



TAMIL SATELLITE TELEVISION AS MEDIATOR IN PRESERVING TAMIL LANGUAGE AND CULTURAL IDENTITY FOR TAMIL DIASPORA

Dr. C. Suresh Kumar

Assistant Professor, Department of Visual Communication
Pondicherry University

ABSTRACT

For centuries Indians have been moving out to other countries seeking better job opportunities. Among them, some come back after a short period of time and some of them make themselves permanent settlers in their respective countries along with their family members. Notwithstanding to the fact that they are away from their cultural society, mass media has been a great boon for them to keep a track on all the events happening in their home country. Particularly, after the boom of the satellite channels, Indian Diaspora have benefitted magnanimously by keeping abreast of all the events happening in their mother land. This article explores as to how Tamil satellite television has been as a tool for the preservation of the culture and language of Tamil Diaspora.

Key words: Diaspora, Ethnic minorities, Culture

Introduction

On a global level, besides the Tamil print media which reaches the in all corners of the world, the strongest bond that binds the Tamil diaspora is the Tamil television channels that has helped to compress it into a tiny village. The Tamil TV, film and music industry have in the past two decades found a niche market among Tamil diaspora and their marketability is said to be next only to Hindi films/music in the competitive overseas market. In spite of the fact that Tamils move out of the country owing to various reasons, television channels can more easily

keep in touch with their previous homes and families. This is certainly true on the individual level. An array of modern and new means of communication , particularly movies, television, books, newspapers and the internet which are produced either in the homeland or in the host country, strongly foster ties. Most of the migrants who move out of their home country contact their homes and also continue to use their mother tongues at their homes. Since on many occasions migrants live among their own folk and work with their compatriots, they do not bother to acquire either the homeland or host country language. Moreover, even after acquiring the new language, many migrants do not show affinity to become bilingual. They prefer to use their mother tongue at home and among other members of the diasporas community. Besides a strong affinity to speak in their native tongue, mother tongue television channels too make them to tie to the love for their own language in other countries.

Diaspora Tamils: Origin

Diaspora emerges from the Greek word *diaspeirein* meaning to disperse or scatter. Diaspora is the dispersal or the scattering of persons with common identity such as culture and language in different directions. Diaspora transcends all its variations. The diaspora maintain and nurture their civilisational and cultural distinctiveness and its aspirations to link their country of origin with the diaspora world-wide, making it a global unity with a global identity. The scattering of persons and communities is very old happening but the phrase 'diaspora' is has been employed in recent times. The Jewish, Indian and Chinese diasporas are some of the vibrant ones with a global presence. Migration of people to different parts of the world started with trade in the olden days was changed into contract and indentured labour migrations during the early colonial days, especially after the abolition of slavery in 1834. Later, this sort of movement started with the search of greener pastures and eventually owing to the political and social problems in different countries triggered refugees and asylum seekers taking shelter in other countries. This phenomenon which continued over centuries on a small scale has of late resulted in mass migration with a common identity on a global level.

The dispersal of Tamils around the world is not of late starting point and right now there are seventy million of them spread in more than fifty nations of the world. The Tamil diaspora is a developing harmony of more than seventy million individuals living in numerous grounds and crosswise over far off oceans, numerous thousands as refugees. It is a fellowship established in an antiquated legacy, a rich dialect and writing, and a lively culture. However, it is a harmony

which is not just an element of the past. It is a developing harmony solidified by battle and enduring and, given reason and bearing by the goals of an individual for the future - a future where they and their youngsters and their children's kids may live in equity and flexibility in a rising one world. It is the energy and the adoration for the Tamil language and society that ties the Tamil Diaspora everywhere throughout the world. As indicated by Heras, "Tamil is the most established of the present dialects." Tamil, one of the effective Dravidian dialects is maybe the main sample of an antiquated dialect which has made due as a talked dialect for over 2500 years with its essential structure practically unaltered. The name Tamil is itself exceptional signifying "sweetness" and "coolness". Dialect and society are two aspects of the same personality, and dialect is a noteworthy social component. Society is everything which is socially learned and shared by individuals from a general public; it is a sorted out arrangement of conduct and said to be standardizing in light of the fact that it characterizes principles of behavior. (Srivastava.S, 2015) As indicated by Edward Burnett Tylor an anthropologist "it is that unpredictable entire which incorporates learning, conviction, workmanship, ethics, traditions and some other capacities obtained by man as an individual from a general public."

Tamil Diaspora, Language and Cultural Identity

Tamil people spread all over the world mostly watch Tamil television channels via satellite besides the channels of the country in which they are residing. Watching Tamil channels appears to be natural reflection of Tamil migrant's identity and it plays a pivotal role in their daily life. Proliferation of modern communication technologies and spread of internet have contributed greatly to strengthening this sort of pattern. Watching Tamil television programmes reflects ones identity, thus, becomes easier with satellite television and recently with internet technologies. Tamils living in different parts of the world watch Tamil TV channels as a necessity to preserve their mother tongue and their close association with their home land. They continue to watch the channels even if the transmission quality is not up to the mark. (Das, S. N, 2008)

According to Basu one of the serious challenges in the present globalised world is preserving and maintaining one's own culture and identity. Nevertheless, with technological advancements, diasporic communities are finding it convenient to stay connected with their homeland and maintain their self-identity. Electronic media such as television have been the essential tools for the Diaspora in re-rooting their identities. While commenting on the influence

of electronic media on the diapsoric community, In the words of Appadurai “because of its sheer multiplicity in which they appear (films, TV, internet and telephones) and because of the rapid way in which they move through daily life, electronic media provide diapsoric communities with resources for self-imagining that help maintain the identity”.

For the Diaspora Tamils, diasporic television viewing was standard practice in diasporic family life, and fulfilled the roles of maintaining continuity with the past and negotiating the present. Watching news programmes, familiar series, and movies was a connection with the home country and it was regularly maintained. In preservation of the mother tongue television also play a significant role and it is an important means of maintaining ethnic identity since it is a symbol that differentiates one group from another, thus reinforcing the feeling of belonging. Television programmes acted as a ritual that punctuated time and daily life, giving reassurance, for the diasporic population, with the media text acquiring meaning not only with regard to its content, but also according to the circumstances of its viewers. In the case of political refugees, for example, news in their native channels kept them informed about the political situation in their home countries, serving as evidence of the places they left behind (Naficy, 1993).

Viewing Tamils television for the Tamil diaspora provided them nostalgia for home, in which there was a complex difference in the feelings of parents and children. When it comes for the parents who had spent most of their time in their native land and happened to be in another country owing to several reasons tend to have stronger feeling for their motherland during their exposure home media and the children who were either born and brought up in other countries or happen to land in other countries in their childhood had only less nostalgic feelings or the their perception of home comparatively. Overall, the authors suggest that diasporic television worked as a mediated space for experiencing different identities, both global and local, both related to youth culture and adult culture, as well as a platform to negotiate the identity of being different, that is, being both a migrant and a new citizen (Naficy, 1993).

According to Bailey et al., who authored “*Understanding Alternative Media*”, modern media technologies play a crucial role in reducing the anxiety and unfamiliarity experienced by the diasporic population. Television, one of the most powerful media, helps to bring the native culture closer, familiarise them with the local community while simultaneously offering a view of the global society. Thus, the television provides the diasporic population the possibility of navigating seamlessly through diverse worlds to create a “placeless culture” in which to anchor

their floating lives. As Hall (1994) puts forth, the media offer “an imaginary coherence on the experience of dispersal and fragmentation which is the history of Diasporas.” This study concentrates on the everyday television consumption of the Indian Diaspora in the United States (US) with a particular focus on how their television viewing patterns help in the process of negotiating a borderline existence and creation of a transcultural identity.

Television as a mediator for Tamil Diaspora community

Migration, whether voluntary or forced, is a very distressing experience. It is characterized by the mental and emotional violence that accompanies the severing of familial, social and cultural ties, the breaking down of self-image and self-knowledge, and the conflict of hegemonic forces in a new home. The characters that immigrants create in their receiving countries mirror the material conditions and encounters of the Diaspora; they construct subjectivities and sensibilities that uncover the ceaseless procedures of redoing, change and emergency they should adapt to in their new homes. In times, for example, these, one of the devices that intervene them to their dialect, society and country is the communication technology. Among the different innovations, TV is a standout amongst the most vital means for managing their nativity emotions in an outsider nation.

Television is considered as an important mediating object carrying messages across space and time and with an un-ignorable presence in many of the Tamil homes. The majority of the Tamils in other countries watch Tamil television or films at home, via satellite, online, or on DVDs. On studying on the Tamil migrants in the UK Jones.D says that a range of Tamil channels are available to UK viewers, with the majority of programming obtained from Tamil Nadu, and a typical day’s scheduling including news and current affairs, drama serials, movies and movie-song compilations, cookery demonstrations, children’s cartoons, quiz shows, presentations of classical dance and music, and devotional programmes. Tamil Nadu stations such as the Sun TV channel family, and Jaya TV now broadcast directly to the UK via satellite – a move welcomed by some participants, who relished being able to watch the latest movies and serial installments at the same time as viewers in India. Sunaina, a migrant to the UK says,

I barely watch English films. Watching a Tamil in a television is more like a real life story. Whereas if you watch an English film - no way will that happen in someone’s life. If you look at a Tamil film it will be exactly the same as our family. Like that family will have an argument, and how do they solve it and all that.’

Eswari (2014) in her study on the role television in the formation of transnational identities explains that the advent of the satellite television channels has enabled the Tamil diaspora to view ethnic media programmes and maintain ties with their homeland. Simultaneously, they find it impossible to insulate themselves against the mainstream media they encounter in their everyday lives which familiarize them with the local culture. Studies on the diaspora communities throw light on the fact that the Tamil television channels teach a lot about family values, the importance of religion and traditions. In another research Tirumala (2009) tells that the participants of the focus group of the research recollected their memories of their parents teaching them about the culture and traditional values through programs in television when they were small and most of the respondents of the study agreed that television aids in maintaining the cultural identity and keep in touch with the traditions and societal standards. Meera who resides at USA makes the following statement about the Tamil television programmes;

“You can really learn about family values and to revere your in-laws and older people. I presume television is our way to stay in tune with the Indian culture while we are here. Half the stuff gets broadcast from India and you get to see parts of India, which helps a lot in keeping that part of us alive.”

When enquired about the opinion about the Tamil cable television channels, Gowri, UK settled Tamil observed the following;

“Tamil programmes throw a lot of culture and traditions at you and they try to teach us all kids about values and traditions through some of their programs. I think we can definitely learn about family values, religion and also language”.

Jones.D observes the following findings in his research;

“Reena purchased a temporary Sun-TV package for her mother to watch during a visit to the UK, but kept it after her mother’s return to Sri Lanka, as ‘it gives a homely feeling’. For Priya, Tamil television represents an ‘escape’ from the social isolation she experiences in the UK due to her lack of confidence in English: ‘I pay the money myself for dance programmes and everything... that’s why we are living close to our culture, our language, through Tamil TV. Britain - I don’t think about it - it’s like I’m living in Sri Lanka”.

Narratives of many of the overseas settled migrants prove that the consumption of Tamil television programmes as offering the intimacy of home, nostalgia and cultural memory. Ethnic programmes made available through satellite television offer a universal panacea to the diasporic

population occupying the “third space” and experiencing the existential angst of not belonging anywhere. While sharing the experience of viewing Tamil TV programmes Mangla says that she is addicted to the programmes telecast on *Zee Tamil*. Though some of the programmes are not interesting, it is not the contents that attract them but listening to their mother tongue and watching familiar landscapes unfold before them revive memories of their past life and provide continuity and coherence to their fragmented and fractured identities. Mani records the episodes in the programme *Kana Kaanum Kaalangal* that deals with the adolescent lives of students and watches them on returning home after work. He reminisced,

“I love the programme. It’s like being back in Chennai and enjoying my college life. Those were good old days.”

Conclusion

Several studies have pointed out the fact that satellite television channels enable the Tamil diaspora to gain access to the ethnic media programmes produced in Tamil Nadu. Tamil diaspora spread across the world undergo the similar experience such as the ones mentioned in the previous discussion. Hence, the present study derives at the conclusion that vernacular television channels are deemed significant in preserving and conversing in ones mother tongue which is an important means of maintaining identity of ethnic minorities since it is a symbol that differentiates one group from another, thus reinforcing the feeling of belongingness. With regard to media influence on cultural identities, Lee (2004) argues that media played a significant role in construction and maintenance of cultural identities because, various information regarding ethnic groups is being documented and commented upon by the current media. This statement is yet again proved to be right with regard to the Tamil diaspora. Tamil television channels though are not produced keeping in mind the diaspora audiences, whatever is shown there still attracts the Tamil diaspora due to their affinity and love to their culture and homeland. Thus, it can be said that Tamil television channels are the mediators for keeping in touch with the language, culture and nostalgia of their homeland.

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