

Constitutional ethics and the appropriateness of broadcasting of pseudo scientific programs on television in India

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Abstract

Despite the ongoing technological progress, pseudo scientific and related practices are much prevalent in the Indian society. In India television is the most important medium for present times. Especially year after the resurgence of private television channels broadcasting of programs on areas such as astrology, reincarnation and vastu shastra which lack assessment through scientific enquiry and could be ethically questionable, are on the rise. The constitution of India categorically encourages development of scientific temper and ethical considerations through fundamental duties. In the context of ethical and scientific considerations provided by constitution, this study aims at examining the ethical appropriateness of television programs which may lack scientific enquiry and assessment of their effectiveness and which can also expose citizen to various exploitations. This

study triangulates the observations from in-depth interviews of experts and from an extensive survey, for highlighting the appropriateness of pseudo scientific programs. The findings will help academicians, activist, practitioners and governing bodies by enabling better understanding of such important and yet at times controversial issue.

Key words: Pseudo scientific programs, Television, Constitutional ethics

Introduction

In a fast progressing country like India, spreading of broadcast media is on the rise. Broadcast media has brought a major change to the area of infotainment. But the flip side of this highly impacting medium is that the rules and governance related to the content of media are still evolving. Resultantly we have plethora of programs being broadcasted both on

national and regional channels. One of the major areas where such programs border on the science and pseudo science are the programs based on areas like astrology, reincarnation and vastu shastra. Such programs may fall short of the logical validation through the approach of modern science, but still seem to have huge impact on the target audiences. Such programs also question their ethical validity which becomes especially important in the largest democracy of the world where the constitution itself encourages development of scientific temper through the fundamental rights.

Television as the preferred medium

As per the 2018 survey of Broadcast Audience Research Council, India now has around 197 million television (TV) homes which is a steep increase from the figure of 183 million in 2012. The other highlights of the survey being, total TV penetration is at 66% and around 835 million individuals are having access to television (more than two and half times that of the smart phone penetration). Mr. Jehil Thakkar, partner at Deloitte in an interview to economic times specifically mentions of television remaining the biggest media for foreseeable future in India and with 100% electrification of villages, television is one of the first item they will buy further increasing the penetration of television³. Thus television is the most important medium in India in the present times.

Constitutional ethics

Greek philosophers divided their work in two three broad segments one of which was ethics. Ethics according to them is the study of choices between good and evil, truth and falsehood, virtue and vice, and it is more about whether the action being judged is good or bad (Thakurta, 2012). As per Encyclopedia Britannica ethics can also be applied to any system or theory of moral values or principles. In this study, our understanding of the term constitutional ethics is what as per the spirit of constitution is the most preferred approach or behavior that a citizen of India is expected to exhibit. The constitution of India categorically encourages development of scientific temper and ethical considerations through fundamental duties.

Hence in the context of ethical and scientific considerations provided by the constitution this study aims at examining the ethical appropriateness of television programs which may lack scientific enquiry and assessment of their effectiveness and which can also expose citizen to economic and social exploitation.

To examine this critical issue we conducted in-depth interviews of eminent personalities namely Dr. Hamid Dabholkar a practicing psychiatrist and an active member of the renowned Andhashraddha Nirmulan Samiti, Mr. Ganesh Kanate, erstwhile editor of Saam Marathi TV and TV9 Marathi and senior advocate Aseem

Sarode who is also a known social activist. Apart from the in-depth interviews, an extensive survey involving 157 respondents was also conducted. The observations from the interviews and the survey were then triangulated to arrive at a conclusion. This triangulation helped in receiving of knowledgeable inputs and holistic views of experts and educated professionals of the society. The audience for the survey included renowned actor/ writer, students, working professionals, astrologers, journalist, political observers and social workers. The survey was sent to respondents through social media and regular reminders were sent to ensure the timely filling of valid responses. Besides the initial basic information about the respondents the survey enquired about their viewing habits of such pseudo programs, the reason for viewing of such programs, impact of such programs on their life and resolution of problems through such programs (refer appendix for survey questions).

Analysis and results

The responses from the survey resulted in the following analysis:

Survey findings

Viewing habits of such pseudo scientific programs

Of the 157 responses, almost 40 % of the respondents admitted that they watch pseudo scientific programs (refer Fig. 1). For an extensive survey involving educated professionals and

experts, this is a relatively high percentage which exhibits the existing high interest levels of audiences.

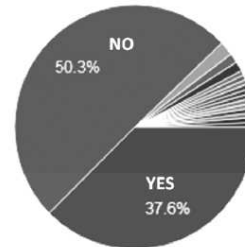


Fig. 1

Impact of pseudo scientific programs
Almost 40 % respondents rated the impact of viewing such channels as good and very good (refer Fig. 2). This high percentage of response becomes more critical when we also consider the overall educational level of respondents, thus making the subject of prevalence of the viewing of pseudo scientific programs worth a consideration for conducting research.

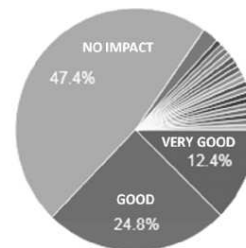


Fig. 2

Frequency of viewing

Almost 50 % of the respondents mentioned of viewing of such programs on either regular or occasional basis (refer Fig. 3). Thus irrespective of their views about such programs appears is a considerable number.

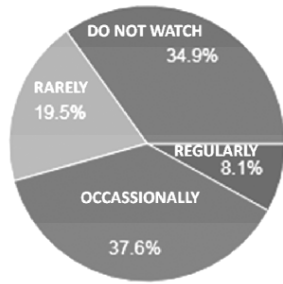


Fig. 3
Reason for viewing
Of the 110 respondents which replied to this question more than 60 % admitted of viewing the programs for curiosity or problem solving (refer Fig. 4). Considering the education levels of respondents this high figure does indicate a desire to know and learn about this subject. This can be construed as the delicate boundary of, leaning towards a scientific enquiry of the subject and a possible vulnerability towards exploitation.

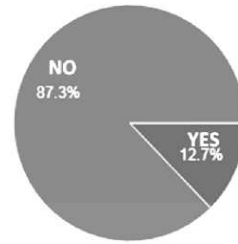


Fig. 5
Problem resolution
Of the 138 respondents, almost one-fourth felt that viewing such programs did helped them in the resolution of their problems (refer Fig. 6).

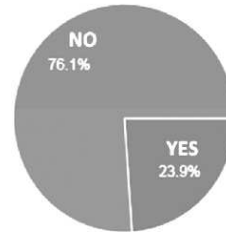


Fig. 6

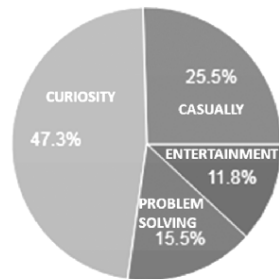


Fig. 4
Follow up with practitioners after watching the programs
In spite of their viewing habits only 12.7% of the respondents follow up with practitioners (refer Fig. 5).

Interviews

Dr. Hamid Dabholkar of Andhashraddha Nirmulan Samiti mentioned that they have demanded for putting a ban on such programs. They even want such practices to come under the scanner of consumer protection act, and the practitioners who don't confer to such acts should put a board such as, "astrology is only for entertainment". Mr. Ganesh Kanate an erstwhile editor of Saam Marathi TV and TV9 Marathi said that though such programs were

broadcasted during his tenure but they had also displayed a disclaimer for those programs. He was not supportive of broadcasting of such programs but according to him the financial constraints can force channels to cater to the possible demand of the audiences. He mentioned an important point of adoption of BBC like model where dedicated funding channels through government can facilitate fair working of television channels in India. As per senior advocate and a known social activist Aseem Sarode, article 51 of the constitution states that to spread the scientific temperament is the responsibility of state and citizens. Thus broadcasting of such programs is against constitutional ethics. He further was of the opinion that such programs result in promotion of corruption, cheating and misguidance and can create mental imbalance in people.

Discussion

For this important area of constitutional ethics and broadcasting of pseudo scientific programs on television, this study gathered the important data about viewing habits and inputs from of audiences where almost 40 % of the respondents admitted of watching such pseudo scientific programs with almost 40 % respondents rating the impact of viewing such programs as good and very good. Regarding the frequency of viewing almost 50 % of the respondents view such programs on either regular or occasional basis.

One critical output of the study is, of the 110 respondents which responded more than 60 % admitted of viewing the programs for curiosity or problem solving. Also, almost one-fourth of the 138 respondents felt that viewing such programs helped in the resolution of their problems. Thus rather than just for entertainment, such programs are being viewed by those who have some quest for knowledge and practical applications. In the context of constitutional ethics such approach can be further refined in the light of adoption of scientific approach and providing safeguards from the possibilities of exploitations. From the interviewees perspective various salient points could be observed such as the practices should be considered under the consumer protection act, proactive steps of putting disclaimer from the TV channels, adoption of a BBC like model for strengthening television as a medium and highlighting of the vulnerabilities of exploitation through such programs.

Media is considered a fourth pillar in the democracy and it becomes highly imperative for an important medium like television in the world's largest democracy, that it echoes the spirit of constitutional ethics in terms of broadcasting programs which encourage the development of scientific temper and ethical considerations among the viewers. The introduction of steps such as bringing the practices under protection acts and adoption of models where the TV channels are not

restricted due to financial considerations can further help in achieving this objective. Further rather than categorically denying the widespread prevalence of viewing of such programs, this scenario should be further explored as to how and why such programs are having large viewership and how the curiosity or the problem solving requirement of the audiences can be addressed in an appropriate way.

Implications, limitations and future research

This study highlighted the existing considerable viewership of pseudo scientific programs on television. This viewership is important considering that the television is most important medium in the present times in India. It also highlighted the probable fall-outs which can happen if the spirit of constitutional ethics is not upheld and the appropriate steps are not taken. The present study was primarily aimed at Marathi audiences and it considered the television as a medium for research, but future studies can also consider other important mediums such as print and social media. Some of the important observations from this study are, viewers are viewing the programs not only for entertainment but also for curiosity and problem solving, there could be a possibility of bringing such programs under protection act and building of model like BBC where a dedicated funding channel through government

can help television channels in gaining self sufficiency and reducing their dependency on other sources of revenue generation. All these areas can further be explored as a part of continuing research on media and constitutional ethics. Hence considering the existence of high viewership of pseudo scientific programs on television, which got highlighted in the study, it is important that such areas are further researched in to. This will not only improve the understanding of what viewers opine about such programs or practices, but will also help in finding approaches for directing their interest and opinions in ways which help them both in betterment of their life and in the development of scientific temper as is encouraged by the constitution of India.

References

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Appendix

Survey questions

1. Do you watch programs based on astrology or vastu shastra?
2. Please name the channel and the program
3. How such programs affect you?
4. How often do you watch such programs
5. Why do you watch such programs?
6. Did you went to any astrologer or vastu shastra expert after watching such programs?
7. Do feel that viewing such programs helped you in resolution of your problems?
