CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Television is omnipresent though not omniscient and omnipotent. Its very presence in the drawing rooms has made it a very popular communication medium for the families to seek information and get entertained. The plethora of information genre consisting of news, documentaries, talk shows and the entertainment genre made up of films, sitcoms, music albums, reality shows and soap operas that are aired on television channels reflect various facets of culture in one form or the other. In particular, the soap operas which have come to command large audience depict multifarious aspects of culture ranging from simple beliefs, morals, customs and habits to more complex symbolic artifacts that are encoded with particular meaning by and for the people with cultural identification. The soap operas are not bland story telling formats. They are sleek television productions programmed to hook the audience to the unfolding episodic drama on the mini-screen. Each episode of the story that mainly revolves around themes such as day to day family life with its inherent turmoil’s, conflicts and vendetta by and large end with a cliffhanger compelling the audience to watch the next episode. Such story telling techniques adapted in soap operas proved a success everywhere in the developed countries of Europe and the United States of America as well as in the developing regions of Latin America and Asia.

Besides being commercially successful, the soap operas are known to influence individual’s beliefs, behaviour and their understating of culture. In addition, some operas have been found emotionally realistic by the audience
(Ang, 1985). At the same time in some cultural milieu a high degree of para-social interactions is reported to have occurred between the audience and the soap opera’s characters (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Singhal & Rogers, 1989). Of course, the interactions between the soap opera characters and the audience will not be uniform as the meaning making process is deeply embedded in the social context of viewing and the culture of the audience as well as of the characters portrayed in the soap operas. That being the case, it is not only the manifest content but also the latent content of the television programme, that is, the meaning generation of the messages among the audience that has been investigated by communication researchers (Fiske & Hartly, 1978). Such investigations assume salience as they help in understanding the way in which audience interact with soap operas in stories, characters and cultural context make sense of them and imbibe if not all, some aspects of the depicted cultural milieu.

In this context, it is pertinent to explore the portrayal and negotiation of culture in Indian soap operas with specific reference to Malayalam soap operas. No doubt, the process of negotiating the soap opera message is a complicated cognitive process based on individual’s frames of references. Nonetheless, it is worth understanding the message negotiating process by examining how the audience engage with soap operas and would there be changes in audience’s frames of reference consequent to watching soap operas. These are the questions this study seeks to explore. As a necessary background to the study a detailed analysis of television soap operas, culture and cultural studies, the negotiation process and frames of reference is presented in the succeeding units of the chapter.

1.0 ORIGIN OF TELEVISION SOAP OPERAS IN US

Television’s ability to portray and project culture has proved pivotal in making it the most popular medium in modern societies. In the US for
instance, television popularity rose to new heights in the 1950s when soap operas, the term coined in 1930s to denote the popular genre of serialized social radio drama, came to occupy prime place on television. Soap opera is a dramatic serial narrative on radio and television. Characterized by a continuing story dealing with the ups and downs of family life, a permanent cast with emphasis on dialogue than action and consistently melodramatic treatment, the soap operas were an instant hit in the US. The success story of soap operas began with the transmission of *Guiding Light* on CBS network in 1952.

*Guiding Light* broadcast since 1952 is the longest-running soap opera in television history. The story line revolved around Bert Bauer, a lower-middle class German immigrant woman and her endless marital troubles. When her status moved to that of a caring mother, her children's marital troubles were then put on display. Later, the Spauldings, Lewises, and the Coopers had been established as core families, and most major plot developments circled around them. Like *Guiding Light*, the early television soap operas in the US were of 15 minute duration and the stories revolved around the traditional families. This trend changed when in 1956 CBS broadcast the first 30 minute soap opera. With its popularity, the 15 minute soap operas were phased out. Aside duration, the stories and themes too changed from traditional families to stories that revolved around profession. For instance in 1963, NBC and ABC launched *The Doctors* and *General Hospital* respectively based on medical profession. The popularity of these persuaded the producers to introduce a host of contemporary social issues such as incest, impotence, amnesia, illegitimacy and murder. The most popular serials in the 1950s and 1960s were *The Guiding Light, Search for Tomorrow, Love of Life, As the World Turns* and *The Secret Storm*. 
The US soap operas basically consisted of day time and prime time soaps. The 15 minute day time soap opera, broadcast on Monday to Friday in the afternoons and addressed largely to the housewives and unemployed women, was the conventional practice from the beginning. Prime time soap opera, on the other hand, was aired in the evening on a weekly or biweekly basis with lavish settings and Hollywood stars. *Peyton Place* broadcast on ABC network in 1964 was the first prime time soap and it turned out to be one of the biggest prime time hits of the 1964-65 season. 30 minute format introduced by the prime time soaps slowly became the standard feature of all serials in the US from 1978.

**Table 1.1 Popularity of US Soap Operas Over the Decades**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Top rated soap opera</th>
<th>Second best rated soap opera</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1952-59</td>
<td><em>Search For Tomorrow</em></td>
<td><em>Guiding Light</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960-69</td>
<td><em>As the World Turns</em></td>
<td><em>Guiding Light</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970-79</td>
<td><em>As the World Turns</em></td>
<td><em>Another World</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>1980-89</td>
<td><em>General Hospital</em></td>
<td><em>All My Children</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>1990-99</td>
<td><em>The Young and the Restless</em></td>
<td><em>All My Children</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000-09</td>
<td><em>The Young and the Restless</em></td>
<td><em>The Bold and the Beautiful</em></td>
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*Source: Wikipedia*

One of the typical characteristics of US soap opera is its open narrative structure in which there is no end point toward which the action of the story moves. This aspect appeared to have a bearing on the longevity of the soap operas with some lasting several decades. While *Guiding Light* and *As the World Turns* survived for more than five decades; *General Hospital* and *Days of our Lives* for four decades; *The Young and the Restless* and *All My Children* for three decades. In order to retain the existing viewers and also to bring in younger viewers, the long running soap opera producers introduced young adult characters and also injected contemporary issues. In 1973, CBS
launched *The Young and the Restless* shot in Hollywood which focused on sex and its attendant problems and complications. It was a trendsetter and remained one of the most popular soap opera for more than two decades. *Santa Barbara* and *The Bold and the Beautiful*, two popular soap operas of the 1980s were modeled largely after the immensely popular *The Young and the Restless*.

The popularity of day time soap operas began to dwindle in the 1980s when more and more women began to join the work force compelling the channels to telecast soap opera on prime time. Thus soap opera became an important feature of prime time programming from the 1980s. *Dallas*, a one hour weekly programme debuted in April 1978, spearheaded the prime time soap opera boom.

Since *Guiding Light* decade, soap operas underwent changes in story themes and narrative styles. In the initial decades, soap operas stories revolved around small town middle class families. In the plot, sin and violence affected the daily lives of the family members. The good invariably triumphed and all the wrong doings were justly punished as was in scores of soap operas. By 1970s, the style and content of soap operas had undergone a revolution. There was open discussion of such matters as abortion, drug abuse, wife abuse, and sexually transmitted diseases. Characters of various racial and ethnic backgrounds were introduced into a previously all-white, Anglo-Saxon cast. The traditional emphasis on romantic and marital problems remained, but promiscuous behaviour, violence, and criminal activity came to be treated more directly.

### 1.1 SOAP OPERAS IN BRITAIN

The British soap opera genre began on radio and consequently was associated with the BBC. It continues to broadcast the world's longest-running
radio soap, *The Archers*, on BBC Radio 4, which has been running since 1951. It continues to attract over five million listeners in UK. *Coronation Street* produced by Granada Television in December 1960 was the first television soap opera. British soap opera is region specific and class conscious unlike the US soaps. Some of the popular British soap operas are *Emmardale Farm*, *EastEnders* and *Brookside*.

Soap operas in the early years were specific to the region of their origin. But within a decade, soap operas of one country began to appeal neighbouring countries. Noting this trend Barker (1997) makes a distinction between certain soaps that are of an essentially local and some others as of regional or international in character. Local soaps are those which are only seen within a national setting. Regional soaps have a broader regional appeal and often serve a specific language community dispersed far and wide. For example, British soap *Coronation Street* had built up a sizeable audience in English speaking countries. Similarly, *EastEnders* was popular in Norway, Holland, Belgium, Denmark and Spain (for cultural rather than linguistic reasons). Thirdly, there are the internationally known soaps, which were popular with many groups of audience cutting across cultural and national barriers. These include American prime time soaps *Dallas* and *Dynasty*, the US daytime soaps *Days of Our Lives* and *The Bold and Beautiful*, the youth oriented *Beverly Hills 90210* and the Australian soap *Neighbours*.

### 1.2 Soap Operas in Latin America

The success of soap operas in the US and Britain echoed in a different vein in Latin America in the late 1960s. The launch of Peruvian telenovela, *Simplemente Maria*, produced in 1967 proved ominous for the Latin American television. Produced by Miguel Sabido for Televisa, a Mexican company, the Latin American début soap opera narrated the rags-to-riches story of a young woman who made a fortune by sewing. Following the
success of *Simplemente Maria*, Sabido produced several telenovelas for Televisa incorporating in to their narrative educational themes ranging form family planning and adult literacy to women’s rights. Sharing a common premise that information was the prime ingredient of development, telenovelas tried to activate and moderate pro-development and positive attitudes in the viewers. Some of the development oriented soap operas are *María la del Barrio* (Mexico), *Beto Rockefeller* (Brazil), *Ven Conmigo* (Mexico) and *Acompaname* (Mexico).

1.3 CHARACTERISTICS OF SOAP OPERA

Television soap operas, no matter in which country or culture they are produced and televised, have certain uniform characteristics. They are dramatic serial narratives having a form and structure much different from other television genres. They never really begin or end but have a beginning and ending within the space of thirty to sixty minutes. The stories continually unfold year-after-year with a slower pace than other genres and without episodic resolution. Instead, they leave the audience with mini-cliffhangers at commercial breaks and at the end of the episodes.

Serious attention was paid to soap operas in the early 1980s when feminists challenged academics to examine what made soap operas so popular with women. Modleski (1983) argued that women were attracted to soap operas because they followed a feminine rather than a masculine narrative. She defined the feminine narrative of soap operas as stories that are (i) nonlinear, which means they have no clear beginning, middle and end, (ii) based on dialogue rather than action, (iii) contain numerous interruptions, and (iv) disperse the attention and loyalties of the viewers. Modleski also argued that unlike masculine narrative, in which the climax is resolution, the ultimate resolution is constantly yet to come in soap operas. Pleasure comes from anticipation rather than resolution.
Brown (1987) lists eight generic characteristics of soap operas:

1. Serial form which resists narrative closure
2. Multiple characters and plots
3. Use of time which parallels actual time and implies that the action continues to take place whether we watch it or not
4. Abrupt segmentation between parts
5. Emphasis on dialogue, problem solving, and intimate conversation
6. Male characters who are “sensitive men”
7. Female characters who are often professional and otherwise powerful in the world outside the home
8. The home or some other place which functions as a home, as the setting for the show

Traditional realist narratives have a beginning, middle, and an end, but soap opera realism works through an infinitely extended middle. Traditional narrative begins with a state of equilibrium which is disturbed: the plot traces the effects of this disturbance through to the final resolution, which restores a new and possible different equilibrium (Fiske, 1987).

The extended middle is one of the most distinguishing features of soap operas. They are never in a state of equilibrium, but their world is one of perpetual disturbances and threats. The happy, stable family is constantly there in the background, but is never achieved. Fiske (1987) states that marriage in a soap opera is not the same as a marriage in a traditional romance in which the couples are expected to live happily ever after. All soap opera marriages have within them the seeds of their own destruction. Soap operas celebrate marriages just as they interrogate them.

Highlighting the other features Fiske (1987, P.181) in his book *Television Culture* puts forth the elements of status quo and disruption:
The dominant ideology is inscribed in the status quo, and soap operas offer their subordinated women viewers the pleasure of seeing the status quo in a constant state of disruption. Disruption without resolution produces openness in the text. It can be read dominantly (patriarchally): such readings would produce fans who return to their more “normal” marriages with a sense of relief. But disruption can also serve to interrogate the status quo. The powerful women who disrupt men’s power are both loved and hated, their actions praised and condemned.

Deferral is another characteristic of soap operas. There are many obstacles after obstacles placed in between desire and fulfillment. No solutions are final, smooth patches are never free from the sense of impending disasters (Fiske, 1987). The triumphs are small and temporary. The mini-climaxes complicate as much as they resolve. Modleski’s (1983) striking comment ‘pleasure comes from anticipation rather than resolution’ sums up the issue. The sound track of soap operas is full of words, and the screen is full of close ups of faces.

The ‘good’ male in the daytime soaps is caring, nurturing, and vocal. He will talk about feelings and people and rarely expresses his masculinity in direct action. He retains the masculine power, but that power is given a feminine inflection. Another interesting feature of soap opera is that women and men in the soap operas are probably more equal than in any other form of art or drama or in any area of real life (Lopate, 1977). The “macho” characteristics of goal centeredness, assertiveness, and the morality of the strongest that identify the hero in the masculine television tend here to be characteristics of the villain.

Traditional feminine characteristics are depicted often as weaknesses ensuring women’s subordination. But the villainess in soap opera turns into a source of strength. Sometimes she uses pregnancy, real or alleged, as a
weapon and she uses her sexuality for her own ends, not for masculine pleasure. She reverses male and female roles and, above all, she embodies the female desire for power that is both produced and frustrated by the social relations of patriarchy. The final control that the villainess strives for is ‘control not over men, but over feminine passivity’ (Modleski, 1982, p.97).

The portrayal of villainesses in soap operas is placed in the framework of moral disapproval, and follows them at work through a repeated narrative structure that denies their ultimate success. The women viewers sometimes side with her and on some occasions desire her downfall. The contradictions in the text and its readings reflect the contradictions inherent in the attempt to assert feminine values within and against a patriarchal society. Fiske (1987) argues that devalued representations of feminine control leave patriarchy unchallenged and the villainess acts as a mere safety valve for feminine anger, or as a more fantasy of feminine power.

Characteristics of television soap opera outlined above are not confined to the soap operas of the US and Britain. They are common to soaps of other countries too including India. These characteristics could be found in the 156 episodes of Hum Log to Buniyaad of the 1980s to the much recent Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi, Kahani Ghar Gharki, Vidai, Balika Vadhu as well as the Malayalam soaps of Sthree, Kalyani and Ente Manasaputhri just to name a few.

1.4 INDIAN TELEVISION SCENARIO

Such a trend was also in evidence in India where television made its debut as an educational tool in New Delhi on an experimental basis on September 15, 1959 with a limited transmission of three days a week. The broadcasts were entirely educational. For viewing these programmes, 180 teleclubs were set up within the range of 40 km of the transmitter in New
Delhi and each of the clubs was provided with a black and white television set sponsored by the UNESCO. All India Radio (AIR), which was in charge of the broadcasts, provided the engineering and programme software. Pursuing the philosophy that television was not considered a medium of entertainment but primarily an educational tool, television programmes for teachers began in 1961. Such an emphasis on education remained in focus when a daily broadcast of one hour began in 1965.

The period between 1972 and 1982 saw a slow expansion of television in India. In 1972 television service was extended to Bombay. By 1975, Calcutta, Madras, Srinagar, Amritsar and Lucknow had television stations. In 1975-76 the Satellite Instructional Television Experiment (SITE), one of the largest communication experiments in the world, brought television to 2,400 villages of Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Orissa. In 1976, television was delinked from AIR and was brought under an independent organisation called Doordarshan.

A major impetus to television came when India hosted the 1982 Asian Games in New Delhi. Doordarshan switched over to colour transmission on August 15, 1982 and went about setting up low power transmitters across the country. Since then the number of transmitters and programme production centres has increased significantly. In November 19, 1984, a second channel was launched in New Delhi. Later, on April 1, 1993 the Metro entertainment channel was started. At present, Doordarshan has 30 channels. DD-1 is the primary channel, the flagship of Doordarshan.

Doordarshan has a three-tier programme service: the national, the regional and the local. In the national service, the focus is on national integration, communal harmony and programmes such as news, current affairs and entertainment. The regional programmes originate from the capitals of the states. These programmes are in the language and idioms of the
particular region. The local programmes are area-specific and cover local issues featuring local people.

Foreign satellite networks began transmission during the Gulf War in 1991. That led to the emergence of the cable operators, an important link in the distribution of scores of foreign and private domestic television channels. These channels have come to pose a real threat to Doordarshan. With the phenomenal growth of satellite and cable television in India, the Cable Television Network (Regulations) Bill was introduced in 1993 to regulate the operation of cable television networks in the country.

Doordarshan had been under government control as an appendix to AIR right from its inception in 1959. Although it was delinked in 1976 from All India Radio, it remained under the direct control of the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India. The demand for autonomy for the broadcast media was, however, gaining greater support. The National Front Government led by Mr. V. P. Singh introduced a Bill in the Parliament in January 1990 to grant autonomy to the broadcast media in the country. The Act was kept idle for seven years. Finally the Act came into force on September 22, 1997. The Prasar Bharati Board was formed paving the way for granting autonomy to Doordarshan and All India Radio.

1.4.1 Origin and Growth of Indian Soap Operas

For almost two decades after introducing television broadcasting, the Government of India used television medium as an instrument of social change and produced programmes which focused on issues like national integration, agricultural development, literacy, education, health and family welfare besides featuring programmes based on Indian culture – classical and traditional music, dance and folk arts. However, things began to change during the 1980s. Doordarshan, gradually, moved away from its exclusive
focus on educational programmes and began experimenting with entertainment programming. Thus, on July 7, 1984 it began broadcasting *Hum Log* (We, the People), a part-educational and part-entertainment television soap opera. Although soap operas are of American origin, Doordarshan modelled *Hum Log* upon Latin American telenovelas, the name by which soap operas were known in that region. The model they adopted was Peruvian development oriented telenovela, *Simplemente Maria*, produced in Miguel Sabido.

To plan soap operas for Doordarshan, Sabido was invited to New Delhi. He introduced the concept of development-oriented soap operas to Doordarshan officials. Soon, a plan to produce *Hum Log*, an Indian-style telenovela was soon finalised. Written and directed by the Hindi litterateur Manohar Shyam Joshi, the first Indian soap opera focused on social themes like respect for women, family harmony, population control and the like. Its story revolved around the everyday activities of a north-Indian joint-family, with each episode focusing on the triumphs and tribulations of one or more of the nine central characters across three generations. Although everyday conflicts and tensions in relationships among parents and children, grandparents and grandchildren, siblings and cousins provided the necessary elements to serialise the episodic narrative, nationalist issues of patriotic pride, family planning, gender relations and communal harmony also became central to the definition of *Hum Log* as the story of an 'Indian' family. Over the course of the 156 episodes of *Hum Log* in 1984-85, Ashok Kumar, the venerated Hindi film star of yesteryears, appeared at the beginning and the end of each episode to introduce and summarise the central themes of the 22-minute narrative. He addressed the conflicts and moral dilemmas of *Hum Log* in terms of their relevance for a typical Indian family. At the end of his one-minute monologue, Ashok Kumar left the story in tantalising suspense, with
an invitation to the viewer to find out what happens next in the story by tuning in to the next episode of *Hum Log*.

In addition to weaving development oriented social messages into its narrative, *Hum Log* borrowed from many other narrative traditions: it used the melodramatic technique of Hindi films; its narrative address and structure were drawn from US soap operas (Mankekar 2000). It utilized the entertainment-education strategy by intentionally placing education content in this entertainment message (Singhal and Rogers, 1999).

Singhal and Rogers’ (1989) study showed that a high degree of para-social interaction occurred between the audience and the *Hum Log* characters. Para-social interaction is the perceived face-to-face interpersonal relationship that develops between a television viewer and a media role model (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Singhal and Rogers note that *Hum Log* achieved audience ratings of 65 to 90 per cent in North India and between 20 and 45 per cent in the main cities of South India. About 50 million people watched *Hum Log*. It attracted a huge number of letters, over 4,00,000 from viewers on a weekly basis.

The main lesson from the *Hum Log* experience was that indigenous soap operas had the potential of attracting a large audience in India. Soaps which aimed at giving development-related messages in an entertaining way became the buzz-word. *Hum Log* was followed by the landmark 104-episode soap, *Buniyaad*, which centred on the 1947 partition of the Indian sub-continent. Written by the *Hum Log* scriptwriter, Manohar Shyam Joshi, *Buniyaad* went to overshadow *Hum Log* in its popularity.

### 1.4.2 Ramayan and Mahabharat

The unprecedented success of *Hum Log*, *Buniyaad* and other serials paved the way for the telecast of *Ramayan*, a mythological epic, which was
part-religious, part-social, part-dramatic and part-soap-operatic. The 78-episode *Ramayan* serial, written and directed by Ramanand Sagar, was aired on Sundays at 9.30 am on Doordarshan from January 25, 1987 to July 31, 1988. It was enormously popular, drawing over 100 million viewers (Lutgendorf, 1991).

Even before the euphoria over the successful telecast of *Ramayan* had subsided, Doordarshan began airing a serialised version of another epic, *Mahabharat*. When it was first broadcast by Doordarshan between 1989 and 1990, *Mahabharat* outscored even the astronomical viewership figures attained by the *Ramayan* serial which it had replaced in the prime time on Sunday mornings. *Mahabharat* was reportedly seen with ritual regularity by over 90 per cent of all Indian television homes, transcending boundaries of religion, caste, class, language, region and political allegiance (Kumar, 2005).

The Government of India decided to open up the skies and permit private satellite channels to telecast programmes in the country from the 1990s. Thus the era of the global television had arrived. The small screen began to offer great variety to the viewer. With the advent of satellite channels like Zee TV, Star TV, Sony TV and an array of others, the golden era of television had begun. What it meant was more channels, more programmes and more competition for the viewers’ attention. By the end of 1990s there were more than 36 channels on TV catering to all kinds of tastes and the programmes became more varied and target-specific. Television channels shifted to mega-budget serials some rivaling price tags of big screen productions. Soaps like *Swabhiman, Shanti, Vansh, Chandrakanta, Shriman Shrimati, Kabhi Yeh Kabhi Ho* and the like transformed television into a multi-hyphenated entertainment package.

In 2000 came the *Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi* (Because, a Mother-in-Law Was Once a Daughter-in-Law Too) which remains the longest
running Indian soap opera. Telecast on Star Plus channel, this immensely popular show was different from *Hum Log*. Instead of any socially relevant messages, the plots revolve around elitist intrigues, extra marital affairs and bitter rivalries. Lajoji of *Buniyaad* and Laloo of *Hum Log* have given way to Svetlana of *Swabhimaan* and Yash Thakur of *Andaaz* (Khosla, 1999).

1.4.3 Soap Operas in Kerala

Although television made its debut in India in 1959, it took more than two decades to reach Kerala. After repeated pressures by the State Government, a one kilowatt low power transmitter (LPT) was installed in Thiruvananthapuram in 1982 to relay programmes from New Delhi. A small room in Tagore Theater was temporarily converted as the venue for the pioneering television broadcasting. The inaugural function of the IX Asian Games held in New Delhi on November 19, 1982 was the first programme relayed from this centre and the programmes reached viewers in 10 to 15 km radius in the city. People crowded in front of television sets to get a glimpse of visuals hitherto unseen by Malayalees. For nearly two years this centre merely relayed Delhi Doordarshan programmes for a few hours in the evening.

Finally a full-fledged Doordarshan Kendra at Kodappanakunnu, 15 km from Thiruvananthapuram, was formally opened on January 1, 1985 by the then Chief Minister, Sri K. Karunakaran. The live telecast of the two-hour long inauguration and entertainment programmes was the first Malayalam programme beamed from here. However, the programmes reached only to a very limited area around the transmitter. Later, on April 14, 1985 a 10-kilowatt high power transmitter (HPT) was installed and thus the broadcast was available to a larger area in the city. Other parts of the State gained access to television programme with the setting up of relay centres at Kochi and Kozhikode in 1988. The Thiruvananthapuram DD in the initial period
produced ten-minute news bulletin and hour-long programmes in the evening and then switched over to the national network of programmes, mostly in Hindi. Gradually, the duration of the programmes from here was enhanced to two-and-half hours and later to six hours. Even though Doordarshan was a pioneer in broadcasting Malayalam programmes its fare was not to the tastes of a large majority of people.

But the viewers had no choice but to be content with DD programmes until August 1993 when Asianet, the first private television channel in Malayalam and also the first regional channel in India, began satellite broadcasting. Since Government of India did not permit private television channels to uplink programmes from the country, Asianet had to set up its studios on foreign locations and broadcast the programme using a Russian satellite. This channel, right from the beginning, catered to entertainment and information needs not met so far by State-run Doordarshan. To reach more viewers, Asianet set up an elaborate cable network in collaboration with Kerala State Electricity Board (KSEB) to take its programme to larger sections of population. Its focus on entertainment especially films and film–based programmes along with news and news based programmes made the channel very popular.

Five years later, Madras-based Sun TV network launched a Malayalam channel, Surya TV. The new channel heavily focused upon entertainment programmes and sensational news stories. Within a short time, its fare was well accepted by the Malayalee audience. The third private television channel in Malayalam, Kairali, under the aegis of Communist Party of India (Marxist), was launched on August 17, 2000. It was a 24 hour news and entertainment channel right from the beginning.

India Vision, the first 24-hour exclusive news channel in Malayalam, commenced operation on April 21, 2003. It ushered in an era of professional
news gathering and live reports of events as they unfolded. News bulletins in Malayalam, which so far largely consisted of a reading exercise, witnessed a sea change with the arrival of *India Vision*. *Jeevan TV*, an enterprise by the Catholic Church in 2002; *Amrita TV* by Amritananadamayi Matt; *Shalom TV* (2005), an exclusive channel for Christian devotional programmes promoted by a Catholic organization in 2005; *Manorama News*, an exclusive news channel from the house of Malayala Manorama in 2007; and *Jai Hind*, backed by Kerala Pradesh Congress Committee (KPCC) in 2008 are the other private channels in Malayalam that made debut in the present decade. *Asianet, Kairali, Surya,* and *India Vision* have presently more than one channel each that offer specialized programmes.

1.4.4 The Early Malayalam Serials

As stated earlier television with pro-development themes broadcast by Delhi *Doordarshan* attracted huge audiences in the Hindi belt and also generated enormous revenue. Besides, this genre opened up vast avenues to create awareness on several gripping problems that the country faced. Serials in Hindi, addressed largely to North Indian audiences, were unable to converse with the entire nation. Hence, soap operas were replicated in regional languages by adhering to the general guidelines but they could localize the setting, themes and characters. Thus, along with the Hindi serials, we saw the birth of serials in regional languages.

In the beginning, adaptations of well known regional literary works were given preference in the regional languages. *Vaitharani*, an adaptation of a radio play by noted playwright T. N. Gopinathan Nair and directed by celebrated writer and film director P. Bhaskaran, is said to be the first soap opera in Malayalam, telecast from Thiruvananthapuram *Doordarshan* Kendra. This weekly serial which consisted of 13 episodes was aired at 7 pm from November 1988 to February 1989. M. T. Baby wrote the script and
Azhagappan was the cameraman. Roopvani, a Thiruvananthapuram-based television enterprise, produced the serial in which P. C. Soman, Ravi Vallathol, Jaganathan, Manoj K. Jayan, Lalitha, Meena Krishnan and V. Harikumar played the leading roles. The story revolved around a village postman and his eleven children. The serial aimed at imparting positive messages on family planning, sanitation, self-employment and so on. Although the serial lacked technical excellence, it was down to earth in depicting the real living conditions of ordinary people. Invariably, the pioneering serials were down to earth and reflected the living style of the majority unlike the present day serials which largely indulge in portraying the lives of the middle and upper class with lavish settings and props.

Apart from Vaitharani, two other serials namely Rohini directed by Rajasekharan and Varam directed by G. S. Vijayan were also telecast from November 1988. The serials turned out to be a huge success and this led Doordarshan to commission more serials. Thirteen-episode serial was the order of the day in which one episode was telecast once a week. This numeral 13 was sacrosanct in Doordarshan circles and it was obtained by dividing 52 weeks in a year by four so that a serial lasted for a quarter of a year.

The weekly serial that lasted for 13 episodes (13 weeks) was the accepted norm for a long time in Doordarshan. The duration of Malayalam broadcast in the late 80s and in the early 90s was limited to a few hours in the evening. With the launch of morning broadcast of Malayalam programmes on Sundays, there came the 52-week serial. Vamsam, directed by Sreekuttan, was the beginning of the lengthier versions (52 episodes) of serials in Malayalam.

In general, there are four types of programmes on Doordarshan. The first is the in-house productions made by DD’s own staff with the facilities at the centre. The second is the royalty programmes in which DD buys the
broadcasting rights of programmes such as documentaries and musical programmes after paying a fixed royalty. Commissioned programmes are the third category in which DD awards a higher rate of royalty and gets the rights. In sponsored programmes, the sponsor pays an agreed upon telecasting fee to DD and in turn the sponsor is allowed to air advertisements for a fixed time. Serials telecast in Doordarshan mostly fell into this sponsored category.

Among the above mentioned private channels, Asianet and Surya TV were the frontrunners in telecasting serials which drew Malayalee audience like never before and to this day they continue to be the champions of serials by dedicating the prime time in these channels to serials. Taking a cue from Doordarshan, Asianet began with weekly serials but soon switched over to daily (Monday to Friday) format. The credit for initiating a megaserial also goes to Asianet. Stri, directed by Shyam Sunder, broadcast on Asianet, was the first megaserial in Malayalam and it was a definite breakthrough in television industry. This serial broadcast at 7.30 pm was rated as one of the most watched programmes by Malayalee viewers in those days. The narrative structure of the serial was melodramatic, women-centred and sentimental. The audience was mostly comprised of women but men and children also sat along to form a large family audience. The success of a serial directly depended on the melodramatic and sentimental contents in its narrative structure. It became hugely popular and at the same time generated revenue hitherto unheard of in Malayalam television. Of the 30-minute episode, 27 minutes were set apart for the story at the beginning of the telecast. But later it was reduced to 16-18 minutes to accommodate more time for advertisement. The title song was also cut in order to sell time.

Presently, of the 16 Malayalam channels five broadcast 22 serials from Monday to Friday (See Table 3.2, Page No.61). Prime time in Asianet and Surya are dedicated almost exclusively to serials. These channels have also
hour-long weekly and biweekly serials on Saturday and Sunday evenings. In addition, they repeat previous day’s serials on the following day’s morning and afternoon slots. The re-runs of some of the popular serials are also shown during daytime in these channels. Doordarshan Malayalam broadcasts serials in the afternoon.

With such omnipresence, television has permeated into every facet of modern life. A world without television is difficult to visualise. It is more than an electronic gadget, a vibrant link through which people come to know about themselves and others and about events and issues unfolding nearer and far away from home. Television, through its numerous genres of programmes, socialises, internalises and naturalises the world around and beyond. Increasingly, more and more people spend a substantial portion of their leisure time with this medium. The comperes, characters, families and places become, over a period of time, the immediate neighbourhood. Through familiarity and intimacy, television audiences are likely to imbibe the norms, codes and ideology embedded in television texts.

Thus, television has come to play a critical role in the culture dynamics of societies everywhere. In particular, the soap opera genre which is reckoned to have a telling two-way effect on culture and people has become the focus of media analyses and cultural studies. The importance of television serials in society and how society negotiates with them is the central topic of the present study. To understand and appraise the negotiation between the audience and television serials we need to have a clear understanding of what culture is. It calls for an enquiry into the way in which culture is produced, reproduced and negotiated in a mass mediated society. Certain broad questions about culture, its definitions and characteristics must be discussed as an essential background for the present study. A brief overview of these areas is presented in the succeeding units.
1.5 CULTURE

Culture evolves over a period of time. The evolution of human beings, as is commonly known, advances in stages from instinctive behaviour to learned and freely variable behaviour. And many of these behavioural traits are transmitted from one generation to another, evolving in a system of codes, practices, beliefs and traditions.

The term ‘culture’ is used in a wide variety of contexts. As Raymond Williams, a pioneer in cultural studies points out, ‘culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language … which has now come to be used for important concepts in several distinct systems of thought’ (1976: 76-77). The term derived from the Latin word cultura which is traced to the root colere which means inhabit, cultivate, protect, honour with worship etc. Some of these meanings eventually separated in the derived nouns. Thus ‘inhabit’ developed through colonus to colony. ‘Honour with worship’ developed through cultus to cult. Cultura took on the main meanings of cultivation or tending. Culture in all its early use was a noun of process: the tending of something, basically crops or animals (Duncombe, 2002).

Williams (1976) has succinctly identified the historical shifts in the current uses of the term ‘culture’. In the first usage, it refers to the intellectual, spiritual, and aesthetic development of an individual, group, or society. In the second usage, it tends to capture a range of intellectual and artistic activities and their products (film, art, theatre etc.). In this usage, culture is more or less synonymous with ‘the arts.’ These two uses were the most common and they were incorporated into intellectual and literary works. Equating culture with civilization and its resultant individual or moral progress in this manner is considered elitist by some scholars. These views seek to validate and
privileges artistic products that dominant social groups consider as important or interesting.

The third usage popularised by social anthropologists and academicians of cultural studies remains central to the discipline and it is far more inclusive than the first two usages. This view contends that culture can be found everywhere and not just in the high arts or in the Western civilisation; it is associated with the everyday life, activities, beliefs and customs of people, groups and society.

All social units both at the micro and macro levels have a culture. Micro-level relationship develops a culture over a period of time. For example, in friendships, patterns develop based on shared experiences, language codes, behavioural pattern, likes, dislikes, habits and rituals that provide a special character to the relationship. The special dates, songs, cinema, persons, events etc. will have unique social and emotional value for the members of the group. These, however, will be irrelevant and meaningless for the members of another distinct group. At the macro-level too, groups develop a culture which differentiates them from others. Over a period of time, the way a particular group at the macro-level goes about socialising and conducting its affairs will eventually become the specific elements of its culture. Similarly, organizations, associations and political parties have also cultures that bind the members together with their ideology, dressing code, meeting style, hierarchical relationship and functioning.

For Ruben (2001), the most complex and rich cultures are those that are associated with a society or a nation and the term culture is most commonly used to refer to these characteristics including language and language usage, patterns, rituals, customs, norms and so on. Thus, in this sense, nations are referred to as the Indian culture, Chinese culture, Japanese culture and so on. A national culture also includes such elements as
significant historical events and characters, social customs, religious practices, beliefs and value systems, and systems of law.

As pointed out earlier, any social unit, be it a group, organization, political party, society or nation, develops a culture over a period of time. The culture so developed performs certain essential functions. The first is to link individuals to one another, the second is to provide the basis for a common identity and finally to create a context for interaction and negotiation among members. These functions get actualised through inter-personal, inter-community discourses – a communication activity.

Culture and communication are therefore described as the two sides of the same coin. The relationship between them is complex as well as intimate and integral. Cultural components like customs, roles, rules, rituals, laws and other patterns are created and shared through communication. Culture emerges and is transmitted through the interaction between individuals at various levels. Without communication, and of course mass media, it would be impossible to preserve and pass along cultural characteristics from one generation to another or from one place to another. As Ruben (2001) rightly points out, culture is created, shaped, transmitted and learned through communication. The reverse is also true; that is, communication practices are largely created, shaped and transmitted by culture. Thus, culture and communication share a dialectical or dialogical relationship which encompasses all the possible spectrums of engendering, evolution, growth, disintegration etc.

1.5.1 Defining Culture

Culture has been understood in a wide variety of ways. It has been analysed by academicians from the narrow constraints of their respective disciplines. Because of these reasons, an attempt to define culture that can
address the different understandings of the term is challenging, demanding and almost impossible. Anthropologists Kroeber and Kluchohn (1952) collected 147 definitions of culture and grouped them under six broad categories.

1. **Descriptive definitions** tend to see culture as a comprehensive totality making up the sum of social life and list the various fields making up culture. An influential starting point for this understanding was a definition by Tylor in 1871. He writes: “Culture or civilization … is that complex whole which includes knowledge, beliefs, art, laws, morals, customs and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.” (cited in Kroeber and Kluchohn, 1952, p. 43). This definition includes both ideas (art, morals, laws) and activities (custom, habits).

2. **Historical definitions** tend to see culture as a heritage which is passed on over time through the generations. For example, as Burgess explains: “The culture of a group is the sum total and organization of the social heritages which have acquired a social meaning because of racial temperament and of the historical life of the group.” (cited in Kroeber and Kluchohn, 1952, p. 47)

3. **Normative definitions.** These can take two forms: the first implies that culture is a rule or way of life that shapes patterns of concrete behaviour and action; the second emphasizes the role of values without reference to behaviour.

4. **Psychological definitions** of culture emphasize its role as a problem solving device, allowing people to communicate, learn, or fulfil material and emotional needs.

5. **Structural definitions** point to the “organized interrelations of the isolable aspects of culture” (Kroeber and Kluchohn, 1952, p.61). These
definitions highlight the notion that culture is an abstraction that is different from concrete behaviour.

6. Genetic definitions define culture in terms of how it comes into existence and continues to exist. These definitions explain culture as arising from human interaction or continuing to exist as the product of intergenerational transmission.

Fiske (1995, p.1) defines culture as the ‘constant process of producing meanings of and from our social experience’ and that ‘such meanings produce a social identity for the people involved.’ This view of culture as an ongoing process contrasts with older versions equating culture with fixed patterns or with the results of cultural practices, especially valued cultural artefacts. The making of meaning involves the ‘reading’ of texts, a term which encompasses a wide range of symbolically encoded items, including commodities, clothes, language and structured social practices, as well as the more conventional notion of all kinds of media products (television programmes, books, songs, films, etc.) This approach, known as the culturalist approach, takes in all aspects of the production, the forms and the reception of ‘texts’ and the discourses that surround them.

Anthropologist Margaret Mead defines culture as the learned behaviour of a society or a subgroup (cited in Sardar & Loon, 1997). Raymond Williams, one of the pioneers of cultural studies, defines it in the following way: ‘Culture includes the organisation of production, the structure of the family, the structure of the institutions which express or govern social relationships, the characteristic forms through which members of the society communicate’ (cited in Sardar & Loon, 1997). Clifford Geertz, Professor of Social Science at Princeton University, defines it thus: ‘culture is simply the ensemble of stories we tell ourselves about ourselves’ (cited in Sardar & Loon, 1997)
James Carey (1988) advocated an approach to communication and society in which culture is allotted a central place. He defined communication as ‘a symbolic process whereby reality is produced, maintained, repaired and transformed. Culture is defined by him as a process, but it can also refer to some shared attributes of a human group (such as their physical environment, tools, religion, customs and practices or their whole way of life). Culture also can refer to texts and symbolic artefacts that are encoded with particular meanings by and for people with a particular cultural identification.

1.5.2 Categorisation of Culture

Culture has been broadly interpreted by different people and some of them specialise or focus on specific areas of culture such as high culture, low culture, public culture, mass culture, youth culture, post modern culture, gay culture, colonial culture and so on. We shall focus on mass culture or popular culture, the specific area of this study. These terms have been used interchangeably in this study.

High/low Brow Culture

Mass culture is generally described as the culture of the masses. It comprises certain forms of entertainment and fiction that appeal to the majority and is also often referred to as low culture. The British canonical literary tradition categorises culture into elite or highbrow culture and lowbrow or popular culture. Elite cultural objects and practice are those favoured by the socially privileged and well-educated, who are believed to be uniquely capable of understating and appreciating them. Lowbrow or popular culture is essentially everything that is not elite culture. From an elitist perspective popular culture is trivial, debased and deficient when compared with the standards set by the high brow culture. The British tradition of categorising cultural products into high and low has parallels almost
universally. Kerala is no exception where a clear cut distinction between elite and lower forms of arts and literature is prevalent. *Kathakali, Mohaniyattam, Bharatanatyam* and so on which were patronised by privileged sections of the society are considered facets of elite culture while the many forms of folk art, *Kathaprasangam, mimics, ganamela*, cinematic dances etc. are considered forms of low brow culture. In the literary field too, the works of Thunchan, Unnai Warrier, Kumaranasan, Vallathol, Ulloor et al are considered classics while the writings of several popular writers such as Muttathu Varkey, C.V. Nirmala and Kottayam Pushpanath to name a few are considered banal and derogatorily labelled *painkily* (titillating literature).

Harrington and Bielby (2001) are of the view that the designation of an object or practice as highbrow or lowbrow depends upon several interrelated variables. First is the degree of accessibility: the more accessible the object or practice the more likely it is to be labelled lowbrow. A second variable is the degree of emotional distance adopted by consumers vis-à-vis the cultural text in question. The final variable is the authorship of the object or the practice that is traceable to a uniquely gifted creative genius.

Raymond Williams argues that the word ‘popular’ has at least four current meanings. First, it can refer simply to those objects or practices that are well-liked by a lot of people. Secondly, it can be used to refer to objects or practices deemed inferior and unworthy. In this view, popular culture is everything left over after we have identified what constitutes elite or high culture, that is, the paintings, sculpture and symphonies typically associated with the wealthy and the well educated. Thirdly, the term can also refer to ‘work deliberately setting out to win favour with the people.’ In this sense, popular culture is explicitly commercial; it is work that is produced to be consumed widely. In this sense, entertainment genre such as films, television soaps and reality shows are examples of popular culture. Finally, the term
can refer to the objects and practices ‘actually made by the people for themselves’ (Williams, 1983, p.237).

For Mukherji and Schudson (1991,) popular culture refers to the beliefs and practices through which they are organized, and the objects through which they are widely shared among a population. Although mass entertainment is the primary arena of popular culture, the term also includes other beliefs and practices that comprise our everyday lived experience: the food we eat, the clothing we wear, the people we spend time with, the gossip we share, the roadways we travel, and so forth. O’Sullivan et al (1996) define popular culture as of the people, for the people in general and well liked by people in general. In the same vein, Fiske (1987) points out that the primary virtue of popular culture is that it is popular, that is, it is of the people and dependent on people power. The mass media are largely responsible for what we call either mass culture or popular culture and they have in one way or other colonized other cultural forms in the process. The most widely disseminated and enjoyed culture of our time is what flows in abundance by way of the media of films, television, newspapers, phonogram, video etc.

The public communication systems of newspapers, advertisements, television programmes and feature films have undoubtedly played a crucial role in contributing to the growth and popularity of popular culture. And cultural studies have endeavoured to fathom the complexities of media forms such as thrillers, soap operas and the like as mechanisms for ordering meaning in particular ways.

1.5.3 Characteristics of Culture

Edward Hall (1959, 1979), one of the most significant contributors to the general understanding of the complexity of culture and importance of communication, identified the following traits of culture:
Culture is subjective: There is a general belief that the elements of one’s culture are logical and make good sense to all. But that is not the case. Culture often remains subjective - specific to a group, community and society. For example, while one society encourages women to cover their heads in public places, other societies discourage the practice. Likewise, an individual from a culture that permits a person to have only one wife can feel awkward in another culture which permits one person to have multiple partners.

Cultures change over time: Culture is not static. It keeps on evolving and changing, often slowly and imperceptibly. Many forces influence such changes. As Ruben (2000) notes, cultures get created and undergo changes through communication between individuals belonging to different cultures. Increased travel, new communication technologies and media proliferation accelerate the movement of messages from one cultural context to another and lead to cultural changes. The metaphors of ‘global village’, ‘one world’ etc. refer to the ubiquity and inevitability of influences and changes in culture everywhere.

Culture is largely invisible: Certain facets of culture are visible. But most of the critical aspects of it, though present, are invisible. For example, language, signs, symbols, behaviours, rituals etc. are visible. But the meanings they evoke and invoke remain invisible. For example, the rituals of marriages and death generate meanings that are not visible. Similarly, several of the invisible facets include interpersonal relationship within and outside family, and beliefs in and attitudes towards societal norms such as the role of women in conjugal relations, parental control and women’s involvement in vocations. Mangalsutra is a visible symbol which signifies not only wedded state but also marital fidelity, stability of family, belonging etc., aspects which remain invisible but central to society.
O'Sullivan et al (1983) have described culture as: ‘the institutionally or informally organized social production and reproduction of sense, meaning and consciousness.’ This definition focuses on two agents, that is, informal (interpersonal interactions, gossips) and institutional (mass media) channels that produce and reproduce culture. The term culture, according to them, is multi-discursive and its meaning is determined by its usage within a particular discourse. The emphasis on sense, meaning and consciousness is the focal point in cultural studies. Culture as a set of practices is not specifically mentioned in this definition. But practices are implied since it is through a set of material practices that institutional and informal channels produce and reproduce culture.

The definition of culture by O'Sullivan et al which focuses on the informal and institutional channels responsible for the production and reproduction of culture is significant for the present study. With mass media being the major institutional channel for the transmission of culture, the study of mass communication assumes significance. Media programmes are taken as ‘texts’ and the audiences of these programmes are considered as ‘readers of texts.’

As noted above, culture has been defined and analysed by several scholars wherein the common thread could be detected. In cognizance of this fact, this study uses the definition of culture given by O'Sullivan et al.

1.6 CULTURAL STUDIES

Cultural studies has emerged as a new field of study. It has made its presence felt not just in arts, humanities and social sciences but also in science and technology. Unlike other branches of study which have clearly demarcated subject areas, cultural studies has a wide subject canvas. It borrows heavily from other social sciences and all branches of humanities and
arts. It appropriates theories and methodologies from sociology, anthropology, psychology, linguistics, philosophy, media studies, political science and so on. As stated earlier, the elitist notion of culture which looked down upon the popular culture of the masses prevailed over for a long time until the emergence of cultural studies which focussed on popular culture. The credit for introducing mass or popular culture into the realm of academic discourse goes to the Frankfurt School and Birmingham School.

1.6.1 The Frankfurt and Birmingham Schools

The Frankfurt School refers to the works of those philosophers, cultural critics and social scientist that belonged, or were associated with, the Frankfurt Institute of Social Research in Germany. The Frankfurt School’s focus was on the critical analysis of modern culture and society in the Marxist tradition. The institute was opened in 1924. With Hitler’s assumption of power in Germany in 1933, most of the thinkers of the institute had to take shelter in France, Soviet Union, Great Britain and the US. Those who fled to the US revived the school there and after the end of World War II some of them returned to Frankfurt and continued their work. This school initiated research into the hitherto ignored mass culture. The main contributors included Theodor Adorno, Marx Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse and Leo Lowenthal.

Birmingham School is another important academic institution among the pioneers of cultural studies. This name is used to denote a number of authors associated with the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at the University of Birmingham, England. Founded by Richard Hoggart, in association with Stuart Hall in 1964, the school had a major influence in the development of critical cultural studies, including reception research and feminist media studies.
The critical approach associated with the Birmingham School was also responsible for an important shift from the question of ideology embedded in media texts to the question of how this ideology might be ‘read’ by its audience. Stuart Hall (1980) proposed a model of ‘encoding-decoding media discourse’ which represented the media texts as located between its producers, who framed meaning in a certain way and its audience, who ‘decoded’ the meaning according to their rather different social situations and frames of interpretation.

Cultural studies emerged in Great Britain during the 1950s in a context of growing affluence and attendant changes in the routines of daily life, especially the expansion of consumerism. Smith (2001, p.151) lists the following key orientations of British cultural studies:

1. It is strongly interdisciplinary in terms of research interests and theoretical influences.
2. There is a primary interest in exploring culture as a site where power and resistance are played out.
3. It validates the study of popular culture as well as “high culture”.
4. Political commitments to the concerns of the Left often influence research topics.

Richard Hoggart, Edward Thompson, Stuart Hall and Raymond Williams were the frontrunners of British Cultural Studies in the 1950s and 1960s. Hoggart is hailed as the pioneer of British cultural studies with his work *The Uses of Literary* in 1957. He focussed on the changes in the working class culture in particular as they are being encouraged by mass publications. He investigated the world view and life styles of the working class as well as their diverse arenas like work, home, family, oral tradition and religion. He concluded that older elements and attitudes were being challenged due to the impact of mass publications like tabloid newspaper,
paperback novels and glossy magazines and new forms of entertainment like jukebox. Hoggart was able to project the working class culture into the mainstream academic agenda at a time when popular culture was looked down as trivial and trash.

Thompson, the next most important proponent of cultural studies in Britain, encouraged research into everyday working class life and popular culture through his book *The Making of the English Working Class* in 1963. His writing on history focused attention on the perspectives and experiences of people who daily make and remake working class culture.

Raymond Williams’ *The Long Revolution* (1961) and *Culture and Society* (1958) took cultural studies beyond the disciplinary borders. Williams and Hoggart, hailing from a working class background and working in adult education system, found that elitist or the existing parameter of the study of culture had little resonance with values and life styles of the working class. They were convinced that a rethinking on popular culture and working class experience was a must. Williams’ *The Long Revolution* (1961), a major work on culture studies, focuses on sociological analyses of culture. He observes that literature and art as only one kind of ‘culture’ and puts forward an understanding of culture as an entire way of life. The role of institution is significant not only in reproducing and transmitting culture but also in changing its forms and the way we think about it. Williams states that ‘documenting culture’ which consist of writings, buildings and fashions will only provide an approximation of a lived culture with its distinct structure of feeling. Structure of feeling, according to him, is something that is shared by a community or generation and not an individual or personal experience. It is acquired only through socialisation and life experience and can not be learned by formal study. For Williams, culture should not be narrowed down to the disciplinary limits of arts, drama and literature. It is to be conceived as a
whole way of life represented in politics, anthropology, history, economics, communication and any and all future sources of community.

Stuart Hall, the director of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) from 1968 to 1981, influenced the theoretical perspectives of much of the research carried out at the centre and he elevated British cultural studies into new theoretical and methodological directions. Critical analysis of race and gender, structuralist procedures for the study of ideology and media, and ethnographic procedures for the study of media audiences were the focused areas of his research. For him, like the term culture, cultural studies is also a complicated and complex field of study; it encompasses the diverse ways in which culture is understood and analysed ranging from disciplines like sociology, history, ethnography, literary criticism, communication, anthropology.

The critical approach associated with the Birmingham School was also responsible for an important shift from the question of ideology embedded in media texts to the question of how this ideology might be ‘read’ by its audience. Stuart Hall (1980) proposed a model of ‘encoding-decoding media discourse’ which represented the media texts as located between its producers, who framed meaning in a certain way and its audience, who ‘decoded’ the meaning according to their rather different social situations and frames of reference.

Drawing on the political sociology of Parkin (1972), Hall suggested that there are three basic codes in circulation - one of ‘dominant’ meanings associated with power, a second ‘negotiated’ code which is essentially the code of the media in their role as neutral and professional carriers of information. There is a third, ‘oppositional’ code which is available to those who choose or who are led by circumstances, to view messages about reality differently and can ‘read between the lines’ of official versions of events. This
simple model recognizes that ideology as sent is not the same as ideology taken. While there may be so-called ‘preferred readings’ offered from above, they can either be treated with some distance and subjected to objective analyses or be perceived as ‘propaganda’ and resisted or subverted accordingly. The present study on Malayalam television serials is based on the ‘encoding –decoding media discourse’ model expanded by Stuart Hall.

Cultural studies, in some cases, attempts to remain an open field, defying methods and traditions. Cultural studies theorists Cary Nelson, Paula Trichler, and Lawrence Grossberg discuss cultural studies as defying research domains, methodologies, and an intellectual legacy of a tradition and language. Cultural studies crosses domains, or disciplines, from Marxism and feminism to psychoanalyses and postmodernism. Cultural studies also has no identifiable methodology and it is best described as a ‘bricolage’ of textual analysis, semiotics, deconstruction, ethnography, content analyses, survey research and other methods.

1.7 NEGOTIATION

Communication research in the first half of the 20th century focussed on what media do to its audience, that is, media content can have an immediate and direct effect on thoughts and actions of individuals. Later, attention was shifted to limited effects perspective mass communication. The research in this line concluded that media rarely had powerful and direct influence on individuals. This perspective further deliberated that mass communication created effects only on a few people and influencing trivial thoughts and actions.

Mass communication research further shifted to active audience perspective where the focus was on what people did with media rather than the earlier concept of what media did with people. Thus a perceptive shift was
visible here from source-dominated approach to audience-centred approach. Although the latter approach was round the corner from 1940s, it gained momentum and academic attention in the 1970s and 1980s at the hands of the exponents of cultural media researchers. By this time, the reach and use of television in Europe, the US and other countries expanded exponentially and research concentrated on what the viewers did with television programmes.

As stated earlier, the audience-centric approach was round the corner from 1940s. The uses and gratifications theory (Herzog, 1944; Schramm, 1954; Blumer, 1979) was one of the early audience-centric approach which conceived that individuals seek certain uses from media and derive satisfactions in terms of the motives and self perceived needs. McQuail (2005) lists some of the major gratifications sought from media such as information and education, guidance and advice, diversion and realization, social contact, value reinforcement, cultural satisfaction, emotional release, identity formation and confirmation, lifestyle expression, security, sexual arousal and filling time.

Stuart Hall, one of the prominent figures at the Birmingham University Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS), contributed greatly to the audience–centric approach popularly known as reception studies or reception analysis. Hall (1980) argued that researchers should direct their attention to the twin aspects of social and political context in which the content is produced (encoding) and the consumption of the media content (decoding).

A key feature of Hall’s reception analysis is the manner in which various types of audience make sense of media content. A centrally packaged programme beamed on a television will be understood, interpreted or negotiated by the viewers depending upon several factors. He stated that a programme/text can be read/decoded in three different ways.
**Dominant/preferred reading**

All messages/texts will have an intended meaning as perceived by the producer of the text. When a reader’s interpretation coincides with that of the producer(s), there takes place a dominant reading.

**Negotiated reading**

Media messages are also open and they can be interpreted according to context and cultural backgrounds of a viewer. Thus a reader may interpret the meaning of a message differently from what is intended by the producers. This process of understanding or interpreting a message differently from the preferred understanding is referred to as negotiated reading.

**Oppositional reading**

In some cases, individuals can make interpretations that are in direct opposition to preferred meaning. Thus depending upon a host of experiences and outlook, an individual may resist the intended meanings of the messages altogether and read them differently.

**1.7.1 Negotiation Process**

Further, negotiation of culture portrayed in soaps refers to the way the members of the audience process, understand and assimilate the information either as such or by redefining/modifying it to suit their own self. Negotiation of culture portrayed in television soaps is a complex process. It involves a complex linear structure affected in varying ways by the text of the portrayal, audience’s engagement with the text and their sociocultural antecedents. The linearity of the negotiation process consists of: i) soaps’ text, ii) audience’s attendance, iii) processing of the text, and iv) acting upon the meaning.
Soap’s Text

In qualitative research, any sign and symbol message system is referred to as ‘text’, a concept advanced and used by semiotitians. To a great extent, soaps’ text as conceived and presented to the audience determines the nature of the audience’s response. It is well known that all soap operas do not sell well. While some get rejected, some others are lapped up by the audience for considerably long periods. This suggests that the text of the soap opera matters. Factors such as the story line, the denotative and connotative cultural facets of the story, the appeal to the emotions, the unfolding drama, the way the ups and downs of life as managed by the characters, and soap production ingredients tell upon its popularity with the audience.

Audience’s Attendance

The audience is the master. It can make a soap endure or pack it off into oblivion. Audience is a heterogeneous entity. Its members belong to diverse social, economic and cultural backgrounds. Besides these antecedents, their frames of reference in relation to soaps’ text and cultural proximity with soaps’ settings and characters play an important role in the audience’s attendance of a given soap opera.

Processing of the Text

As the audience does not attend to the media messages uniformly, they tend to process messages in multifarious ways. In that, they are selective. They select a few messages and subject them to a processing in which they attach varying degrees of importance to the selected message(s). In addition, they also decide whether the selected message(s) should be subjected to the next stage of negotiation - understanding and assimilation of the meanings. The processing of text is a complex cognitive process as scores of variables of
the text and audience’s antecedents come to bear influence. Central to this stage are the aspects of comprehending the text, its interpretation followed by making meaning synchronous with one’s own frames of reference.

**Acting upon the Meaning**

Acting upon the meaning inferred or conjured from the messages is the last stage of negotiation. The meanings derived from messages may bring about attitudinal changes and/or behavioral changes. The former could either reinforce existing attitudes or modify them. Corresponding to the attitudinal changes, some changes in the behavior of the audience may also manifest. These changes could range from changes in the use of languages, relationship within groups, behavior patterns, to lifestyle facets.

Negotiation is a concept. Its construct is frame of references, that is, a set of viewpoints or presuppositions through which individuals assimilate and accommodate the incoming texts/messages of the central ideas of any communication, be it a news item, a novel or a television serial.

The present exploratory study is an attempt to investigate how audiences negotiate Malayalam television soap operas. Thus, in order to study the negotiation process, we need to assess the frames of reference of the individual viewers which will have a telling effect on the manner of reading a televised text.

**1.8 FRAME OF REFERENCE**

According to Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought (2nd Ed., 1980) a frame of reference is the context, viewpoint or a set of presuppositions or of evaluative criteria within which a person’s perceptions and thinking seem always to occur, and which constrains selectively the course and outcome of
these activities. Thus a frame of reference is the sum total of a person’s viewpoints, presuppositions, evaluative criteria with which he/she judges the sensory experiences. It also means that the frame of reference is a must for perception. Human mind imposes a frame on sense perception to make it sensible. All sensorial information/messages including television messages make sensible to an individual depending on his/her frame of reference.

A frame of reference is linked to Piagetian model of assimilation and accommodation (Piaget, 1972). What do we do with the incoming sense data? Piaget argues that this cognitive process is carried out through the above mentioned two components. In assimilation, an individual would fit new information into the existing mental framework in order to comprehend the world in terms of the existing concepts and modes of thought. In accommodation, an individual would alter existing concepts or mental frameworks in response to new information. We are constantly fed with numerous messages including television messages and they are processed and then made meaningful. While negotiating the messages of a soap opera, we are subjecting these messages to an assimilation process. In this context, the existing frames of reference play a dominant role in making the incoming messages meaningful. The opposite is also possible wherein the incoming messages alter the existing frame of reference.

The concept frame of reference draws parallel to the psychological notions of stereotyping and cognitive dissonance. In stereotyping we regard a class of objects or people as functionally equivalent. As long as this equivalence is maintained, the comprehending process goes smoothly. Any aberration is likely to be rejected. For example \textit{Sthree}, one of the trend setting mega-serial in Malayalam was a mini-screen hit. Indu, the lead character in
the serial, was meek, servile and an embodiment of a virtuous wife and mother. She was well accepted and endeared by the audience. Later a second part of *Sthree* was broadcast by the same channel with almost the same crew but with a different theme. Instead of a hapless character, Indu was portrayed a daring police officer. This was an aberration. The serial failed to click with the viewers and the producers had to end the serial.

Cognitive dissonance theory put forward by Festinger (1957) refers to the state experienced by individuals when they feel inconsistency between two attitudes they hold or between their attitudes and behaviour. In normal situations, individuals try to minimise such inconsistency as it causes great uneasiness. But when individuals go through such uncomfortable state they may change one or both of the inconsistent attitudes. Thus individuals will subject the incoming messages to the cognitive process either by accommodation or assimilation so as to be at ease with oneself. This cognitive process of accommodation and assimilation take place based on the frame of reference of an individual.

An attempt has been made in the above sections, as a prelude to the present study, to succinctly explain television soap opera genre and the concepts of culture, negotiation and frame of reference. The present study is an attempt to analyse the portrayal of culture in Malayalam soap operas and its negotiation by audience. A meaningful investigation of the viewers’ negotiation of culture through television serials calls for the analysis of the previous studies in the field. Although, there are no sustained studies on the topic, similar studies in allied areas are briefly discussed in the next chapter.
Reference


**Websites**

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