

The Controversy over Dramas: A Study of Indian Dramas in Afghanistan Media Through Viewers' Point of View

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ABSTRACT

Indian dramas have been welcomed in Afghanistan since 2000. It was the time that the new constitution enshrined freedom of expressions, and many private TV channels were granted licenses to compete for viewers, and indeed for advertisements in order to run their stations. One of the famous dramas that sparked controversy were “the Mother-in-law was once the Daughter-in-law”. The Drama twists around Indian societies, family issues and religious practices which, according to the Council of Clerics, or Ulema, are not within acceptable limit of the faith and culture of Afghanistan. How do viewers perceive the dramas? Majority of the viewers have objection regarding the appearance of the female casts. Sari is not a right dress for a Muslim woman while the Council of Clerics problematize the contents of the drama, too. The political and religious conflict of interest may also have a role in sparking the controversy, but the findings of this study indicate that the majority of Afghan and Indian respondents define the messages of the dramas opposing the Islamic principles.

KEY WORDS: Controversy, Council of Clerics, Media and Viewers, Drama and Sari

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I. INTRODUCTION

Many Indian dramas have been broadcasted in Afghanistan through private TV Channels since the establishment of the new democratic government in 2001. They have their own audience, but many others dislike them; majority of the dramas depicting Indian societies, family issues and religious practices which, according to the Council of Clerics, or Ulema, are in conflict with the belief and culture of Afghanistan”. Screening of dramas became controversy when a former Minister of Culture and Information (MoCI) of Afghanistan claimed that the airing of this and other like dramas are against Afghan culture and Islamic values; he ordered TV channels to stop broadcasting of some Indian dramas alleged that they were not in keeping with “Afghan religion and culture”(Wafa & Galla, 2008). On the other hand, many viewers were rushing to their home to watch the suspense of the drama – what happens next in the episode, and also TV companies were resisting broadcasting the dramas. How do viewers think of the sparked controversy?

To answer this question, a questionnaire was designed and distributed among the young educated Afghans, and Indian counterparts, including the students of the English and Foreign Languages University (EFLU), to have their opinions on Indian dramas being broadcasted in Afghanistan, and in India as well. The respondents for this study claimed that they had watched the Dramas at least some of the episodes. Thus, this study reflects the opinion of the respondents toward the messages and customs of the female casts of these dramas in relation to Islamic principle of Hijab and promotion of proselyte.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

In 2001, a new chapter of political and social hustle and bustle opened up in Afghanistan, Taliban regime was ousted; many radio and TV stations along with many other newspapers and weekly news outlets were established to operate in the post-Taliban era. Thus, the new established media were not well versed to produce and narrowcast or broadcast programs for their audience in the country. So, Indian dramas dominated major TV stations. Indeed, this domination was not without social and or even political challenges.

A former Minister of Culture and Information (MoCI) of Afghanistan, unexpectedly, addressing the MPs for getting approval votes as Minister, promised not to allow Indian dramas being broadcasted if he is accepted. Consequently, he ordered to ban Indian dramas for being broadcasted in the country (Wafa & Galla, 2008).

From the beginning, disobedience was expected and this came to be true. The Chief Executive of the TV channels, those that scheduled the broadcasting of dramas, objected the announced decision of Ministry of Culture and Information (Wafa & Galla, 2008; Tang & Faiez, 2008; and the Economic Times, 2008).

The commission of Culture, Religion and Higher Education of Afghanistan Parliament (CRHE) also denounced broadcasting of Indian dramas and ask Minister of Culture and Information (MoCI) to stop them. Even though it is being objected, the channels are broadcasting the dramas censoring some part of the ladies' bodies not appropriate in Afghan culture, such as midriff, shoulders and so on (Tang & Faiez, 2008). But such an argument was going on for some times.

Therefore; the study of "Controversy over dramas" carried out to show how it varies from culture to culture. This study mainly concentrates on the opinions of people especially the youth in Afghanistan and their counterparts in India. The opinions of the two geographically different groups of single religion will be of the main concern in this study which clearly would be compared and assessed in the later stages.

II. METHODOLOGY

This is an opinion survey of viewers of the Indian dramas including "*Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi*" or "because the Mother-in-law was once the Daughter-in-law". To study the legal context of the dramas for broadcasting in a country like Afghanistan, documents such as Mass Media Law and National Constitutions of Afghanistan have also been scrutinized for analyzing the provisions in regards to the broadcasting of the dramas said to be inappropriate to the local culture and faith.

The primary respondents of this study consisted of young educated people from Afghanistan and their Muslim counterparts in Hyderabad, Telangana, India. Both groups of respondents confirmed that they had watched the dramas in full or at least some of their episodes either in dubbed or original languages. Those from Afghanistan watched the dramas with Persian dubbed while those from India enjoyed the drama with original language of casting.

It is significantly important to look at the dramas through audience point of views. To do so, a questionnaire in two languages of Persian and English was designed and distributed through internet to the respondents in Afghanistan and its hard copies in person to the young educated Muslims in India respectively.

The most important aspect of the study is the comparison of the notion among the Muslims residing in India and Afghanistan. It surely exposed how the concepts are different geographically and even among single religious group.

The questionnaire has been distributed to more than 80 respondents including female and male, journalists, public workers and students of colleges and universities. But around 70 responses have been given back. There are many reasons; academic and cultural problem, traditional believes and fear of aftereffects. Women think that their responses might be published in printed media and they will face challenges in their own business in Afghanistan.

THE DRAMAS AND THE MAIN ISSUES

Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi (Because the Mother-in-Law Was Once the Daughter-in-Law) was an Indian drama that aired on STAR Plus and then in Afghanistan since 2002 up to 2010. After this drama many others like *Kasautii Zindagii Kay*, *Hana*, *Kum Kum* and so on, were aired in Afghanistan through private channels.

Almost all the dramas revolve around social affairs such as; family affairs. For instance, in *Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi*, three generations live in one house. A mother in law has to put up with her three men bahu's, Savita, Daksha and Gaytri. Savita, Daksha and Gaytri always try to create troubles. Savita's main plan is to get rid of her son's wife, Tulsi. Daksha and Gaytri help her with this plan.

The main context of these dramas is about Indian lifestyle that portrays upper class families. These Dramas display ideal life of Indian and some major challenges with which some important and rich families face. This is the point that the majority of respondents pointed out and said the concepts of these dramas are fictitious and the life style they portray is fabulous.

Respondents from Afghanistan viewing the dramas had different point of views. For instance, a female respondent relies on that the dramas try to advocate accuracy and defend the right of innocent and weak people, but these are fictitious not real and are basically away from original culture. Another respondent believes that every drama has negative and positive points, but negative points are major in these dramas and the real audience of these dramas are Indian youth to get fidelity with their culture.

Some respondents respond that these dramas are based on Indian values and evoked on what is major challenge in India; specially challenges like dealing with tradition, moderation and modernization. For instance, a respondent who is a government employee, thinks that a family besides keeping traditional dimension of lives, could welcome changes happen recently around the world. She implicitly indicates globalization that these dramas try to show dealing of tradition and modernization as a globalization. It is believed that these dramas are

not associated with Afghans' Islamic-based culture. According to them, women in these dramas appear in Sari whilst Muslim women must wear Hijab. For example, a respondent who is a student of MA in media and communication at EFL University, does not oppose the messages of the dramas, but disagrees with wearing Sari as he points out that some part of women bodies is unveiled. This response recalls my memory of Media Censorship in classroom in India that our teacher pointed out on Indian women clothes and called them the sexiest clothes in all over the world.

Majority of the respondents, either Indian or Afghans, are in views that women in Sari are more unveiled as all midriffs are disclosed. figure1 provides more details in this regard.

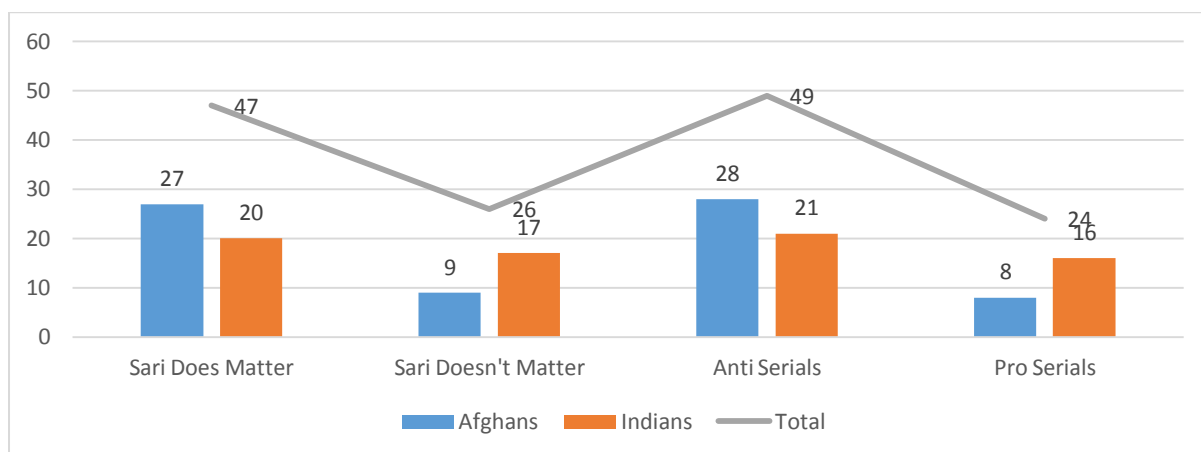


Figure 1: Sari in the Dramas and the Opinion of Respondents

According to the respondents from Afghanistan, the issues of the dramas are somehow the same as Afghan women fight for their rights. A TESL student at EFL University, responds that women in these dramas endeavor for their rights and perform more feminism-based behaviors.

Majority of people participated in this study, explicitly oppose the drama messages, but they are eager to watch them even if someone indicates that they were addicted to watching these dramas. This contradiction means that there are no alternative dramas in Afghanistan so far.

A minority of Afghan youths did not oppose the messages of these dramas, but some cultural differences like clothes and some shots that show polygamy are problematic. The most controversial aspect is religious dimension of the Dramas. Religious and cultural aspects of dramas are the main reasons for the ban of these dramas in Afghanistan as the respondents point out them, too. They believe that there are some shots that violate Islamic values and Afghan cultures.

Respondents from India regarding these dramas have something to object. Most of them oppose the dramas messages and they also find the customs of female character against Islamic values, but a minority of the respondents think that the dramas enlighten social issues like *“The main idea regarding adults’ problems in life related to profession, family, love, marriage and learning from past mistakes and stability in their lives in the long run.”*

THE DRAMAS AND THE AUDIENCES

Former Minister of Information and Culture of Afghanistan describes one of the dramas broadcasted by Tolo TV, and states there are scenes that are difficult for an Afghan family to watch, such as that of a woman with more than one husband.”, and a member of the Council of Clerics insists that Ulema will continue the campaign to ban all dramas being broadcasted on TVs (Wafa & Galla, 2008).

Generally, the respondents to the questionnaire are divided into three categories, liberals, moderate and conservatives. Majority of respondents from Afghanistan think those dramas do not fit into Afghan culture and religion while few other find nothing in these dramas that could contradict Islamic values.

Indian respondents also have liberal and conservative thoughts. Some of them explicitly oppose the dramas because of women in Sari and pre- marital close relationship of girls and boys. Some others, like their Afghans counterpart nothing in these dramas to infringe the values of Islam. Figure2 gives more details.

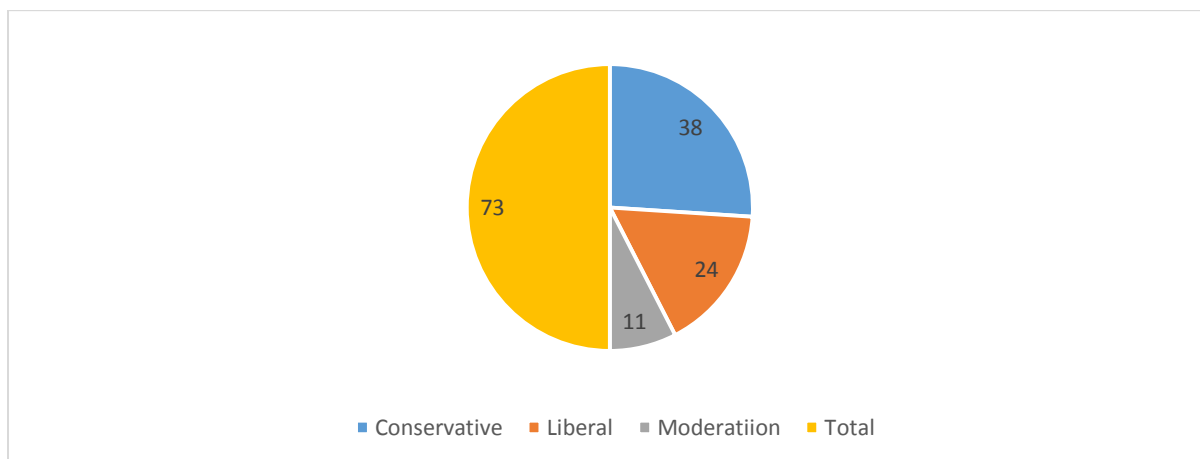


Figure 2: Categories of Respondents Based on Their Views Toward the Serials

In this study, those who do not mind religion in those dramas are called liberals, but those who take religion in their accounts are called Conservatives and those who responded normally are called moderate.

Majority of the respondents respond conservatively as 38 out of 73 persons disprove the dramas to be screened in Islamic Countries, 24 out of 73 are in favor of Dramas and 11 out of 73 believe that these dramas are normal.

THE MASS MEDIA LAW AND THE DRAMAS

Afghanistan Mass Media Law emphasizes on respecting other religions, but media is not allowed to proselyte other religion savings Islam. Article 45 states that production, reproduction, print and publishing of the following reports and material in mass media and agencies mentioned in article (27) of this law are not permissible (Mass Media Law of Afghanistan, 2009, p.38):

“Works and materials which are contrary to the principles and provisions of the holy religion of Islam; Works and materials which are offensive to other religions and sects; Works and materials which are defamatory, insulting and offensive to the real or legal persons; Works and materials which are considered libelous/defamatory to real and legal persons, and cause damage to their personality and credibility; Works and materials which are contrary to the Constitution and are considered crime by the Penal Code; Publicizing and dissemination (promoting) of religions other than the holy religion of Islam; Disclosure identity and broadcasting of pictures of the victims of violence and rape in a way to damage their social dignity; and Works and material that harm psychological security and moral wellbeing of people, especially children and adolescent.”

Anti-Dramas refer to the paragraph 1 and 6 of article 45 of Mass Media Law that prohibits publicizing and dissemination of other religions rather than Islam. They believe that when there is a big dilemma in the dramas and the protagonist like Tulsi goes to temple and pray and then the dilemma is dissolved; this is publicizing the Hinduism in Afghanistan.

Pro-Dramas including Chief Executives of Channels point out to the article 4 of Mass Media Law and confirms the right of getting accessing to the information and disseminating of their thoughts and expressions (Mass Media Law of Afghanistan, 2009, p.8):

Paragraph (1): Every person has the right to freedom of thought and speech, which includes the right to seek, obtain and disseminate information and views within the limit of law without any interference, restriction and threat by the government or officials. The right also includes free activity of means of publication, distribution, and reception of information.

Paragraph (2): Government shall support strengthening and guaranteeing the freedom of mass media. Except as authorized under this law, no real or legal person including government and government offices may ban, prohibit, censor or limit the informational activities of mass media or otherwise interfere in their affairs.

Afghanistan Mass Media Law defines a commission is called “Media Commission” which includes Minister of Information and Culture as Chief, Dean of Journalism Faculty of Kabul University, representative of judiciary force and Journalism Unions as members. This commission is authorized to assess and analyze the content of media, in case if there is some violation, the media are introduced to the court and court decides what to do with the media according to violation defined by the laws.

Banning five dramas was not announced by the chief of the Commission of Media, but by Minister of Information and Culture. This is the technical problem of stopping shows from screening whilst according to the conservative interpretation of dramas they are against Islamic values. From this perspective, Article 3 of Afghanistan Constitution supports their opinion: “No law shall contravene the tenets and provisions of the holy

religion of Islam”, and Article 34 of Afghanistan Constitution states; “Freedom of expression is inviolable” (Constitution of Afghanistan, 2004). This article can be utilized by pro Dramas, specially, the founder of channels.

RELIGIOUS DIMENSION

Religious Conservatives insist on stopping broadcasting Indian produced shows as they describe them anti-Islamic culture." They believe that such programs promote “non-Islamic” opinion and prevent children from concentrating on homework (Tang &Faiez, 2008).

Clerics and religious leaders believe that dancing men and women together even women singing is not allowed and prohibited in Islam. The first indication of clergies goes on shots that women and men dance together. The second concern of Mullahs relates to the religious practices of people involved in the Dramas and the third issue is school children and their assignments.

Tolo TV aired a dance party pertaining to men and women dancing together on an Afghan film awards program in 2008. The Ministry of Information and Culture condemned the scene, saying "dancing, men and women together is completely against the culture of the Afghan and Islamic society".

Director of Media Commission states that Afghans could be corrupted by scenes showing Indians worshipping, Hindu idols and plots involving women who divorce and remarry - a practice deemed unacceptable in Afghanistan”(Tang &Faiez, 2008).

What conservative leaders say is related to the religious aspects and leaders own media as well. What founder of channels claims is based on financial and revenue of the channels but what the officials say concerns political dimension.

POLITICAL DIMENSION

Five Indian produced dramas were banned proclaiming that they are non-Islamic and proselyte Buddhism in Afghanistan which the action is entirely prohibited by law. This decision was announced in 2008 one year ahead of Afghanistan presidential election. The question is why official did not take off the air the dramas during three or four days, as many of them were broadcasted at least four years before the decision of banning.

President Karzai, because of election, signaled that he sides with the conservatives in the controversy over the dramas. Although he said that he would ensure the freedom of the media till he is in power, but he says that the programs which go against Afghan culture should not be allowed.

The television companies also make themselves feel on the political front, not only by broadcasting probing news reports but also by taking sides in ethnic and language debates, which reflect political divisions in Afghanistan.

As Afghanistan prepared for a presidential election for the coming year, some station founders and journalists contend that banning television programs is part of a political tussle for control of the airwaves. Political party leaders have opened their own television stations, which have already been challenging to the government.

THE TV CHANNELS AND THE JUSTIFICATION

The sponsor of Tolo TV channel thinks that broadcasting Indian Dramas is in accordance with the law, so they will continue to broadcast them, Millions of people watch these shows every night". Tolo is one of those four channels that were ordered to ban broadcasting Indian Dramas as this channel screened two of them, are called Kasautii Zindagii Kay and Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi.

Chief Executives of those channels believe that there are avid viewers of Indian entertainment. Just a few people complained and it is not a good gauge of the public mood. Chief Executive of Tolo TV states: "We are experiencing the re-Talibanization of Afghanistan... We can feel it, we can smell it and we can taste it. The mood in the government is changing" (Tang &Faiez, 2008). He pointed out to those as he called them 90s, people who fought for power in 1990 are called Jihadist leaders and Taliban, are back to the power.

Abdul Hamid Mubariz, Director of the National Association of Journalists- an independent group that supports Afghan journalists and media organizations calls it “*unjustifiable.*” He says that he supports freedom of expression and the steps that the government has taken are not legal turning to the article of Afghanistan Mass Media Law that says the content of media first must be considered by media commission.

The Director of Ariana TV, the network that acceded to the order to drop “Kumkum,” suggests that some of the politicians calling for the ban were motivated by business rather than beliefs. He says they had started competition with television stations and that they were having difficulty competing with the established ones.

One of the most concerns for the owner of channels is financial problems. They broadcast several commercials within Indian dramas. People advertise their products while the episode of Dramas start and the price is charged triple than broadcasting other programs. The Director of Ariana TV confirms as he said to the media; "From a commercial perspective, it would put pressure on us as we receive a lot of advertising for these Dramas".

The television companies justify the shows on the basis of their popularity, whilst the financial issue is the main concern for them. Even they, because of profitability, edit culturally offensive scenes of the Dramas, like those in which actors exposed too much flesh.

A senior reporter and editor for Tolo TV thinks that his station used the revenue from the popular Dramas to fund its highly regarded news programs. He says; "These programs have the largest number of people watching them." "It is through them that we are able to broadcast other programs; news, sport, education..."(Tang & Faiez, 2008).

The Majority of private Channels are established for commercial purposes and they broadcast the programs that are entertaining. Such kinds of programs have more viewers rather than news and serious programs. The religious Channels, almost all of them established by religious leader focus on serious and informatics programs like news, debate and religious discussion and round-table programs. These programs have their own viewers but are few.

III. CONCLUSION

Afghanistan is a traditionally Islamic country, and is a very faithful to the customs and traditions. The interpretation of Islam and its relation with politics is very complicated. Many religious leaders are at the helm of power besides their liberal counterparts. The liberals, conservatives and politicians misuse religion for their personal motives and objectives as much as possible respectively. It has been about ten years, since 2001, that International Community has been in Afghanistan, the civil societies have not found their position and roles in the country. They are really fragile and unstable.

Majority of Afghan believe that the foreign dramas, movies and songs are against Islamic values, but they do not have the alternatives to substitute them easily. Even some of low-quality film and dramas are directed are the imitation of Indian or Iranian film industries.

The controversy started because of the tension of interest. Religious leaders have their own channels, private channels endeavor for revenue and politicians misusing religion and media for their political objectives. Meanwhile, there are some concerns for neighboring country about strong presence of India in Afghanistan.

It is also that respondents also believe that these dramas are not within the acceptable limit of Afghanistan culture and faith, as findings of this study indicate that the majority of Afghan and Indian respondents define the messages of the dramas opposing Islamic principles and values. The customs of the female characters and the contents such as polygamy of women are understood to be against Islamic values and provisions.

The solution seems to be afghan-based directed show, movies and dramas as they are understandable and there should be Afghan-based production. Majority respondents indicate this too. They said they had to have their own movies and dramas. As some of them state that Indian dramas and movies are boring.

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