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### **Acts of Negotiation**

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MSc in Media and Communications (Research)

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**Dissertation submitted to the Department of Media and Communications, London School of Economics and Political Science, September 2008, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the MSc in Media and Communications (Research). Supervised by Prof. Sonia Livingstone.**

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# Acts of Negotiation

**Ranjana Das**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Moving ahead with the notion of media reception being an act of negotiation between very many resources and restraints, the paper reaches at four interlocking negotiative experiences in media interpretation in a specific instance, exploring ways in which these negotiations make reception analysis a device to explore media cultures, over time.

Selecting insights from a qualitative project with a group of urban Indian women and their negotiations of a vernacular television programme, this paper argues that interpretive practices around the media may act as resources in understanding lived media cultures in a historical frame, instead of being read 'off' their surface for findings around 'activity' 'passivity' 'pleasure' and 'resistance' which, after having been crucially central to reception studies have probably been taken to their farthest limits.

It suggests the relative advantages of the term negotiation compared to reception, reading, viewing, listening or audiencing.

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## 1. FOREWORD

Audience research has never lacked critics. While some got tired of divergent readings, others observed an endless flow of pet themes like resistance, pleasure and subversion, seeing the same themes reproduced in articles, with minor variations (e.g. Morris, 1988). Indeed, the accusations that some audience researchers misread 'power', amongst many other flaws, have not been entirely unfounded.

Deriving insights from an empirical study that made selected interpretive negotiations of a specific vernacular television text its analytical device, this paper argues that interpretive practices around the media (that straddle contextual resources and restraints) are documents of more than familiar stories of resistance, accommodation and pleasure; reception studies produces resources through which media cultures can be understood. *Every interpretive expression 'fans' out from the media a diversity of inter-textual, social, cultural referents.* Searching in these expressions for divergences in reading had once proved to be fruitful for questions around hegemonic media power, but interpretive practices are also larger resources if they speak of moments beyond the moment of textual interaction.

The empirical reflections contained in this paper derive from a multi-method study of the interpretive experiences, difficulties and challenges around a short-lived Bengali television serial *Rani Kahini* (the Tale of Rani) recounted by a group of middle class Bengali women in Calcutta, India. The fieldwork for this project was conducted in the spring of 2008 with follow up fieldwork in summer 2008 during the high points of a short-lived vernacular television programme. Ethnographically motivated, it included prolonged periods of participant observation, media re-construction and in-depth interviews while the programme was broadcast. This paper presents some findings from viewer re-constructions of the programme and interview sessions and as such does not elaborate on the entire fieldwork.

*Rani Kahini* (henceforth RK), an immensely popular television drama was marketed in West Bengal, the largely Bengali speaking state in India, by Zee Television's Bengal chapter, as the 'Struggles of a Woman', centred on the life of a young woman Rani. It is yet another of the local media system's many ephemeral programmes. Bengali television drama had started off with what were originally known as 'mega-serials' with two hugely popular serials *Janani* (Mother) and *Janmabhoomi* (Motherland) running on DD7, that is the Bengal chapter of Door-Darshan, the public service television. Constructed around discourses of the Indian struggle for

independence, corrupt landlords, rural rights and abuses and constructions of a 'glorific' mother at the service of the nation, these textures soon gave way to cable television serials, particularly at the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. A multitude of serials, built around the predominant themes of everyday struggles, city life, romances, marital difficulties, 'ordinary' themes in middle class lives, the current crop of serials are what I call in this paper, part of an 'ephemeral' genre. These, unlike the endless sagas of their counterparts in some other parts of the globe are short-lived, have tight plots that end quickly, tight difficulties and clean resolutions, and quick ups and down. They do not overtly aim for developmental discourses, primarily perhaps because they are private channel programmes. Common themes include the school-lives of children, working parents, disabled grandparents, joint versus nuclear families. Stories most often revolve around one or two central (usually middle or upper middle class) families, with three generations participating in the lived personal and professional difficulties, rivalries and challenges of Calcutta life.

When I asked around in Calcutta for any critical work that has been done around contemporary Bengali television drama, scholars most vehemently denied the possibility of somebody making such an attempt. Yet, the city continues to be the home of an art-loving public where heated debates on everything from Mozart to Tagore, Bankim to Beethoven flow from lecture-theatres into art galleries into newspaper editorials. This point is hardly novel: television drama continues to be the most popular and most reviled of all genres, and indeed as fieldwork was to show later, reviled even by those who pursue them eagerly. So why was this an interesting project? First, the programme studied, the vernacular contexts set and the viewers engaged with offered few if any academic precedents in audience studies<sup>1</sup>. Second, it was looking at a field that often hears prophetic declarations about its death, despite the fact that one cannot conceptualise mediation, imagination, culture without engaging with the lived media practices of people. Third, it was trying to expand the meaning of engaging with interpretive practices without losing the question of audience reception.

How do interpretative tasks open windows on diversely mediated histories? What high points in media memories are drawn into comparisons from a glorious past? How do viewers interpret the now against a then?

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<sup>1</sup> Exceptions prevail, but in the case of West Bengal most commonly studies of globalization and Hindi/Bollywood media and ethnographies of the domestic have been carried out, for instance Scrase (2002). A rich anthropological account of the Hindi language soap *Hum Log* and *Hello Zindagi* is documented by anthropologist Veena Das, in Miller's *Worlds Apart* (1995).

## 2. METHODOLOGY

This section only briefly outlines the methods used in the fieldwork. Instead of drawing from what is said in the literature about the method, what follows is a rationale for why the project was designed the way it was. The multi-method fieldwork for the project was conducted in with eleven participants across five households the spring of 2008, (following a pilot project in March 2008), and follow up fieldwork was carried out in summer 2008. This paper however draws on narrative analysis of RK, seven in-depth interviews conducted in March-April 2008, the third of which was followed by an exercise of media reconstruction. Media re-construction exercises were conducted with all participants in April 2008. Participant observation was conducted over a period of four weeks in all five households. A fortnight of follow up participant observation was conducted in July 2008. Participants were selected by snowballing. Care was taken to ensure that the lives of most of the participants touched upon the lives of some of the others. A diversity of age, socio-economic class (SEC), professional status, marital status, was worked out. Interviewee profiles, the topic guide, sample transcripts etc are available in the appendices. All interviews and re-telling sessions were recorded with participant permission. Interviews were fully transcribed, though re-telling sessions were selectively transcribed (some re constructions were written by the participants) and all names changed.

**Interview Schedule:** The schedule was organized in three sequential sections spanning 10 themes. The first section dealt with 1) Family 2) Educational Experiences 3) Media Habits. The second session focused on the interpretation of the programme Rani Kahini and had the following four themes: 1) Plot 2) Characters 3) Empathy 4) Narrative Corrections. The third session dealt with vernacular television programmes in general and focused on 1) Comparative Media Analysis 2) Media Memories.

**Media Re-Construction:** Using structural precedents from Livingstone (1991) reconstructions of *Rani Kahini* were invited. However these were not designed as re-tellings of specific episodes. Instead viewers were invited to retell the 600 episode-long narrative as a story.

**Participant Observation<sup>2</sup>:** The researcher lived with two of the five households for extended periods of time, watching television in joint family households, cramped living rooms and private bedrooms. The other households were visited regularly and participants spent time with the researcher even outside viewing situations. The last week of April was spent in recording **text-in-action** sessions while watching episodes from Monday through Friday.

The analysis presented in this paper focuses keenly on the media re-construction sessions and interviews and does not concentrate directly on the ethnographic component though undoubtedly it feeds through.

**Research Design: On Suitability, Problems and Justification:** This paper draws on selected quotations from interview and media-reconstruction sessions. A qualitative mode of enquiry was the automatic choice for this project as the research question itself defined the method. The three-fold approach adopted is in line with the reception-consumption frame this project carried with: the re-telling sessions along with Stage 2 of the interviews were designed to focus closely on textual interpretation, while the participant observation sessions and stages 1 and 2 of the interviews were to move away from and beyond a particular media text. The participant observation component in the project opens it up to the question of whether this claims to be a 'genuine' media ethnography. It does not, primarily because its researcher is not an anthropologist. It scavenges across 'borrowed' fields, deriving insights from often opposed traditions to piece together a framework that would help it answer the question it chalked out for itself.

Methodological purity does not remain the war cry in that journey. For instance, media-reconstruction was an element borrowed from social psychological approaches to communication, which would help provide some of the links I was looking for; while participant observation was a component borrowed from audience ethnographies without which the rest of the project would never be able to move beyond an intersectional moment. Critics of such methodological 'hybridity' may be many, arguing for the incompatibility of disciplines, divides, traditions, paradigms and many other things, method being only the surface articulation of deeper commitments.

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<sup>2</sup> Though the fieldwork had a strong ethnographic component, detailed comments on the role of the researcher, self-reflexivity are aspects that are left out of the current paper because of the specific focus that is adopted for this paper.

Speaking self-reflexively, the territory was in the uncomfortable zones of the familiar that was gradually moving into unfamiliarity. As a person who had grown up in a fan sub-culture, where the rhythms of evening home life were articulated around the remote control, 'being a fan' was something I was personally familiar with. I was entering the same space, this time as an analyst. Many vocabularies had shifted into separate registers even in familiar relationships where 'foreign' life had left marks apparently, on my changed attire and surprisingly enough changed way of speaking. These issues needed negotiations as those being interviewed were not random samples, but in the particular case of this project, snow-balled and often familiar faces.

### 3. AUDIENCES: AFTER ACTIVITY AND PASSIVITY

In 1998, Sonia Livingstone had found audience research at a crossroads. Many, though not all, had left the field after a fantastic project or two, critiques had accumulated, method had become a battleground, and purpose was keenly debated. Today, ten years later, where does the field stand as it looks back at the crossroads? Taking cues from three interlocking emergent (sub)fields in global media and communication studies that have expanded in the last decade, media anthropology, internet research, and mediation studies, one may argue that the *audience* has survived, albeit with many names and much repackaging, and probably all debates are still intact!

In this frame I have three tasks, the third of which is most directly specific to the current project, while the others provide the backdrop:

- In the first section- I begin with a few comments on two recent themes in the field of audience studies- the quest for models and the quest for global expansions- because in many ways these issues feed through the paper- first, the current project explores four interlocking frames of negotiation which are **not** to be mistaken for a model; second, the resources this project draws on, relies at many points on a comparative/trans-national frame.
- Next, to highlight the central approach used in this project: a reception-consumption frame, I draw together audience scholarship from a trans-national arena that informs my current project, throwing light on a possible divide that runs through the field.
- In the third section- I focus specifically on scholarship generated globally, over the last three decades, around the forms of television drama, its reception and consumption.

### DEBATES

One may wonder if there is at all something called audience theory (see Livingstone, 1998). Scholars widely experienced, have produced ambitious meta-theoretical accounts which have been torn down by their equally experienced colleagues as teleological and sometimes just bad (Barker, 2006; also see Morley, 2006)<sup>3</sup>. Scholars continue to be in disagreement in their intellectual positions on the past (see for instance the divergent positions on the centrality of

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<sup>3</sup> While writing this I was acutely conscious of Martin Barker's worry about students who "try out" audience research for dissertations and then proceed to write "about" audiences (Barker, 2006).

Encoding/Decoding<sup>4</sup> in the historiography of the field), their subtly and not-so-subtly selective reconstructions of histories, their takes on the global, transnational future, their selection of research priorities and their positions on different sides of many divides. Most importantly, critiques both external and internal have been fierce, well-researched and often interestingly, prophetic. There have also been scholars who have repeatedly drawn attention to answering the accumulated body of critiques (e.g. Livingstone, 1998) or to the crucial fact that (most of) the empirical accounts have largely been generated from Western industrialized societies, majorities and mainstreams though in this decade this concern is being addressed using diverse entries (see Abu Lughod, 1997; Mankekar, 1999 (anthropology) ; Sood, 2004 (social psychology); Kim, 2005 (ethnography); Valdivia, 2004 (participant observation and interviews).

Over the last two decades, audiences have developed as constructs for which adjectives have freely flowed. Terminologically challenged, theoretically fraught it has been a *fugitive* (Bratich, 1998). Radical contextualism (Radway, 1988) perhaps produced the *discursive* construct (Alasutaari, 2000) and the very relational (and by extension unequal) nature of interactive interpretation, produced the *relational* construct (Livingstone, 1998). Audiences are no longer what they were (Nightingale 2004). Over time, methodological insights (derived from ethnography particularly) have gained well-deserved primacy, often assuming ethnography is the only way to take audience research forward; others from psychology, quantitative research, other qualitative methods, gratifications, social-psychology are perhaps elbowed out.

### ***Modelling Answers to the Audience Question***

The years 2006 and 2007 saw the journal *Communication Review (CR)* carry two much needed issues where four scholars debated the future of the field of audience studies. *CR* is probably the only journal in the field to have devoted this kind of attention to the field in recent times, therefore a focus on these pieces is perhaps legitimate. Implicit in most of these accounts was dissatisfaction with the way audience studies has been moving, yet the paths offered as solutions to the dissatisfaction seem indistinct. In the 2006 issue of *CR*, much dissatisfaction seemed to stem from the accumulation of empirical accounts which have not been adding much to theory (Morley, 2006). This is surprising because the value of empirical research, particularly

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<sup>4</sup> This debate is interesting. One may draw attention to Livingstone's observation that an adoption of the text-reader metaphor may have made the textual dissociations of audience studies much more difficult (Livingstone, 1998). Opinions differ as David Morley, Perti Alasutaari amongst others stress on the centrality of the 1981 text (See the *CR* 2006 Barker-Morley exchange).

in an area where fieldwork has largely been restricted to a handful of (mainly) English speaking industrialised societies, cannot be overstated if one is indeed to reach a body of work which can successfully internationalize itself without being universalistic. But perhaps the dilemma/impasse Morris (1988) had identified two decades ago, resulted from a "frustration with our lack of ability to speak both in a cohesive manner to one another [...] and also to those in different fields apart from audience study, who might not share either our political or methodological predispositions" (Press, 2006: 97)

Yet another move had been to call for 'testable' generalizations (Barker, 2006: 127) and interesting models for conceptualizing reception were offered in the 2007 issue of *CR* (Michelle, 2007). As the editor commented, one wonders if these efforts to construct models really converse with issues of politics, purpose and power that are central to understanding mediated experiences of cultures which are enmeshed in specific contexts of political-economy, market structures, local-regional regulatory frameworks and many other concerns. In other words perhaps "this is the true limit of the notion of a "model," which may never be able to engage the political dimension of our field" (Press, 2007: 180).

### ***To 'start with the global': The trans-spatial?***

This project, like all single sited projects, probably resembles a miniscule part of Sreberny's 'patch' (Sreberny, 2008: 18), and at many instances draws on and compares with observations from a global arena. It is also located at a moment of academic talk around comparative research, cross-national studies, translocalism (see Kraidy and Murphy, 2008) and other 'broad' frames. When scholars of comparative media research call for cross-spatial frames in media research or when they assert that the better part of findings and research have been restricted to a handful of societies (Curran and Park, 2000; also see Parameswaran, 2004) and linguistically dominated by accounts available only in English (see Panel Introduction by Livingstone and Drotner, 2008, ICA, Montreal), the agenda is perhaps not to reach a framework that draws out models or answers, but to complete an "analytical quilt" (Sreberny, 2008: 19) that must avoid the dual trap of either despairing at differences (implicitly assuming a single 'standard' which is usually one's own culture), or resorting to the anthropologist's cultural relativism; for audience research is indeed a field that had set out with (but sometimes lost) the implicit promise of addressing difference, inequality, power and politics (of media, culture and research) as it engaged with *people*.

In that journey, the agenda for audience research should not be to *test out* theories outside of contexts of origin for that beats the very purpose of inter/trans-nationalization, but, as Livingstone (2007) says for the new media, to start with the global not perhaps for an individual project but across the academy. But what would a transnational analytical quilt look like? This paper presents findings from a small empirical study in a specific context and does not pretend for a moment that it will present a 'deep' study. How would one define the deep analytical patches? Should one compare countries, 'regions' or scapes (see Rantanen's interview of Appadurai, 2008)? The jury is still out.

## **A SPLIT**

Radical contextualism offered by Janice Radway (1988) twenty years ago, held two prospects. One was the promise of contextual richness which is till today being interestingly adopted by many audience ethnographers leading to thick accounts of cultural reception in everyday life. The other as Ang put it, in different words, was a feeling of endlessness in this journey (Ang, 1991, paraphrased from p. 90). At another end, some scholars of reception studies have recently called for models in the field in attempts to make sense of the range of findings around divergences in reading. However, perhaps in both these moves one may discern the oscillation that seems to have characterized approaches to audiences.

I draw attention to two strands of research with media audiences and interpreters globally, one relatively recent (though with a substantially crucial 'past') and the other located in a lesser discussed side of the eighties, both of which provide the conceptual and methodological tools used in this project.

### ***'The Audience in Everyday Life'***

Over the last decade or so, the stream of global media anthropology has provided contextually rich accounts of media narratives in everyday lives, thickly described, interpreted and understood in the complex fabrics of culture and its politics. Moving away from the centrality of Anglo-American cultural studies in writing about audiences (undoubtedly fundamental though the interventions of the Birmingham School were at a particular historical moment), recent ethnographic attempts into understanding audiences have provided perhaps the richest accounts of the cultures of consumption before and after television in global contexts.

Lila Abu Lughod's study in upper Egyptian villages where she provides a Geertzian 'thick' understanding of the narratives of women and nation is a good instance of a thick ethnography that deeply contextualises the role of television in the lives around its screen (Lughod, 1997). The interplay of politics, religion, gender, Nation and culture is evident in Purnima Mankekar's (1999) rich ethnographic account of women watching public service television in North India. Divya McMillin's ethnographic research with indigenous vernacular television reception from Karnataka, India, combines political economy with cultural studies approaches and is one of few vernacular audience reception studies from the country. (McMillin, 2002). Cross-cultural media encounters have been studied (Ang, 1985; Juluri, 2000; Kim, 2005; Liebes and Katz, 1990; Puri, Parameswaran, 2004) providing accounts of not just media consumption but also comments on the relations of globalization and its attendant power relations, understanding agency as well as structure, resources as well as restraints. Scholars studying Latina/o audiences provide accounts of ethnic audiences, 'mainstream' media and identity production (Valdivia, 2004) and much work continues around diasporic audiences<sup>5</sup>. Mirca Madianou's detailed ethnography with the reception of news in Greece (Madianou, 2005) is one of the recent media anthropologies that worked around news consumption.

Extending backwards in time one reaches the cultural studies projects conducted by the Birmingham School as well as sociological and cultural research conducted in the American academy; exemplified by David Morley, Andrea Press, Joke Hermes, Elizabeth Bird, James Lull, Mary Brown amongst others. While cultural axes have been intersected and complicated since then, in the late 80s and early 90s scholars such as Andrea Press (1992) had demonstrated findings at the intersects of social class, age and gender in American television experiences. Speaking in terms of the richness of ethnography Sherry Ortner (1995) correctly points out, an ethnographic denial leads to problematic acontextualism. Within media and communication research this stream itself has hardly been a unified 'stream' and much debate continues on what qualifies as real ethnography or even a well-done ethnography and one may ask by extension, in an interdisciplinary field like media and communication studies, who 'calls' in matters of the methodological 'genuineness' of 'borrowed' (?) methods.

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<sup>5</sup> For an insightful commentary on diasporic audiences and media consumption see Dayan, D (1998).

***'The Resourceful Reader'***

In literature reviews, perhaps a bit too often one loses sight of a focus on interpretive practices. Critiqued scathingly as the 'social psychological bias' ( e.g. Ang, 1991), open to the endless critique often reserved for (an occasional use of) quantitative methods, twenty years after the particular historical moment in Western media studies where this research had made its contributions, one may successfully draw from it, its focus on interpretive engagement, implicit in which may now be the recognition that audience research has its real challenges not in discovering attentive, critical, subversive readings but in analyzing why (and one may add *how*) people make sense of the media the way they do (Livingstone, 1998), what cultures this paints, what histories this tells and what stories this documents. Structured programmes, a focus on their representational aspects, textual lyrics, reading as an interpretive and interactive activity are concepts that were highlighted in the works of Sonia Livingstone, Tamar Liebes and Elihu Katz.

Livingstone, Liebes and Katz<sup>6</sup> had endeavoured to locate reading as an interpretive activity where audiences must negotiate the resources which surround them, where the media formed a part of social 'reality', where social knowledge was crucial, where 'life' was a text. Interestingly, today the intersecting fields of communication and cultural studies (setting aside for a moment that cultural studies may not like to be called a 'field') hears a lot of rich conversation around questions of interpretive practices in everyday life and culture; reception studies had long ago interacted with interpretation providing us some very deep vocabularies. At that particular historical juncture this work that had located 'viewers' work', without over-carrying 'activity' and 'resistance' solely on the basis of multiple readings of texts, the political contributions of this moment were in placing a finger on questions of media power without falling into the trap of claiming limitless resistance. Contrary to associations of interpretation with individualistic accounts of media use, Liebes and Katz's study for instance had located readings in context, in community relations and the referencing, appropriating, dismissing of (un)familiar media was accounted for keeping in the picture a variety of cultural referents<sup>7</sup>. Stepping away from the apathy of much audience research for understanding media effects, mention must also be made of the studies in the same decade by Arvind Singhal (1988) on the pro-social impacts of the very first Indian television serial Hum Log. In recent times,

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<sup>6</sup> A selected list of these articles and/or books can be found in the bibliography.

<sup>7</sup> For a recent critique of this project as well as Gillespie's project see Harindranath, 2007.

developments in entertainment education have seen Suruchi Sood (2004) work out possibilities for health communication using para-social interaction between audiences and daytime radio soaps in India.<sup>8</sup>

### ***Eco and a Double Metaphor of Readers and Texts***

So, we have the media as object, to be understood contextually. What about the media as text? Or the other way around? Asking around in literary and cultural studies, the word 'reception', or 'text-reader' now often generates discomfort. Indeed some argue that text-reader centrism has impeded (e.g. Madianou, 2005) progress. There are some understandable reasons. The text in its restrictive conceptualizations first of all is perhaps misleading. However, returning to Umberto Eco, one may see some ignored roots. Umberto Eco (1994) had played with a double metaphor of the reader and the text. He sees the world as a text and a text as a world both of which have daunting histories. Critiques of text and readers have been intimidating. Interpretation as an act is not reserved only for texts but for 'everything' else as well. Incidentally, this is quite explicit in Eco's (1994) articulation of the 'world as a text' as well as in Livingstone's (1998) view of 'life as a text', where one is always an interpreter. In terms of media texts, recent developments in mediation theory add to that precisely: no discourses are free of the media in some form or the other in the mediation of 'everything' (Livingstone, in preparation). The previously acquired concepts of intertextual texts and intertextual readers are well articulated in mediation theory and as such one would be naïve today to see the word 'text' in a contextually dissociated framework. Differences between 'inter-textual' resources as those that play with concepts from other media texts and 'extra-textual' ones as those that derive from the discourses beyond television/the media (see White, 1992); categorizations of overlapping strategies of intertextuality in television drama namely parodic allusion, creative appropriation, and self-reflexive reference (see Ott and Walter, 2000) have been proposed but one is left wondering how if ever at all, one can fluidly and fluently delineate these lines.

The relative absence of textual studies in audience research has been one of the main critiques of the field in that it often went overboard in its celebration of polysemy (e.g. Condit, 1998). The task of the media audience researcher is daunting. They must inquire into the circumstances that produce media messages (which means an undeniable connection with political-economy at various levels), the circumstances that make possible a particular kind of

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<sup>8</sup> See Sood's work with Tinka Tinka Sukh (Sood, 2004)

circulation (which makes it imperative to account for the power of brands, trans-territorial media systems, global/local/regional media power), the resources that media users bring to the media (which must take into account cultural as well as social-psychological factors), the dynamic ways in which activations happen (e.g. Iser, 1980), in a world where one is always an audience, to be conceptualised relationally in multiple spaces, surrounded by media cues.

Interpretative practices, or rather cultures of reading once set in such a context is but the first step in a cumulative process which must be interdisciplinary and multi methodological. As those hopeful of negotiations/interactions if not convergence between varied approaches continue, sceptics remain focused however on the incompatibility of paradigms, (in)disciplines and fields (or not), and a range of ambivalences prevail : social science 'versus' cultural studies, 'empirical' versus cultural, 'qualitative' versus 'quantitative', etic/emic issues and lots more (e.g. Ang, 1991)

### **TELEVISION DRAMA IN A GLOBAL FRAME: A BRIEF REVIEW**

Shunned by the scholars of 'high' art, television drama has received attention from media and communication scholars and anthropologists across the globe over the last three decades who have studied its genre patterns, representational issues, audience reception and consumption. Constraints of space prevent discussions of important cross-cultural studies, and this unwillingly fast-paced and highly selective review, selects studies from four different media systems and cultures, each of which have followed different methodological entry points into their projects. It draws from *McAnany and La Pastina's* comprehensive commentary on the audiences of Latin American Telenovelas (a multi-methodological approach), *Abu Lughod's* work with Egyptian television drama (an anthropological approach), *Andrea Press's* work with the viewers of American television Drama (qualitative-sociological approach) and *Sonia Livingstone's* work with British soap operas (a social-psychological approach) . Later, in the analysis, I draw on (and diverge from) *Tania Modleski's* textual studies of the genre (Modleski, 1979) to read some of the genre features of Bengali television drama in contemporary times.

While McAnany and La Pastina's review of audience research around telenovelas demonstrates the utility of triangulated approaches adopted by a field for studying engagement with a popular genre, in their methodological critique of audience research with telenovelas they identify a problem with issues of generalizability in the social scientific sense, the lack of significant socio demographic variables, the lack of a proper definition of what qualifies as

ethnography and a seeming lack of justification in the employment of methods of life history for the study of audiences (McAnany and La Pastina, 1994). Genre analysis has revealed the genre's thematic playing with national and social discourses, centring both around issues of development, health, corruption, gender, homosexuality, its continuously morphing form with a focus on melodrama (e.g. Barbero and Munoz, 1992), family life (e.g. Barrios, 1988), 'morality' and an urge for financial independence for women, themes like 'gender equality' and so on (see Hamburger, 2001). This is a form that travels across Latin America and occupies dominant prime time slots. Audience involvement with the genre has been demonstrated to be strongly dependent on variables such as class, gender, professional accomplishments, and recent works include a focus on audience reception and gendered readings amongst other concerns (e.g. La Pastina, 2001, 2004) and a focus on Brazilian mini series (e.g. Rondon, 2005).

Anthropologist Lila Abu Lughod's long association with Egyptian television as a national form revealed the complexities of 'nationhood' and attendant developmental discourses in Egypt, the cultures of consumption 'after' television and the surprising roles television plays in peoples' lives, offering not a fantastic 'escape' from reality but representing a world by itself, a part of yet, yet not an overwhelming presence in daily lives (Lughod, 1997). Lughod's findings defy the possibility of making assumptions of audience reception from the study of a text, as rural women in Egypt hardly identify with or even recognize the rich and 'good' orientation of the lives of central characters of 'Hilmiyya Nights' and instead show a greater appreciation for 'aberrant' or 'morally deviant' characters. In 'Dramas of Nationhood' (2004), she concludes with an interesting focus on the real-life people who are stars on screen, with the ethnographer's recognition of the fact that if she herself has entered for analyses and not as a fan, the role of stars in the lives of fan sub-cultures must be supreme.

In Andrea Press's work with the viewing of American television drama amongst women from diverse backgrounds, audience reception opened out 'windows' on culture (Press, 1992). Press identified pre-feminist and post-feminist programmes amongst the multitude of television programmes that were referred to, and the reception of these texts had significant associations with women's experiences of class and age in American society. In her work with the reception of 'Dynasty' Press (1990) notices differing strategies of recognition, identification, subversion and pleasure amongst women from middle and working class backgrounds, a theme that runs through Kim's recent work in Korea (Kim, 2005). Press's working class women were not found to aspire for or idealize the Dynasty standards of life.

Sonia Livingstone's approach to the study of television audience reception started from the intersectional location of social psychology and communication studies offering her interdisciplinary inroads. In 'Making Sense of Television' (1998), she draws attention not to what audiences read of the media but crucially to 'why' they make sense of the media the way they do, the centrality of social knowledge and the opening out of the study of 'texts' to life as a text. She stresses that reception is essentially a *position of negotiation*, and visual imagery, textual representation of stereotypes, dominance and dependence (Livingstone and Liebes, 1995) must be accounted for as researchers explore the socio-cultural dynamics of reception. In 1988 she speaks of the interplays of realism and fantasy in the ability to participate in a *common* culture. Ten years later, in her use of the term *relational* construct (1998) she complicates this 'commonness' and ten years after that, in 2008, while carrying interpretive vocabularies to new media literacy, she takes with her the relational construct- while retaining a focus on the collective nature of interpretive practices, she stresses upon the relations of power and inequality in these collectivities which make "communities (of practice) fundamentally unequal" (Livingstone, transcribed from talk on Media Literacy, 2008)<sup>9</sup>.

## **MEDIATION AND THE EXPANDING MEANING OF NEGOTIATION**

Recent work with audiences shows shifts in vocabulary that move 'towards' many kinds of conceptual expansions. One instance: Mirca Madianou's *Mediating the Nation* for example chooses a chapter title with audiences, texts and contexts that moves 'towards' a theory of mediation. This is perhaps a sign for audience studies to take note of so that it may fruitfully participate in such shifts. Specific moments of reading have been conceptualised as acts of negotiation between texts and readers, generating vocabularies with which to productively comprehend the location of meaning at the text-reader intersect. Likewise, insights have flowed from rich studies of media consumption in everyday lives. In an increasingly visible shift of focus away from the media (and its texts) as a detached entity, towards processes of mediation, it is necessary to broaden the meaning and nature of negotiations. It is therefore imperative to treat interpretive activities of people around the media, as sites that may accommodate the vocabularies generated about textual meaning making, as well as the scavenging across discourses (Radway, 1988) talked about in audience ethnographies.

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<sup>9</sup> This expression was taken from Sonia Livingstone's talk on Media Literacy, 2008

This project is a micro-study of specific people, around a specific media text within their everyday lives. The analysis, after attempting a reading of narrative closure in the text, moves into details about every person's domestic, professional and social situations and refrains from categorizing these people according to any particular axis (class, age and so on), instead it takes up a thematic structure of understanding negotiations. The aim is to reveal how interpretation of specific media texts acts as resources into lived histories and media cultures. At best the account is indicative, it does not imagine any possibility of generalization.

The quotations selected for one negotiative experience therefore may easily have been selected for another. These are not discrete modes. They have less to do with positioning people in relation to the text (as critical, resistant or so on) but more to identify ways in which the interpretation of interpretive practices may be useful as we move into empirical studies of media cultures and indeed mediation. The analysis follows three stages: providing incomplete threads from peoples' lives, offering some comments on closure levels in RK and then brief accounts of four interlocking negotiative experiences.

#### **4. ANALYSIS**

Most women who participated in this project were middle aged and elderly urban women, belonging to middle and upper middle classes. Some belonged to the working class and travelled daily from suburbs to the heart of Calcutta city. All these women have been devoted followers of vernacular programming and vernacular literature and music. Amongst the middle class, the national language Hindi, was often considered a cultural imposition from the centre and in the course of fieldwork there were strong 'differences' that were continuously spoken of in Hindi language programming (and North Indian 'business' culture) and Bengali programming (an 'intellectual' culture). 'Their' on-screen clothes, jewellery, displays of wealth, as identified in 'national' programming were contrasted with vernacular television drama in Bengal which spoke of 'small families, 'intimate relations', 'homely ambiances', 'absence of vulgar throwing around of wealth', 'interiors that look like middle class people live there'. On the other hand, participants who worked as domestic helps or nurses, who were one may presume in any case excluded from the Bengali highbrow intellectual 'culture-scape', identified a contrast between vernacular television drama and 'reality'. Most expressed a greater affinity for the fantastically rich lifestyles and palatial sets on the exotically designed Hindi serials. 'Realism' emerged to be a complex concept which was differentially central to the reception of television drama.

#### **PEDAGOGY, PURPOSE AND PEOPLE**

The pedagogic researcher that Ien Ang (1991) had scathingly critiqued had entered the project, armed to critique her previous generation for finding 'pleasure' in watching stereotypes and ideals, with the researcher's readings of woman-nation discourses. In *Reading the Romance*, Radway (1984) had been implicitly wondering how 'they' would never realise the stereotyping that romance novels constructed, why 'they' would perhaps not revolt. Undoubtedly, 'motifs' are constructed and sustained in vernacular media cultures; one cannot help asking if the woman who is not a mother, or the woman who walks out of a marriage will ever be the woman that *Rani Kahini* and other programmes 'encode' as the woman they eulogize.

***Class, Relationships, Nostalgia, Economics, Age and Disability in the 'serial' experience***

In the next few sentences, I refrain from 'categorizing' my participants according to any of the social axes mentioned above; the account shows how axes interlock and as such, negotiations will have to be grasped the same way. At times though, in the current project, as in many studies before mine (see Press, 1992 and Kim 2005), age and class emerge as the most useful constructs.

Monica, a middle class widow of 86, and the witness of two decades of domestic disturbances and broken relationships amongst her children, says "*Rani is like a daughter, you see, she can adjust with all troubles, and keep herself so happy*". In Rani's search for her long lost husband, the close ups, shot-counter shots of a traditional symbol of marriage, the red *bindi* on her forehead, the tight screen arrangements with an entire family calling Rani their 'Ma', (all motifs that can be critiqued strongly with feminist fervour), Monica recognizes elements from her past. Monica recounts her yearnings for marriage more than half a century ago, she talks of her joys in seeing to it that her daughter's dresses she hand-embroidered looked 'as good as the ones they show on TV'.

Seema, an upper class elite, the sole occupant of a palatial house, a middle aged teacher of Bengali literature, fills up her "*house with voices*" when she switches on her television. She is a single mother, and had walked out of her marriage with an infant. She despises her 'lack of taste' in sitting in an empty sprawling bedroom '*almost mindlessly*' to switch on to '*trash*'. Her dreams are of a certain high culture, where 'stars' of Bengali culture and literature would script feminist plays, organize classical music concerts, and yet Seema, cannot help but wonder how she "*as a woman of today, can ever watch this trash*". Repeatedly, encounters with the 'low', bother her search for why she has herself consciously shunned the 'high'.

Seema's domestic help, the young Basanti, travels on a crowded local train from the suburb of Canning, copes with poverty, and cooks seven course meals for her employer, and they watch *RK* together. Worlds collide for Basanti, she is Seema's 'other', the architecture of Rani's house, the interiors of her employer's bedroom 'belong' to a world where she spends most of her day, where she gazes at 'them' on screen and tells me with a little laugh, before leaving to catch the 8.45 local train back home "*I'm off. Life doesn't move with all this, does it?*". Seema remarks

after a while "*They are all like that. You mustn't mind. Poverty makes these people lose all sense of politeness*".

Mini, a middle class home-maker, Seema's sister, judges her. Mini's family is 'stable'. Her daughter Ritika who (I was reminded repeatedly) is pursuing her PhD in social work rebukes her during vacations for being "*caught up in the tragic grind of anti-feminist programmes*". Mini loves Rani, for her capacities to "*hold families together, to stick to her rights, to never give up even in the face of fire*". Rani is her role model, she says.

Malini, a middle class, middle aged teacher, is coping with a difficult marriage. She teaches a foreign language in Calcutta, is financially semi-dependent on her husband, struggles with a difficult domestic situation, and sticks to it "*for the children*". An ambiguous follower of Rani, she compared herself most often with Rani's position in life.

Monica's daughter Rima, is patient and loving as the senile and partially disabled Monica slowly and painstakingly re-tells the very same episodes to her each night, night after night as they eat together after a long day. In a family of two, a widowed Monica who disapproves of late nights, and a single Rima whose office keeps her working till late at night, bond around the re-tellings of *Rani Kahini*. Rima understands senility, she appreciates the fact that her mother will patiently weave her own stories, her own readings into the 'real' episode, make up conclusions to cover up for senility; and then, the next day, Rima, who hates "*the fancy rubbish they show about 'ideal' women with jarring music, trashy lighting gimmicks and old fashioned motifs*" will turn on the television in the cramped dining space, and catch up on what "*really happened*". Monica will not know.

Contrary to many (often male/ 'educated'/ 'liberal') voices, in Bengali newspapers, living rooms, social gatherings where 'serials' are equated with trash, where young urban men and women comment sarcastically on "*mothers and aunts who live in dream worlds*", relationships are mediated around the vernacular soap screen. Generations connected as the fieldwork was completed, classes were othered, gender emerged such that "Bengali mothers and aunts" became a laughably juvenile, universalistic term. Relationship difficulties, memories, struggles, pleasures were enacted around the screen. As *Rani Kahini* drew to an end during the follow up fieldwork, and Rani was diagnosed with a terminal illness, every woman who participated shed tears, most wrote to me in summer asking me to "*write that part*" in the paper. Monica asked me to "*keep Rani alive*".

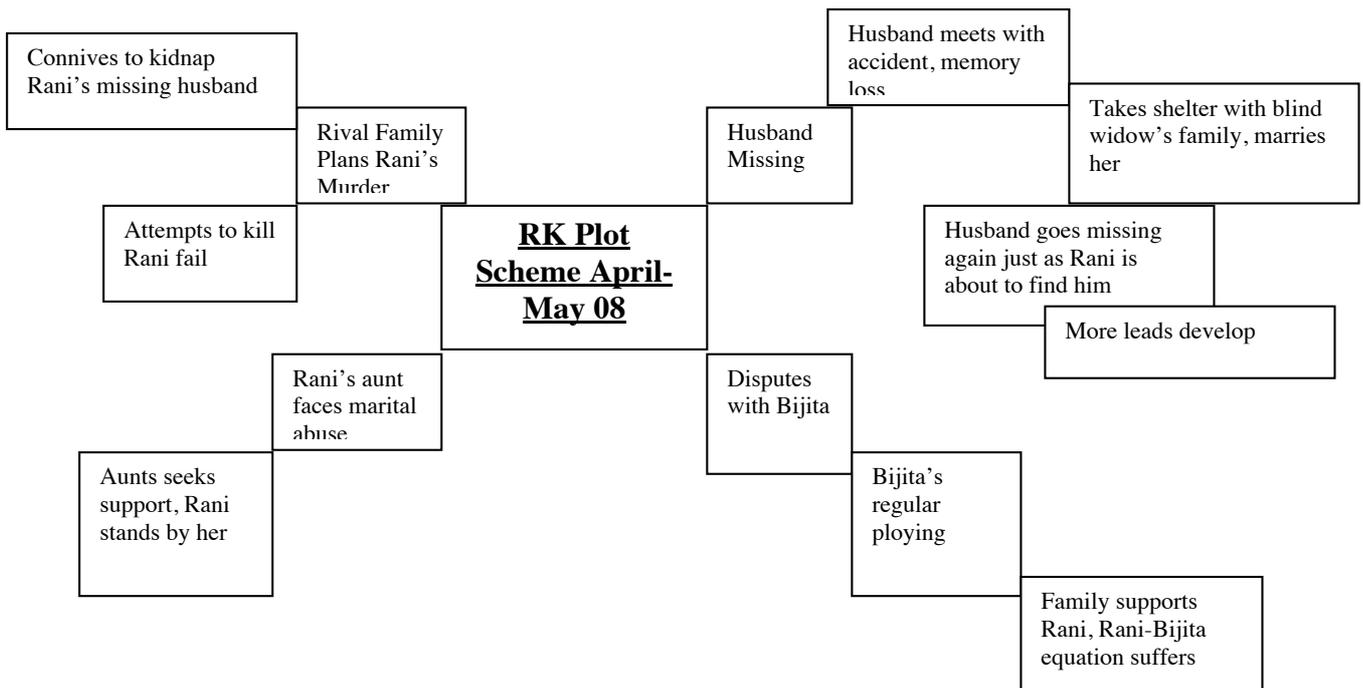
**RK: Brief Comments on Closure**

Space constraints prevent a detailed narrative analysis of RK, and only indicative comments are provided:

*A fistful of sunlight, a light breeze..  
 Lots of desires, some tiny gains..  
 Things break...re- build...they come and go..  
 Such is life...in black and white..  
 We live on...in darkness and in light....  
 Days keep changing...we weave stories...  
 Smiles and tears...and lots of dreams...  
 The heart's dreams are here to stay...  
 Listen to such a story today...  
 The story of Rani (Refrain)*

Theme Song, (RK): translated from Bengali by the researcher

At the time of fieldwork RK was running with 15 central and around 11 secondary characters. In summer, when the protagonist Rani was diagnosed with a terminal illness, many old plots had been resolved, new dilemmas had opened up and new characters introduced. The following sketch maps out some of the simultaneous plots that were running in RK at the time of fieldwork. In addition, I provide a listing of sub-plots that have occupied the earlier episodes; together they provide a picture of the thematic concerns of the programme that revolves around the travails and victories of Rani, a young upper middle class Bengali woman.



***Selected sub plots from earlier periods***

Selected Earlier Travails	Results of sub plots
Mother dies at child-birth, mother's real identity not revealed to Rani	Brought up by a grandfather who serves on the estates of a rich man, the youngest son of whom becomes Rani's boyfriend
Unwanted Pregnancy and Abandonment by Boyfriend	Struggles through pregnancy and ultimately marries ex boyfriend's elder brother, 'vertical mobility' into a rich, upper class family
Faced with a conniving sister in law, and an adoring nephew	Ongoing struggle, supportive family (recurrent theme)
Husband suffers road accident on the day Rani gives birth	Husband Missing plot begins
Son Kidnapped	Rescued
Rival business family plans Rani's death	Fails
Sister in law's son poisoned by rivals, Rani blamed, goes to jail	Resolved, united with all

***RK: Closure Levels***

The narrative was not analysed in detail for the current project and only indicative comments are provided. The title is 'Rani Kahini', where the word Rani (the protagonist's name) means 'Queen', and Kahini means 'story'; together Rani-Kahini and by extension XYZ-Kahini, is a terminological form derived from religious/mythical narratives in the vernacular. The sub-title says 'The Struggles of a Woman'. In this brief section, I offer some possible areas where thematic and structural closure may be identified in RK, and by extension many of its current vernacular counterparts, though there are programmes which operate without a central protagonist (e.g. Ei Ghor Ei Songshar [This Household, This Family], or Erao Shotru [Even they are Enemies]):

1. The RK story revolves around a central protagonist, all incidents in the narrative have a direct bearing on her life, she features in all sub plots, directly or indirectly. Like many myths in Bengal, this television serial is the story of one person, organized around who are everyday and not-so-everyday troubles and travails. There is therefore, a central protagonist, around who the narrative may be said to close in, by itself not offering alternative 'centrality'. (This is complicated in its interpretation, which I elaborate later)
2. The organization of the good and the bad in terms of characters are all dependent on their disposition towards Rani. What qualifies as safe, good,

helpful behaviour has a pre-decided textual flow leaving little room (explicitly) for multiple interpretations

3. The genre by nature being ephemeral, has discrete plot structures, very often to do with similar characters, yet the problems and their solutions do not often spill onto the next issues, though there are links in between as well as recurrent themes. Some problems, such as ongoing interpersonal politics are ongoing.
4. Characters do not have ambiguity built into them, the good ones and the bad ones are always painted without rises and falls in their natures. The exception is probably one of the central 'villains', the protagonist's sister-in-law Bijita, who is very rarely shown to display sensitivity.

This does not go to say that the narrative is completely closed, though these are distinctly visible concepts that separate the structure of RK from the openness identified in many of its counterparts across the globe. Livingstone, in her narrative analysis for British soap operas, for instance points out that the British genre provides "relatively open texts, and thus can be expected to provide a substantial role for the viewer, in that there is no single hero figure, no single perspective expressed, no discrete boundaries to the narrative" (Livingstone, 1998, p. 63). In the analysis of the current project however, despite 'closure' at many levels, negotiations reveal rich interpretive roles of the viewer as they scavenge from and weave together social and cultural discourses in their interpretive activities.

## **NEGOTIATIONS IN INTERPRETATION**

In this section I analyse a part of my fieldwork, organizing it under four interlocking categories (Associative Negotiations, Comparative Negotiations, Negotiations in Anticipation and Alternative Negotiations). These experiences are definitely not to be viewed as separate 'MODES' as viewers shift ambiguously between and within such 'modes' and it is not my intention to suggest a typology or model of any kind at all<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> The analysis could proceed in very different ways, for instance with brief explanations and more quotations across the participants.

***Associative Negotiations: Viewing as a Battle of Conflicting References***

Look at how Rani managed to hold herself together today, all alone with the police grilling her...terrible travails....almost everybody plotted against her (long pause) the police didn't believe her, her brother-in-law connived against her, and her husband is missing (long pause)...I could have walked out long ago, Rook (name of son) was little, and his dad was away and my mother-in-law horrid (brief pause) well she was menopausal, maybe I should have thought about that. I don't know, Rook says I am a great mum!" (Malini, Interview)

Malini was re-telling what happened 'yesterday'. She had not been asked about herself. References are complicated. Malini learns some 'ideals' and then negotiates positions in between, sometimes torn sometimes decisive in perceptions. Bengali women one may say are repeatedly encoded in the culture-scape of the state in a specific attire in which mothers are seen in advertisements, media images, sustaining huge families, being available as providers and nurturers for aging parents in law, as homework-partners for teenagers, as a loving wife. But the encoding of 'ideals' in mediated discourses, tells us half the story. Interpretive activities reveal struggles in deciding what one 'should' feel about the media. Malini's problem is complex. She identifies a 'learnt' ideal, refers to the 'norm', she shifts immediately to her counterpart Rani, who is another middle aged struggling home maker and declares her as an ideal, immediately qualifying it with her mother's lessons to her. But there is another reference to be made and that is to her everyday life- the way she worked things out. In that referential frame Malini knows ideals fall flat, the woman who walks out of a marriage does not fit into any kinds of ideal woman moulds as the contemporary Bengali media culture would have it. She uncomfortably shifts between multiple 'should's and returns to her son's calling her a great mum. She struggles between multiple referential associations, some constructed as a part of the mediated everything which through ancient, medieval and contemporary mediation sustains memories, images and motifs of 'ideals', transmitted through generations in their respective media cultures; some picked up in the decisions of everyday life which is itself mediated. Mediation ensures multiple referential frameworks, jostling between which is a viewer who must decide between the 'learnt' and the 'experienced'.

And then they took her to the police station looking for her husband..it is complex, you see (pause)You youngsters don't read important books. Do you know of Behula, the wife from that myth of the trader Chaad and his family, she went to Heaven and Hell to get her husband back, that's what they are doing with Rani...this is the story of a (long pause) very good person, who sticks to her beliefs, who doesn't let things drift away with city life" (Monica, Reconstruction)

Contextual resources span entire media cultures across multiple historical phases. Oral history perhaps offers fantastic inroads into re-doing reception studies for it is only through oral history that one reaches at the referential frame that interpretation opens up. Monica has grown up in a village where she bathed in the river, heard mythologies of ancient 'ideals', her referential frame spans visions of huge joint families, mothers who could almost never leave the kitchen reprinting stories of dedication in a childhood and adolescence where myth mixed with 'reality'. The Anandabazar Patrika, the leading Bengali daily offers new realities today. The same stories of divorce, separation and conflicts that are told in the papers have run through her own life in India, where her sons have experienced broken marriages. Is Rani an 'ideal' because unlike Monica's daughters in law, she stays at home and dedicates her entirety to her husband or is she an ideal because she fits, with minor exceptions, into Monica's memories of a childhood mythology she learnt at school? Referring from media moments across geography, across seven decades and three generations in time, across multiple media cultures, interpretative activity and the referential frames it opens up show the complex ways in which reception involves a deep study of mediation over time.

***Comparative Negotiations: 'Then' 'Now' 'High' 'Low' 'Us' 'Them'***

Did you see Bijita's clothes today? Revealing dresses, high key make up, RK is entering the Hindi rubbish that's shown on STAR TV. Calcutta was the seat of culture producing classical music, serious academic talk and 'intellectual' sessions on local politics; earlier I remember we read episodic children's novels; "literature" if you know what I mean in that magazine called 'Sandesh', you weren't born, they carried on for ages, I used to wait for Sundays..write this down in your book. I just watch this trash because that's all they have. (Seema, Interview)

A scholar of contemporary Bengali literature, here is the seemingly critical reader of syntaxes, the Bengali 'intellectual', differing in her take on the *high* and *low*, from her working class companion *Basanti*. Seema has read high and low vernacular literature around a wide breadth of time in the contexts of a changing political-economy of local media systems. She is an avid fan who refuses to admit that, she follows genre workings and refers frequently to parallel media genres, in print and in film, maintaining implicit references to how genres had 'worked' *then* and how they work *now*. A fierce fan of Tagore, Ray and Ghosh, from whose work in literature and cinema she has learnt definitions and syntaxes of 'good' art, she refuses to move away from what kind of media texts 'should' be respected, canonized and enjoyed. Her syntactic references are scavenged from high media cultures that continue to occupy elite Calcutta's culture-scape. Yet she turns on the television in an empty house, even before

switching on lights and fans and follows recaps while “*filling up the house with voices*”. Silverstone’s ‘Media qua text’ shares a troubled space with ‘media qua object’ (Silverstone, 1994).

**Mini:** Rani does all that doesn’t she, looking after everyone? That’s really good, I tell my daughter to follow Rani’s life.

**Ritika:** but I would never waste my life waiting for an absconding husband, everyone must adjust, you didn’t understand all this

**Mini:** But you don’t understand things like we do. Have you seen her love? Her patience in waiting? Today, you stumble with your choices.

**Riti:** I would look after *myself*. Not after *everybody*.

(Mini and Ritika, Joint reconstruction)

Mini struggles in comparing over time. She cannot grasp whether ‘things’ have changed in three generations, though she knows they should have. She scavenges from her life and her mothers, sees it being re-mediated through contemporary media and can piece together a referential frame that is disrupted by the ‘realities’ of the generation that follows her. Ritika’s is a lifestyle media cultures in the vernacular still exclude. Mini refers to personal memories of serving fondly, memories of her mother doing that as well as she sees Rani on screen, winning hearts. Mini’s personal history provides her a register of references which show her sure routes to *being loved*. Mini’s daughter provides her another life which has received education (read liberation), financial independence at the end of it. Mini doesn’t understand whether her daughter should be *like* Rani, because here she has another route that is exciting, unprecedented in Mini’s own life, largely unrepresented by popular television. Mini does not want her child to repeat a history that can win hearts, because an elusive ‘something else’ lies beyond. Her references across three generations provide her confusion. In her interpretive experiences, she is at pains to figure out what works and what does not.

In associations and comparisons, viewers link personal histories spanning complex registers in space and time. They make sense of a mediated ‘now’ by drawing in resources, struggles and restraints from often conflicting ideals, across time. In associations, readers bring to the media, resources from contexts that are informed by collective references and social memories. They piece these references together to reach a ‘call’ on what they make of the screen. In associations the act of interpretation scavenges personal readings of collective memories, opens up inroads into multiple media cultures, and ‘documents’ multiple histories.

***Negotiations in Anticipation: Waiting for Difference***

**Mini:** I hated it when he (husband) came and switched off the TV when they showed Esha's mother conniving to kill Rani...maybe there's something wrong with the programme itself...

**Riti:** I agree, why prolong it for ages? RK spins the same stories. I remember when we were in school, I think, there was a programme called 'Ek Akasher Niche' (Under the Same Sky), they had genuine HIV-AIDS stories going..do you remember Julia? That *taught* (emphasis mine) people something, the lower classes don't know these things.

(Mini and Ritika, Interview)

Riti is the social work PhD, a firm believer in the top-down 'developmental' role of television in 'others' lives. This is a problematic question that begs a detailed discussion of both class in contemporary Bengali society as well as parallel debates that are being generated around entertainment education in India. Soap opera research in India by Singhal (1983) and Sood (2004) has approached questions of health, documenting social-psychological analysis in entertainment education. Sood's doctoral work (1999) with audience involvement with the daytime radio soap 'Tinka Tinka Sukh' in India and Sood et al's multi-method, triangulated approach to a family planning programme in Fulbari, Nepal explored the interrelations of policy, politics, media and audience involvement (Sood et al, 2004).

Middle class women's urge for a pedagogic text was implicit in all the conversations with most of the participants. There was a desire to be able to use the media for something 'constructive', more constructive than 'just' entertainment. Parameswaran's work with urban elite readers of Harlequin romances shows a desire to use novels for language education (Parameswaran, 2004) and my current project confirms that a desire to be able to use the media for some purpose remains implicit, whatever the purpose may be. Having accepted that, it is of interest to see whose use is being talked about by whom in these discourses. Implicit in the talk on use by 'others', (by default those less privileged and more 'problematic') is a steady articulation of class.

Rani's aunt..her husband is a drunk and tried to sell her to a pimp I think.. mother-in-law is an odious person. Her father, the poor old man is dumb and cant do anything about it. I know this happens all the time. You open the newspapers, and right there you'll find these stories/ You go to our homes, and you see the same stuff...but we give it back...these people don't show the real things. (Basanti, Reconstruction)

For Basanti then, the story fails because it does not show the real life agency and resistance she speaks of. The tales of woe, despair and agony, the stories of abuse that populate urban imaginations of the dark and unknown rural may need revisions. This hardly goes to say that Basanti and her contemporaries lead in Canning, a life of perfect resistance against authority and abuse. It is naïve to imagine that. But in Basanti's eyes, the travails, and troubles make little sense unless she witnesses a fightback. Yet again, the differential realities brought to the screen as resources by audiences makes the discussion on viewers expectations of realism in television drama a complicated question. Whose reality will it represent?

**'Alternative' Negotiations: Character 'selection' and the Cultural 'Opening Out of a 'Closed' Text**

I feel sorry for Bijita. Clearly, you are supposed to hate her aren't you? With the constant ploys...but she has a disabled son, can you imagine what a huge worry that is.... very deep down she loves everybody...its just that..life sometimes takes it out of you doesn't it? But you know what...its really Bijita who struggles against the system....Rani is obviously perfect...its Bijita who doesn't dance to everyone's tunes, the 'wicked' one! (Basanti, Interview)

The use of the word 'alternative' is a conscious opposition to mainstream, central or key, implicit in which they may be the researcher's fixing of a key theme. The narrative was not analysed in-depth for openness and closure in the current project, but perhaps, as the discussions on closure identified earlier, here was RK, with its dominant 'message'. Rani, the good mother, the good wife, the good daughter-in-law, the good human being, the considerate neighbour, the selfless sister-in-law, the valiant niece, the forgiving friend. Marketed as Rani's story, as the title goes, perhaps RK is an instance of a 'closed' text (Eco, 1979) in many senses. It has closure to offer on many counts, it defines clearly the good and the bad, the moral and the immoral. Characters don't travel through highs and lows, they are steadily, good/bad, faithful/sly, selfless/selfish and the show has its 'ideal' on offer. Plots (the struggles of Rani) easily show a pattern where 'options' are restricted by the very structure of the text itself. In the fieldwork, while many accepted these 'closures', (the sample of people involved were mostly elite, middle class and upper middle class), Basanti reveals neither an admiration for these middle class ideals of selflessness nor does she find any delight in seeing people succeed within the 'system' not unlike Lughod's findings with the rural readers of *Hilmiyya Nights* (Lughod, 1995) who 'chose' deviant characters as favourites rather than the 'good' ones, or Press's findings with working class women's lack of attraction (Press, 1991) to 'good' lifestyles (though

Press has other very different reasons to explain that). What Basanti's 'system' refers to is difficult to place a finger on. Is it as simple as 'patriarchy'? Or is it a complex articulation of patriarchy, poverty, class tourism on a daily basis, gender and a rural-urban straddle she must perform? In 'opening out an otherwise closed (or perhaps open-closed?) narrative, Basanti's ink is her daily life (note her use of the term "supposed to").

Ma tells me the episodes every night, as you saw. But can I tell it to you a bit differently? You wont like it if you like Rani like Ma does. I like Rani too. But she isn't 'real'. Shall I tell you who is? Its Miss. Point out one woman to me, who dares to live with another man, in his house, as a governess initially, not marry him, blend into the family because "she" wants it that way, and just not care when people make snide remarks. Everyone avoids discussing Miss because people are uncomfortable. The show itself shows Rani not Miss as the central person. (Rima, Reconstruction)

'Miss' doesnt confirm. But neither does Rima in most of her social networks, where she talks about how staying single, returning late from work are still unpardonable. The governess of a rich family's kids, Miss has stayed on, standing by the man of the house, Rani's father-in-law, in steadfast support, love and underplayed dedication. An undercurrent of a question around Miss's relationship with her employer, her equations with him ran through my viewers, all of whom, except Rima avoided the question. Rima, is single by choice, she refused to marry at a time when staying single for Bengali women was unimaginable in most families, and still is. She refuses to accept the easy closure offered by RK in the wife/mother status that it accords to the character that the narrative by and large eulogizes. In Rima's eyes, it is the deviant one, the one who steps outside the line, the one who is singularly side-lined by the narrative who appeals.

What is interesting about these negotiations is not simply 'polysemy', in fact by itself, the fact that alternative readings exist and that audiences are active may tell the researcher very little today. It is only in the vertical probing of interpretive activity from the contextual richness offered by an ethnographic stance, that the cultural negotiations at play, the selective prioritizations of certain contextual restraints over others, are (sometimes) revealed. The agenda for the researcher of interpretive activity around the media is hardly to discover polysemy of texts (for that has been proven beyond doubt) or the fantastic resistances of audiences or even that divergent readings are generated. The purpose of reception studies is to treat interpretive practices as material to be deeply interpreted for studies of media cultures and mediation.

## 5. TERMS AND REFLECTIONS

### ***'Negotiation', other terms and the question of interactivity***

It is necessary to reflect on why I chose the word 'negotiations' in the title and in the project itself, instead of viewing, audiencing, reception. Paying attention to terminology this way is not a mere re-articulation of (sometimes banal) concerns that viewing, reading, listening (as Radway explains in her 1988 account of radical contextualism), reception and audiencing are by themselves in some ways overtly media-centric and perhaps lack the interactivity that is demanded by the concept of mediation. By contrast perhaps, negotiation as a term may perform two tasks: first, it may better accommodate the question of interactivity not just of the 'media'(texts) and people(readers) and their contexts(structures, cultures) as discrete interacting entities, but the interactivity of everything-discourses, dialogues, power structures, texts, skills, challenges and meaning; and second, it may better help in studies of mediation. The resources available from reading and viewing as terms, are many- in fact associations, references, corrections and comparisons are terms that are undeniably located in the in-betweens of both text-reader and encoding-decoding metaphors. Negotiation perhaps is more accommodative of both reception and consumption and all the complex discursive processes they encompass. 'Associative Negotiations' are therefore not identified with an implicit assumption of their accommodative nature within mediated every day life, 'alternative negotiations' may not automatically be categorised as oppositional and therefore privileged in the eyes of the researcher. 'Comparative' and 'Corrective' negotiations are not to paint a critical and focused engagement where the media is accorded centrality in daily lives; far from a focus on encoding and decoding, these negotiations of one story (RK) may tell many other stories.

My fieldwork showed almost no ties with escapism and problem solving (see Livingstone, 1988, 1998), though it reinforced the questions of realism and emotional experience. The cultural opening out of closed narratives remains an under-studied area in this paper as does a (class) selective search for pedagogy. While much work on Indian television audiences in general has focused on religion, communalism, politics and health (Mankekar, 1999; Rajagopal, 2000; Singhal, 1983 and many others), the scarcity of academic work on 21<sup>st</sup> century vernacular television drama in India, particularly its audience reception made much of this project exploratory rather than explanatory. To conclude I would like to provide some brief reflections on a question repeatedly asked of me by my participants.

In the course of fieldwork, I was often asked if I thought RK was a feminist programme. The initial reaction had been an emphatic NO. There are easily two ways (and innumerable more) in which the content may be interpreted. The constant interplay of troubles and insult on Rani, the ascribing of ideals and morals on her, the expectations that it is she who needs to hold things together and sacrifice her own joys (what qualifies as 'own' and why is a matter of relentless debate) derives largely from the discourses of the woman that are constructed by the national imaginary and feminism provides a strong theoretical entry point for the textual analyst who focuses on woman-nation discourses. One may remind oneself of when Tania Modleski, in her convincing analysis of the genre had talked about spectatorial positioning by the text of a spectator/subject who is constituted as a sort of an ideal mother (Modleski, 1979). Inevitably for the genre it is only certain kinds and categories of women who emerge as ideals, while others who are 'deviant' do not qualify.

But resolving subject/spectator questions at the resolution that textual constructions are hegemonic, and oppressive (and by implication ignoring the larger question of how they are interpreted, appropriated and negotiated in lived cultures) offers a return in many ways to a point in media scholarship where one loses the anthropological richness that has been thrown up by scholars of media cultures, interpretive insights that have been generated by the vocabularies of audience reception, that complicate the media far beyond what its content 'means'. At yet another extreme of polysemic technicalities, the focus should not lie on what people divergently read, because there can perhaps be a large number of interpretations, it is of greater interest to explore how these readings are resolved into the lives of those who engage with the media. The researcher's internalism, her pedagogy and her judgment of the 'trash they watch' cannot sufficiently address these larger concerns.

In agreement with Ang's critique of Radway then one may argue that proposing the fact that "(romance) readers should be convinced to see that their reading habits are ultimately working against their own 'real' interests- will not do". (Ang, 1991, 90) Audiences of RK have not been valiantly critical, astonishingly resistive and neither have they accorded an immense centrality to the genre in their lives. But nonetheless, they have offered me other priorities, which have often not matched with the 'issues' I wanted to speak to them about. Victory against odds (with instances from personal life stories), being able to fend for one's own self without depending on 'others' (men), resisting plots and connivances of a very differentially experienced and intersected patriarchy (connecting sometimes seamlessly but very often opposing violently and disjointedly with instances from their everyday lives), selecting favourite characters which are

very different from the ones which are designed to become favourites (connecting with personal stories of subversion, reminiscent of the 'opening of Eco's closed texts) were some of the crucial themes that surfaced in the course of the current project.

While many reactions from RK viewers seemed uncritical, unsurprising, this perhaps goes to show that the very priorities of audience studies should not be to enter with pet loves called activity, passivity, and so on though in varying measures, these remain implicit in the agenda. Not everybody was watching RK, not everybody was loving it, not everybody was focusing on the focus of the text and not everyone who focused was according it seamless intervention and centrality in their everyday lives.

The question of greatest complexity (and probably the question most commonly asked of audience researchers by critics) is perhaps whether all of this plays into 'real' issues of power? It is impossible and juvenile to seek for specific ways in which engaging with the media directly impacts real issues of power and searching for these very specific intersects is perhaps neither feasible nor desirable.

Anybody who has engaged thoughtfully with mediation will know by now that the media is not an isolated object/resource/restraint in everyday life and therefore its articulations/effects cannot be grasped as easily as that. This does not mean yet another extreme of fantastic resilience and endless audience power. As anthropologist Abu Lughod correctly pointed out for television in an Egyptian village "Television is, in this village, **one part** (emphasis mine) of a complex jumble of life." For Abu Lughod, that part is not 'overwhelming', but 'discrete' (Abu Lughod, 1995, 205), but one wonders, in the very concept of mediation, is *anything* discrete even if they are or are not overwhelming?

## **6. A CRITICAL POSTSCRIPT**

Leaving aside questions of method design, the empirical work presented here deserves criticism at many levels. At its broadest level, the analysis stays ambivalent on its own question: was it able to demonstrate the 'larger' utilities of research with specific media instances that it had promised in its abstract? The analysis in its attempt to incorporate discussions on the people, contexts, the text and negotiations spread itself a bit too thin perhaps, though an alternative focus on more examples under the four frames would not have been complete because the text itself and the context needed some discussion to complete the analysis. Theoretically, it was difficult to figure out whether the reception-consumption approach was a larger question of 'convergence' between the disciplinary divides running in the field of media studies itself (for instance the 'empirical social science' versus cultural studies approach), and if so, how, if at all, was this to be resolved in practice? The framing of negotiative experiences into experiential modes prevented a thematic discussion of findings which could perhaps have done more justice to the research question, and provided a richer account. The 'explanations' following each quotation made the analysis an explanatory and almost deterministic account of why people were reading the media in a particular way. It is impossible for anybody to decide specifically which discourses are at play as resources and restraints in interpretation and the analysis fell into this trap right away.

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### ***Two Concluding Reflections***

This project left me wondering on two larger issues: In the crucial task of expanding reception scholarship as it moves into global, comparative settings (as mass audiences in many regions of almost all nations are increasingly complemented if not replaced by interactive users), two practises may be needed. The first is undoubtedly the task of remaining committed to audience studies, instead of presuming its race is run.

Getting in current conversation from the broader field of communication studies into audience research, as empirical studies continue to accumulate, perhaps the second task of relevance is pondering on the question of cross-spatial comparative research, transnational thinking. When Ang (1991) asks for a more 'macro' approach and Morley (2006) expresses dissatisfaction with repeated empirical studies, or Curran (1990) tires of similar fare being served again and again and Sreberny (2008) calls for 'analytical quilts' instead of 'deep analytical patches' - do divergent stances and conflicting intellectual positions all call at their very own, different levels

for a larger, broader discussion, which is (presumably for all these scholars) **not** a single grand framework?

On the one hand there are some who offer the four metaphors of the coffee house, the patchwork quilt, the twisted rope and the gestalt image (Livingstone, 2008) where 'interaction' is key. On the other there are those who are against the very idea of convergences (Ang, 1991). In this project I struggled at very many moments, wondering what I was to draw on, what is appropriate, which scholars can parallelly inform this work, whether ethnographic insights can exist in peace with insights from social psychology, all the time trying to define a single position to work from. At its largest level, this project concludes, pondering like many others, but not reaching a satisfactory answer in the uncomfortable in-betweens of paradigms, the unruly edges of fields, the (un)suitability of disciplinary interactions and the many (inter)faces of the elusive middle zone.

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