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ABSTRACT

In the Doctoral study, I look at the relationship between television and religion from an anthropological perspective. Taking the case of three media events in Gangtok, Sikkim, in recent times, I try to inquire into the ritual structure and religious significance of the broadcasts. These three televised events are: Indian Idol -3 (2007), royal wedding of Bhutan (2011) and funeral of Sathya Sai Baba (2011). Moving away from the mainstream interpretation of religion within the institutional realm, and understanding it as any numinous phenomenon, the study demonstrates how the three broadcasts displayed all essential pre-conditions of numinous: community, deep feeling, belief and ritual. The study argues that often, such attributes of numinous are functions of complicated collective struggle for identity and may result from a rich blend of political and religious rituals.

Employing the conceptual categories in anthropology like ritual and myths, and resorting to ethnographic methods, the study attempts to read the broadcasts at two levels: one at the level of audio visual narrative, and the other at the level of interpretations by audiences elicited through in-depth interviews. The study demonstrates the various forms/levels of religious interpretations a television study could provide indicating the convergence of the two and mutual reinforcement it forges. The significant role television plays in the rites of passage is also illustrated by the study. The study, among other things, also argues that television offers a profitable site for understanding of religious profanation and secularization of religion.

Few general conclusions can be drawn from the present study. First, the study concludes that viewers are able to draw religious meanings from non religious events as well. In all the three televised events under examination in the study, the ability of the viewers to negotiate and draw the meaning from the televised event was discerned. At the same time, the ability of non religious event to invigorate the religious and spiritual imagination of the audiences was demonstrated. While the case of the *Idol* was otherwise an explicitly non religious programme in the traditional sense, in the case of the funeral broadcast of Sathya Sai Baba and wedding of the Bhutanese King, explicit religious contents found reasonable space in the televisual text. However, as demonstrated in the study, across all the three broadcasts non explicit religion was elicited, both at the levels of audio visual content and their readings by viewers and is particularly displayed at the successive higher orders of analysis. Thus, the study contests Thomas and Mithchell's (2005) finding that

viewers do not draw religious meanings from non religious programmes and contents. It must however be stated that the current study does not necessarily contradict Thomas and Mitchell's findings since the latter's premise itself was centered around narrow and questionable theological connotation of religion.

Second, a significant pattern of viewing in the case of all the three events was observed. In all the three cases, collective viewing was the norm and viewers planned for the occasions in advance and adjusted their daily schedule to view the event. However depending on the occasion, the "celebration" was different. Thus in the case of the *Indian Idol*, people invited others for dinner during the show, they cheered and danced in tune with Prashant's music and enjoyed talking about the show. In the case of Sathya Sai Baba's funeral event as well, households invited others to witness it together, but in this case viewers observed fast, they "dressed up", participated in the prayer and sung *bhajans* in the same way as it was observed at Prashanti Nilayam, and did not discuss much with each other about the demise of the godman or his televised funeral. In the case of Bhutan's royal wedding, parents recorded the broadcast for the children who had missed it out and people took great pride in viewing the wedding, though discussing about it in public was avoided.

Third, the priestly role that personnel involved in televising significant events play is brought to the fore in the study. Thus, in the *Idol*, the hosts and judges collectively bound the show, maintained its continuity, helped absorb the shocks and vagaries of audiences' voting, facilitated in the integration and in the transition rituals of the rites of passage. Similarly, in the case of the funeral broadcast, the television rituals helped viewers to absorb the 'shock' and pass through the mourning process. By transforming a private mourning to a public one, the reporter united the viewers in their grief. Likewise, the reverential tone and narration by the commentators during the wedding of the Bhutanese King conveyed their submission to the occasion and added great value to the chants and rituals that television showed. .

Finally, the study emphasized the need to broaden the definition of religion from a purely theological or institutional one to a cultural one as it opens wide the analysis of televised religion or for that matter media and religion studies. The study demonstrated how anthropological reading of television helps us understand the relationship between religion and television better. In fact, using religion as a broad analytical concept informs us about the interconnections between religion and television. By employing rituals, myths and rites of passage in its programmes, television generates and facilitates the numinous. The manifestation of community, deep feeling, belief and rituals in and through television broadcast owes to these anthropological categories drawn from traditional religion. Such televised events draw our attention to what Shills (1975) calls 'sacred centres' of the society, that deals with fundamental values, beliefs and meanings of life that bind individuals together. An anthropological reading of television, as this study demonstrates, requires that both television and religion in the processes move beyond commonsense knowledge, as well as beyond the accepted common sense within their respective fields.