping this perspective in mind," says Minal.

Once again the members spoke to a cross section of people in Delhi and Guwahati. Questions ranged from how families negotiated between their children's lives and their own desire to watch the matches and the need to ensure that children devote sufficient time and attention to their books to whether another jung was being fought in homes or had the families managed to arrive at a compromise?

Responses from parents and children ranged from optimistic to concerned and anxious. Many children and parents said they had planned carefully for the ICC World Cup and worked out a schedule between studying and watching cricket. Class 12th student from Delhi,

Channels, who have business interests, exploit every opportunity they get to fulfil their commercial goals. And cricket is no exception. *Extra Innings*, an interactive round up programme with cricket commentator Charu Sharma, glamorous TV stars Mandira Bedi and Sandhya Mridul, brought the World Cup live from South Africa to Indian homes. It began two hours before the game and continued two hours after it. Apart from interviews with cricketers, a peek in their personal lives, the show had predictions by tarot card specialist *Maa Prem* and interactive contests like *Predikta* and even a *Mahasabha* of Gods debating the team's prospects.

In Mumbai, a study by the Forum indicated that viewers in the busy Indian metropolis did not necessarily lap up all that the channel offered in the name of popularity. As Chetan Shah, a young chartered accountant, questioned, "What is the need for glamour in the show?" Shah had a piece of advice for Max commentators - that it is not necessary that a former cricketer can become a cricket commentator. "They need to study cricket. Even if they had been good players, they have not studied the game or mastered their speech as in the case of Gavaskar and Shastri."

Ram Naik, a middle aged owner of an automobile shop found *Extra Innings* "very boring and too long". He suggested that Mandira should dress up sensibly. "In fact, there is no need for Maria and Sandhya too. These girls have no idea of cricket and they just keep talking loudly," he said.

Tanushree Basu, said; "it is extremely unfair to have the World Cup during board exams. More so because my father would be enjoying all the matches while I would be restricted to watch only a couple of them." Though not cricket lovers, Anindita and Arun said, "we live in a one room flat, our father watching the TV is a disturbance."

In keeping with its mandate to advocate and give the public a say in programming choices, the Forum sent a copy of the report to Tusshar Shah, AVP Commercial, SET India Pvt Ltd - the official broadcasters of the World Cup. Responding to the report, Shah said the audience feedback would be useful to formulate the programming and marketing strategy of the channel in the future.

Building new leadership: Alongside these efforts to project the viewers' concerns about TV content into the public realm and negotiate with the industry, the Viewers' Forum saw itself expand and diversify. New leaders emerged from the collective at new centres like Guwahati in 2002.

Anita Baruah, the Viewers' Forum coordinator from Guwahati says, "North east India is a mystery to many. When the Viewers' Forum in Delhi wanted to know about the media or rather the viewing habits of the people here they realized they knew nothing about places like Guwahati. Mobilising people for the Guwahati chapter did not prove difficult. Whenever I spoke about the Forum to friends, relatives etc., they came forward as active participants with their growing concerns. We became a diversified collective of lower income group, higher income group, students, educationists and social activists who worked towards giving a coordinated, well researched feedback on issues like media habits, role model, CAS²⁷ /DTH²⁸ study, the portrayal of single women, and finally we worked on Election news monitoring in 2004."

In **Mumbai**, the Forum was initiated in 2002 with Hemali Doshi as the coordinator. In **Delhi**, new leaders like Lalita Baruah, Divya Saxena and Neeta Pandya emerged from the neighbourhood meetings. Lalita recalls, "CFAR proved a big learning experience for me. In the beginning, everything was beyond my comprehension. I wondered why so many people attended the workshop at Jamia Hamdard (where a training meeting was organised for core members). I thought to myself, Viewers' Forum couldn't be spending so much money for three days just to discuss television! I felt there must be something more serious to this and started jotting down points. Then everything made sense to me. During neighbourhood meetings, we discussed September 11 and Iraq crisis. I found all this very interesting. Then, one day I was asked to address a meeting on AIDS by Akhila Sivadas. I found that I was absorbed by the analysis we conducted." Lalita would participate in numerous surveys and conduct focus group discussions. She was an active member of the group that monitored the 2004 General Election coverage on TV news channels.

27 Conditional Access System

28 Direct to Home

Legislative Advocacy - In all its interventions, the Forum had been conducting its advocacy on an informal basis with individual TV channels, producers, and advertisers. It had not taken recourse to any official action. This was a lacuna discussed by members who felt that they could make a greater difference if they could get the support of a regulatory mechanism, something that has been absent in the India cable experience since 1992. **Members consistently made demands for an independent regulatory authority, one that would offer redressal to viewers and the industry alike and settle contentious issues.**

Participation in the Task Force on CAS: In 2002, the Government sought to introduce the Conditional Access System (CAS) this mechanism allowed viewers to receive only those channels they wanted and not all the channels as was the practise till then. CAS would ask for a nominal payment for free-to-air channels and then pay channels would be paid for on an individual or bouquet basis. CAS was viewer friendly and the Forum supported its implementation.

In appreciation of Viewers' Forum-CFAR's standing and contribution in expanding media advocacy, the Forum was made a member of the Task Force set up by the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting on the implementation of the Conditional Access System. CFAR played an active role in representing the viewers' points of view with the Government as well as the industry.

Neeta Pandya, a member and resident of Indraprastha Extension, revealed that cable operators formed a cartel and announced cable charges of Rs. 250 per month, a hike of more than 2.5 times. On top of that, the cartel said no operator, apart from the stipulated operator for the society, would take up the concerns of the members. The residents of IP Extension formed a collective and threw out the operator.

Some of these concerns were: the government should regulate the cable prices of 'basic tier' of the 'free-to-air' channels; educate the consumer on operation of cable television, the broadcasters, content creators and MSOs should not enhance the charges of the 'pay' channels arbitrarily. The CAS Bill was tabled in Parliament in April 2002. It was passed and partially implemented.

CAS threw up another question: what should be the Government's role in deciding the tariff of cable services? Should the Government intervene or not? Or should the interplay of the free market decide? Members like Lalita Baruah felt that there should be more intervention from the Government: it should lay down rules indicating a stipulated time frame for notification and increase in cable rates.

While the public was engaged in a debate over the introduction of CAS, several operators were holding viewers to ransom. A survey of Delhi's Vasant Kunj by Lalita revealed that viewers were paying different rates to the same cable operator. In fact, many people did not know what CAS was all about. In Guwahati, Anita Baruah came up with similar findings.

To educate viewers on the issue, the Forum organised a public symposium on *The Cable Industry and the Viewers Setting New Norms and Standards* in April 2002. "The objective of the discussion was to bring about an interaction between the Government, viewers, cable operators, broadcasters and MSOs over the growing anomaly on the viewers' right to choice and the need for educating the viewers in exercising this choice."

Rakesh Mohan, Joint Secretary, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting represented the Government while the cable industry was represented by Rakesh Dutta, Vikky Choudhry, Major Kohli, and Roop Sharma. The Viewers' Forum was represented by Shalini Mathur (Lucknow), Lalita Barooah, Sujata Goenka, Suhas Kumar, Minal Hazarika, Anita Ghai and Vimla.

The symposium concluded that the need was to first educate the viewers about the cable industry. Viewers need to be made aware of the role that they can play in instrumentalising their choices; they need to come forward with their grievances. At the same time, the government needs to step in with regulatory norms and help along with the consumers' and viewers' interest groups in providing education to the viewers. It was felt that the cable industry, the broadcasters, print media, Government and the viewers needed to be brought together in a dialogue to build a system that would regulate and try to resolve the growing concerns over the functioning of the cable industry.

Sensitising the news media on depiction of violence: By 2002, members across the centres were well trained in conducting research and sought to sensitise the media on different subjects. The depiction of real life incidents of violence in the news media was one such issue. This was part of their continuing concern with media violence. "Since 9/11, the electronic media has brought us images of blood and violence from across the globe. In India this coverage has often been 'live'. Many viewers have complained about the graphic scenes of violence shown on TV during the attack on Parliament or Gujarat. They felt it was excessive and repetition only made it worse."

Much of the public and professional discourse had been on whether violence on television, in all its genres - fiction, news, cartoons - made the public immune to gory incidents of violence and disasters, both natural and man made? "To assess if the media had become receptive to public concerns on disaster reporting after the Gujarat earthquake, we undertook a quick survey across Delhi, Mumbai and Guwahati in 2003 after the twin blasts in Mumbai," says Minal of the Forum's next major initiative.

During the survey, Upen Hazarika, a retired civil servant, in Guwahati said, "surfing between Aaj Tak and NDTV 24x7, I ended up watching the latter for the simple reason that their newsreaders are more familiar and the splattered body parts were not part of the scenes. We read the gory details in the newspaper the next day."

While reporting on the gruesome incidents of rapes, the role of the media was crucial, since it is the most powerful influence in the formulation of public opinion.

In 2003, the Capital witnessed a series of rapes, including that of a Swiss Diplomat in October 2003 and a 17-year-old student by Presidential bodyguards. These incidents raised concerns about the security of women among the citizens and the Forum conducted a survey on the media's role in shaping this perception.

Sapna Shakya, a student from the Capital's prestigious Lady Shriram College, said, "As far as media coverage is concerned, I think they have attached adequate importance to the issue but at the same time they are also sensationalising it." Retired Government officer O.P. Rai opined, "The job of the media is to give information, not interpretation. The media asks leading questions thereby overplaying the role, which has been assigned to it." A section of women respondents felt many perpetrators of violence against women got ideas from TV soaps.

National Elections 2004: The presence of numerous 24-hour news channels led to a wide and in depth coverage of the first Lok Sabha elections in 2004. Viewer Forum members who watched a lot of news found that the initial coverage seemed to concentrate on a few individuals and issues. Members, especially those belonging to the Basti Manch resented the fact that the emphasis was on politicians and politics rather than on issues that concerned them as citizens. In CFAR studies on the general elections of 1998 and 1999, it was established that the political discourse was based on inter party politics and the issues of human development or civic interest was marginal.

To find out how much coverage such issues received in the 2004 General Elections, members of the Viewers' Forum decided to monitor news programmes of the 2004 elections. This was a landmark study for the Forum. This phase of the Forum saw the emergence of a new rank of leaders as 20 women representing a cross section of voters and viewers - middle class homemakers, *basti* dwellers, joined hands to monitor the channels. Among the national channels monitored were Hindi news bulletins on Aaj Tak, Doordarshan News, NDTV India, STAR News and Zee TV, besides English bulletins on NDTV 24X7. Regional channels monitored included Prag Channel (Assamese), Sun TV (Tamil), ETV (Gujarati) and Sahara Samay (Hindi).

By any yardstick the monitoring was a huge exercise. The news was monitored over a period of two months from March - May 2004 and covered almost 450 hours of election coverage.

There was an expectation that the media would act as a conveyor belt of political information, a feedback mechanism for the public to voice their opinions, concerns and hopes. During the assembly polls in 2003, the media and the BJP had focussed on development issues - roads, water, education as well as other electoral issues. Channels debated infrastructure conditions in Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh to explain the anti-incumbency factor. The fact that India Shining campaign celebrated its success in these

fields was another reason to believe Election 2004 would be an election about human development issues.

The viewers' study found that such hope was belied. The coverage on news channels was highly selective, restricted to a handful of issues, campaigns and personalities with no major issue of national or human development importance receiving any meaningful coverage - either in quantitative or qualitative terms. As Pratima Shah, a Delhi based monitor says, "Only once in a while development issues were brought up. Most of the time is spent on parties bashing each other. Development and all other issues are secondary."

If vikas (development) was a passing part of the coverage of campaign, manifestoes and speeches, regional issues and state elections received little coverage. Unemployment, education, infrastructure - received a mere five percent of the total coverage devoted to election news in the sample.

Recalling her monitoring experience, Lalita Baruah of Delhi, said, "in the beginning I found it difficult to monitor. But I learnt how to do it - watching the news became interesting. It was interesting to hear what each party had to say about the other. Sometimes it was hilarious. It really increased my general knowledge because earlier I did not bother watching all the news. Things like exit polls widened my horizon."

Sudha, who monitored the regional Tamil news channel, says, "Earlier when I used to watch news it was only to look at the headlines. After that I would change the channel. But because of the monitoring study, I had to go through the entire news. In the beginning, I used to find it very interesting. But later the news programme on SUN TV kept repeating the same type of news and I started losing interest in news watching."

The question of 33 percent reservation for women figured as an election issue in the last two elections in 1998-99. In 2004, such issues did not find mention in the campaign. There was a window of opportunity - Jammu and Kashmir Permanent Resident Jammu and Kashmir Permanent Resident (Disqualification) Bill where the opinion of women could have been heard or the condition of women who risked death for a Rs. 40 saree in the Lucknow saree stampede could have been focussed upon. Unfortunately, they were not.

Pratima says, "Zee had too much coverage of the Lalji Tandon case. One day they spent an half hour on this. The questions the studio anchor asked the field reporter were so silly - just to spend time. It's like they don't have anything else to show."

The empowered viewers who had monitored the report had several queries, and took the opportunity to seek clarification from the Chief Election Commissioner Mr. T.S. Krishnamurthy when he released the report *General Election 2004, Monitoring Television Content: Citizen's Response* at a public function held in Delhi during August 2004. "What decision did the

Commission finally take as regards the sari stampede case in Lucknow? Was it a violation of the model code or not?" asked viewers.

The meeting concluded with the Chief Election Commissioner remarks, "it is a question of public awareness, vigilance on the part of the voters. Election Commission will be interested in supporting vigilance organisations, independent non-governmental organisations intervening in the electoral process. In fact, voters, watch groups and we have intervened and taken prompt corrective actions."

Thus, a journey, which began with a small neighbourhood meeting in 1998, culminated in producing a weighty research study on the election coverage of television news and the Forum had been recognised and felicitated by the Chief Election Commissioner.

In today's media environment, citizen's pressure groups like the Viewers' Forum are all the more relevant. As Madhu says, today there is a greater need for a Forum "because the media determines how we think about ourselves, about our society. For example, at about 10.30 p.m. on NDTV they show the nightlife in all cities. I find it exceptionally boring, but this partying, this nightlife, is becoming an aspirational thing, not perhaps for people of my generation but with younger people, students, who are heavily influenced by this. I see the amount of drinking in parties, at pubs. It is affecting the lifestyle. I don't know if they are showing it because that's already being done, but it certainly is spreading it around."

Having been part of the Forum for years, Yamini Dholakia strongly believes that "viewers can make a difference. We viewers can do a lot to bring about awareness and, therefore, changes in our society. Through this Forum, we can inform and teach the less privileged people about their rights. It may not have an immediate impact but public protest does have an effect. The serial producers will have to bow down. That would be a wonderful change! Secondly, if we could present our views and hear theirs (the media industry) and finally come to practical conclusions - nothing like it. It would enable us to choose our viewing."

It is with these hopes and ambitions that the Viewers' Forum faces the future.



Centre for
Advocacy and
Research

F-19, Kalkaji, 3rd Floor,
Desh Bandhu College Road,
New Delhi-110019