Religious television viewing and impact on political behavior

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Abstract

It has been seen that in recent times, in India there has been a mushrooming of religious television channels as well as religious programming on regular channels. These channels also claim that due to these religious broadcasts the number of people visiting temples, mosques and churches has increased compared to before. It is also the claim of these channels that they are serving to establish a moral and just society where people will live as per moral codes of conduct and this will result in more peace and harmony. Religion and political affiliation has been the interest of researchers especially in the past decade. It has been found that in the past decade there has been a surge of religiosity among people and communities and this has been found to reflect in their political behavior in many parts of the world. People who are deeply religious to the point of fundamental belief in the superiority of their religion tend to support political parties that belong to their religion or those that present a secular view. However, the researcher did not come across research in the Indian context that explores the relationship between religion and well being or the impact of religious television in the lives of people. Therefore this study aims to explore the effect of watching religious TV and religiosity on political attitudes and beliefs of viewers. Research has found that religion is an important aspect of politics, strongly shaping political alignments. This study concludes that religion has an influence on social change processes, especially with regard to women and their involvement in political movements.

Keywords: movements, mushrooming, television, television, especially

Introduction

Religion plays an important role in most Indian homes and its dominant presence is felt by people in all aspects of their life. In India, in most cultures, religion dominates every major important event in a person's life right from birth, eating solid food, learning to write, joining formal schooling system, getting married, childbirth and even death. No life event in a person's life is without the intersection of a religious or a cultural practice. Religious affinity and practices also vary across various castes and sub castes. The major religion in India, Hinduism has several forms depending on the cultural beliefs and practices of people. However, the traditional practices are undergoing a change due to a number of factors, such as urbanization, modernization, changing family structures as also an increasing role of media in broadcasting religious programs.

It has been seen that in recent times, in India there has been a mushrooming of religious television channels as well as religious programming on regular channels. These channels also claim that due to these religious broadcasts the number of people visiting temples, mosques and churches has increased compared to before, and also that they are now doing more religious rituals as well as following a path of well being. It is also the claim of these channels that they are serving to establish a moral and just society where people will live as per moral codes of conduct and this will result in more peace and harmony. There are several studies that are conducted in the western countries that study the role of religion on various aspects of lives of people. Most frequent among these are on religion and health and well being; religion and politics and religion and coping with stress. There are also a few western studies that focus on religious television and religious programs on mainstream networks.

However, the researcher did not come across research in the Indian context that explores the relationship between religion and well being or the impact of religious television in the lives of people. There are a few studies that explore the effects of media on cultural beliefs of people, but no studies on how religious television impacts the religiosity and lives of viewers. It is strange because India is a secular country and also a spiritual land of many faiths and cultural practices. The Indian television network is also wide and well established. This study therefore will help fill the gap in research in the area and will be one of the few to explore the impact of religious television in the lives of people.

Religion and political affiliation has been the interest of researchers especially in the past decade. It has been found that in the past decade there has been a surge of religiosity among people and communities and this has been found to reflect in their political behavior in many parts of the world. People who are deeply religious to the point of fundamental belief in the superiority of their religion tend to support political parties that belong to their religion or those that present a secular view. People will vote for governments that safeguard their religion, provide amenities and facilities to the people of their religion and have more tolerant religious views.

Religious television by propagating religiousness tends to reiterate the superiority and importance of one's religion.

Several of the gurus and holy men who preach religious scriptures also covertly talk about politics and express their views on various political activities, people and parties. These holy men and gurus have a huge public following and people tend to follow their dictates, including political behavior. Religious media are one type of specialized, narrowcasted media that may be polarizing the electorate. Given the much vaunted role of "values voters" in the elections and the ongoing "culture wars," understanding the role of religion in general and religious media in particular in politics is increasingly necessary ((Wilcox, 2000) [27].

Religious Television and Religiosity
Television has a tremendous impact on people. In developing countries like India, television is the main medium of information and entertainment for a majority of people. The audio-visual nature of television, combined with its ability to combine various media formats including the story telling formats, puts a tremendous influence on people. In a comprehensive study of media use found that by the end of 2010, the average world citizen was spending 4 hours with the television each and every day. 40% of the time that people spend with media was found to be spent watching television (Phillips, 2010). Scholars believe that like religion, television determines the worldview of it's viewers (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan & Signorielli, 1980). It also codetermines what the viewers think about (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Television viewing is a ritual, almost like religion, except that it is attended to more often (Gerbner, Gross, Signorielli, Morgan & Jackson-Beeck, 1979: 180).

As people spend so much of their time with television, the media has a continual influence upon people without even their realization. They follow their television watching routines day after day and therefore this medium has a tremendous influence on how viewers think, what they think and believe and how they act. While some of this influence is easy to notice, most of it shapes their mental codes unconsciously. May people have a habitual use of media, they turn on television or radio as soon as they get up in the morning, or reach home after work in the evening. In most Indian homes, people eat their meals in front of the television. News, movies, serials are the most favorite programs of people. Television remains the most popular medium owing also to it being inexpensive. With a subscription of Rs 300 or less a month, people are able to watch more than 100 channels, movies, songs, news, sports programs, serials and dramas etc. More often television also forms a major family activity. Family members watch television together and it also forms a part of their conversations.

The growth of religious television in India has been spectacular. Earlier too, there were religious programs on television such as mythological or religious based movies, songs, serials and dramas. The soap operas of Mahabharatam and Ramayan in Hindi as well as their translated versions in other languages in the 1980s and 90s only led to the growth of these programs in the later years. India being a secular country, channels that featured programs of various other religions also soon began to be broadcast along with the Hindu base channels. These channels have the sole purpose of religious propaganda and raising the moral and social culture of the people. They also have a huge viewership. The programs have been successful in creating a feeling of deeper religiosity in people, one that

goes beyond mere belief and simple forms of worship. Religious TV channels broadcast programs that dwell upon the various festivals and forms of worship, that is especially true to Hinduism. Every festival is preceded by programs that elaborate on how to worship, the rituals and the benefits associated with it, with religious gurus and pundits drawing upon references in the scriptures. This has seen a surge in people trying to follow the ritualistic forms of celebration, gathering the materials that are sued to worship, the food associated with every festivals, dressing up in colors and materials related to every festival and trying to diligently follow the ritualistic methods as prescribed by these channels. This has also seen a surge in commercialization, with the goods and materials associated with festivals in much demand during festivals and also a surge in their prices.

The number of people visiting temples and other places of worship during festivals has also seen a tremendous increase in recent years. Religious TV channels show these places of worship and other holy places associated with one's religion, a kind of religious tourism programs that has led to the popularity of these places. Religious tourism has received a boost owing to these TV channels and programs, with people thronging places of worship in hundreds and thousands. For one, religious TV channels inculcate a feeling in the people that religion is important and mainstream in their lives. From simple forms of worship to more elaborate rituals, these channels explain everything in detail that is related to ritualistic worship. This influences people to adopt these practices as worship is also associated with gaining material or other benefits in life or removing the problems that come with life and living. Most channels suggest remedies such as performing specific poojas, rituals, wearing gemstones or other materials, eating and offering specific kinds of food to people and animals, etc to gain good luck and get rid of problems in life. On one hand, this has lead to an intensification of religiosity in people, on the other it has also led to consumerism and an increase in consumption patterns. Several studies have concluded that watching religious television does increase the religiosity of people (Abelman, 1984; Graham, 2000; Schwartz, 2004) [3]. Researchers have also found in numerous studies that television programs impact the cultural position of individuals and groups. It also impacts the life style of people and their religious understanding. Many people shape their religious understanding by watching television (Bicer, Ramazan. (2011). The Important of the TV on the Religious Understanding of Turkish People). Most religious television programs also present some of the most conservative views especially regarding the role of women, the manner of their dressing and behavior and relationships with other members of the family and community. It is then to be seen if religious television programs and channels will lead to the formation of an increasingly conservative society and whether it is in conflict with the more modern ways of living. Research has shown that people who watch religious shows take them seriously. What leads people to consume religion on television is a sense of social responsibility: that they are doing it not just for themselves, but also for others, be it their families or communities (Channeling Islam: Religious Narratives on Pakistani Television and Their Influence on Pakistani Youth, Yelena Biberman, Sahar Gul & Feryaz Ocakli, Pages 78-97, 2016, Asian Affairs, An American Review, Vol43).

There are also social and familial impacts of watching religious television. When people tend to become more religious by internalizing the religious messages that they view on television, it also affects their worldview, including family dynamics and their relationships in the community. Household activities may become more traditional and conservative, adhering to their religious and cultural practices. The amount of time that the family spends in religious activities such as worship, preparing for worship and conducting rituals and visiting holy places and temples might increase. Reading religious texts may also increase. The market of religious books, materials related to worship has also grown proportionately in recent times. There is also a danger of superstitious beliefs that might be propagated by these channels in the name of religion. For e.g. most channels have a regular horoscope reading, encouraging people to contact the host for a more detailed analysis and predictions of their horoscope. This is in addition to the daily forecasts that are read out for each zodiac sign on television. The wearing of specific gems for remedies and the subsequent selling of them by the sponsoring agencies has also been on the rise. Such programs also rise in the wake of natural events such as eclipses for instance, where programs tell people elaborately on the practices that they need to do during the eclipse. While this is in contradiction to the mainstream scientific findings, it is still believed and put into practice by people.

Research has found that religion is an important aspect of politics, strongly shaping political alignments (Wilcox, 2000; Layman, 2001; Guth et al., 2006) [27, 23]. In most countries, political conflict is deeply divided along religious lines and scholars have argued that the world is in the throes of a culture war (Hunter, 1991; but see Fiorina, et al., 2006; Williams, 1997) [20, 28]. Research has also found that religious media plays an important role in citizens' views of political candidates and their vote choices (Guth, 1983; Wilcox, 2000) [14, 27].

Secular media powerfully influences political attitudes and electoral behavior (Ansolabehere, Behr, & Iyengar 1993; Bartels, 1993; Graber, 1997; Zaller, 1992) [13, 30]. Information funneled through media elites can shape political opinions as much as do longstanding and deeply rooted political values (Zaller, 1992) [30]. People may not consume nontraditional media sources intending to gain political information but they may encounter politically relevant information as a by-product of their attention to these sources (Baum, 2005) [7]. Therefore religious media has a political influence on people even if they are not consciously seeking political information or direction on religious TV. Many users are attracted to religious media for its religious or entertainment value rather than for political cues (Abelman 1990) [1]. These people may also receive political cues given by gurus and shown in programs that slant towards a particular political party. Religious leaders wield a great political influence on viewers as they make connections between religion and politics explicit (Beatty & Walter, 1989). Because of the high esteem in which places of worship are held and the voluntary nature of membership, any political messages transmitted by them through mass media are likely at least to receive a respectful hearing, to enjoy substantial credibility, and potentially to alter opinions (Wald, Owen, and Hill, 1988) [26].

The audience of religious TV may also be more open to being influence, as religion is an important part of people's life and faith related matters have a tremendous influence on people. Several researchers have shown links between religious beliefs and policy attitudes toward everything from the environment to the Soviet Union to Israel to defense spending (Guth et al., 1995, 1996; Guth & Green, 1993; Hurwitz, Peffley, & Seligson, 1993) [15, 16]. Therefore this study aims to explore the effect of watching religious TV and religiosity on political attitudes and beliefs of viewers.

A review of literature in this area is not a simple task. The multidimensional field of enquiry and contextual differences in research makes the task of presenting a comprehensive review on the subject matter, complicated. The researcher has therefore included studies that focus on the impact of religion on various aspects of a person's life as well as those related to religious television and media.

The study by Kallinyl and Saran (2019) investigates the impact of religious media expansion and its effects on religious views in the Arab society. It explores a significant trend in the Arab world namely 'religious intolerance, division and conflict'. The researchers hypothesize that media has played an important role in increasing religious intolerance in the Arab world.

The researchers adopt a content analysis of media – television and radio during the year 2018, in Arab countries. They examine how religion is covered by Arab media, how media outlets used in religious conflicts and explore the link between intolerance and violence in the region to media coverage of religious issues. They examine various media outlets in the region and study the link between religious media availability and expansion and its use to communicate to the public various religious ideologies that may create intolerance.

The researchers put forth that the Arab culture known for its collectivist nature, wherein there exists a societal understanding that the advancement of the group is more important than that of an individual. Arab societies have been known for focus on group harmony and collective growth and progress. However, the spread of religious mass media is changing the Arab culture in many ways. There are now many free-to-air satellite networks that focus on religious issues, debates and discussions of other religions. This is having an adverse impact on the way the Arab population view religion. Instead of promoting religion as a cohesive force, religious media, by denigrating other religions, tends to establish fundamentalism of Islam that is leading to intolerance among Arabs towards various sects of Islam as well as to other religions. In their study, they found that nearly 47 percent of young people surveyed were in the highest-viewing category, watching more than three hours of religious TV day. They also found a strong correlation between religious television viewing among Arab population and intolerance towards other religions.

In this paper, by Mark Regnerus, Christian Smith and Melissa Fritsch (2018) conduct a review of literature of studies from the last 10 years in the USA. The theme of analysis is the role and importance of religion in the lives of American adolescents. The findings of the content analysis of more than 200 studies reveals that religion plays an important role in the lives of many adolescents in the United States. Also, it was found that girls are more religious than boys as per most of the studies. It was also found that Mothers are generally thought to be more influential than fathers in the development of religiousness in adolescent children (Benson, Masters and Larson 1997; Bao et al.

1999). Moore's (2002) research using data from three waves of the National Survey of Children showed that subsequent young adult religiosity was best predicted by peers' religious service attendance patterns during high school, ethnicity (African-American) and gender (female). Maternal religiosity and living in the South were also related to religiosity, but parenting style was not.

In this theoretical paper, the authors David C. Dollahite Loren D. Marks Hilary Dalton 2018) argue that religion can both help and harm families. They point out to the central reason for these outcomes as a system of dualities at the intersection of religion and family. They propose a conceptual framework of religious and relational dualities. They propose eight dualities: (a) transcendent and mundane spiritual experiences may affect families, (b) families may experience God as a close confidant and an authority figure, (c) religion in families may involve accepting and refusing actions, (d) religion in families may include religious expectations and relational compensators, (e) religion in families may generate and address relational struggles, (f) religion in families may be relationally divisive and unifying, (g) religion in families may bring perplexing mysteries and profound meanings, and (h) religion in families may be a transforming and a maintaining influence. We discuss how these dualities lead to outcomes that help and harm families (David and Loren, 2018).

Ajala; Bolatito Lanre-Abass (2010) to examine the role of women in movements for social change in Nigeria as the society is one where religion and politics are deeply connected in one's life and society. In Nigeria, religion and ethnicity are important considerations for political power and economic resources. As in social movements, religion serves as a framework for community identity, it is important to examine the role and influences of women in organizing political movements as women are regarded as the custodians of religion and culture.

The review of literature reveals that women´s movements are shaped by religion, race and ethnicity. Socioeconomic status also becomes important in shaping political movements. Secular women are more likely to join political movements as compared to women of faith.

The review is based on secondary data and documentary analysis. Primary data was also obtained from nine interviews. Primary data was collected in Anambra, Kano, Oyo and Plateau States of Nigeria. The review analyses the historical development of women´s movements in Nigeria, highlighting distinctions with respect to both secular and faith-based women. The review suggests that religion interacted with women´s change agendas. It concludes that religion has an influence on social change processes, especially with regard to women and their involvement in political movements.

Newman, Brian and Mark Caleb Smith (2007) explore the political role of religious media. Religious media is considered to be politically influential because they bring in religion into political thinking. People are also most likely to internalize political cues shown in various religious media programs. The results of the study reveals that almost half of the respondents in the study rely on religious media when making voting decisions. The study was done in 2000. The study suggests that religious media have a polarizing effect on voting behavior of people.

The paper thus concludes that religion and religious television viewing has significant affect on the political behavior of people.

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