

Book Reviews

Kirk Johnson. *Television and Social Change in Rural India*. New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1999. 247 pages. Paperback. Indian Rs 225.00.

The role of television as a powerful medium of communication is well-recognised. This one material commodity has most dramatically influenced the social life of India. About 75 percent of India's one billion people live in villages. Today, in rural India, television is considered as a necessity and it has become a large part of most villagers' daily life. Johnson's book is about the role that television plays in the process of social change in rural India. His focus of research has been primarily on the advertising and entertainment aspect of television in the context of village life as a whole.

After introducing the importance and rationale of this study briefly in Chapter 1, Johnson reviews the literature on communication theory in general and television in particular. In Chapter 2, Johnson chooses to conduct an ethnographic study of two villages, one a relatively remote village and the other closer to the town, to make some comparative observations, using the method of in-depth interviewing and participant observation. Chapter 3 is about the selection criteria of the villages, methods of data collection, and comparative analysis for this study.

The author discusses various socio-cultural aspects of Danawli, the main village he has chosen for his study, in Chapter 4. These include its caste system, landownership patterns, and distribution of power. In Chapter 5, he takes a closer look at the social dynamics of village life with reference to marriage and family, caste, and class relations. The author concludes his observations by stating that village society has emerged as a community that is interconnected with the outside world and is marked by great divisions and hierarchies.

In Chapter 6 the author narrates the history of television in India since 1959, when it was first introduced. He has observed during his research that television in India has little resemblance to television thirty years ago. Television was brought to India for development purposes. The original objective of television programming was first to educate, then to inform, and last to entertain the viewers. These priorities have been given up now in favour of entertainment, largely sustained by commercial sponsorship and advertising. Television came to Danawli in 1985, and in 1995 there were twenty-five television sets mostly owned by landowners. A television set has become an object of desire and status in the village and an essential part of the dowry in village weddings.

Chapters 7 and 8 form the centrepiece of this book. In Chapter 7 Johnson has focused on the role of television in the life of households. Johnson analyses this role systematically by comparing the life of the villagers before and after the advent of television. Prior to the arrival of television in the village, people followed what seemed like an age-old routine but, after television, life in the village became organised according to the schedule of television programmes. Although less than twenty-five percent own television sets in Danawli, in reality many others without it have access to the television programmes. Contrary to the belief in the literature, television in Danawli does not lead to social isolation or the alienation of individuals. In fact, it cuts across age groups and gender, bringing people together. Men even share household chores to enable women to watch television. In case one watches television in another (somebody else's) house, it leads to the creation of new relationships and the strengthening of existing ones. With television, there is greater equality between villagers in acquiring useful information. However, because of lack of access to television, a small number of villagers have feelings of deprivation and could become alienated from the rest of the village society.

With regard to the role of television in changing the social landscape of village life, the author has observed that consumerism, in general, and the desire for urban goods and urban lifestyle, in particular, have increased significantly among the younger generation. Another evil effect about which the older generation is worried is the increasing arrogance and lack of respect for the elders among the village youth. The author has observed a significant gap between verbal statements and the actual behaviour and action. Being exposed to enlightened views on various issues including caste, women, and marriage, the villagers have learnt to make politically correct statements, particularly in the presence of outsiders. But this does not mean that they follow, or intend to follow, the views thus expressed in practice.

In summary, the book covers several aspects of rural life that are influenced by television. These include consumerism, migration, the emergence of an information underclass, linguistic hegemony, and the restructuring of human relations.

Johnson's book provides a carefully observed and detailed analysis of the impact of the widespread introduction of television on the rural life of India. But there are certain areas of village life that are not explored thoroughly, such as marriage and caste relations. In addition, urban migration, roads and communications, agricultural and overall economic development are also contributing factors in influencing the economic, social, and political landscape of village life. The author ignores the educational and informational aspects of television in the context of village life. However, this book provides useful information for future investigators. Its value lies in the systematic, balanced, and

insightful analysis of the impact of television on rural life. It will be of interest to development practitioners, professionals in the field of mass media and communication studies, sociology, anthropology, social change, cultural studies, and qualitative research methodology.

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