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Gandhi Meets Primetime: Globalization and Nationalism in Indian Television, Shanti Kumar (2005)

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Television helps to situate where we live, whether it be on the couch, in the living room, or at the neighborhood bar. At the same time, television is central to our experiences of fluidity and movement, informing an entire discourse of flow. As media and metaphor, television owes its persistence to this phenomenology of location and mobility that enables the viewer to be both at home and in the world. What types of community can be imagined through these forms of televisual place and space? One obvious answer is the nation, which exerts a powerful pull on media forms that are supposedly free from the terrestrial restrictions of checkpoints and borders. One reason for the nation's longevity is that it is able to articulate, much like television, an alignment between centripetal, place-based logics of coherency and centrifugal, space-based logics of dispersion. The nation is equally at home with the production of local communities bound to particular realms in the discourse of citizenship, and comfortably homeless with the production of global communities bound to particular traditions in the discourse of diaspora. Television, with its own dynamic of home and homelessness, is a powerful way of connecting these communities together. The localisation strategies of transnational networks catering programming to Indian audiences and the presence of Indian cable channels on US and UK satellite networks testifies to the ways in which television plays a critical role in the imagination of national collectivity.

In *Gandhi Meets Primetime*, Shanti Kumar suggests that community organised at the intersection of the televisual and the national is *unimaginable*. In Benedict Anderson's classic formulation, 'imagined communities' refers to the ways in which print-capitalism's technologies of mass reproduction created a virtual sense of fraternity as readers connected to each other through the circulation of material printed in a common language. Kumar contends that, unlike print, the spatial logics of television are unimaginable in terms of being unbounded in scope (in terms of the physical reach of transmission) and representation (in term of multiple modes of expression), even as they create communities of viewers connected by the common experience of watching. For Kumar, the shift from print capitalism to electronic capitalism represents a 'decisive break' in the imagination of the community, creating fault-lines in the stability of representational

strategies associated with the nation. The incorporeality of television, the difficulty of predicting its flows and effects, and its multi-generic modes of address, fracture the task of defining the nation through an electronic imagined community.

Once stated at the outset, however, *Gandhi Meets Primetime's* structuring premise emerges only sporadically and therefore remains too scattered to sustain a consistent engagement with the unimaginable community as a way of understanding the role of the nation in the cultural politics of contemporary Indian television. What the book does provide is an account of the legacy of nationalism in post-colonial Indian cultural politics, a history of the intense transformations in Indian television, in particular the privatisation of Indian state television and the emergence of transnational and translocal television networks, and a fascinating inquiry, sustained across multiple chapters, into the struggle over the uses of Gandhi's iconography as the Father of postcolonial India. The extraordinary dissemination of Gandhi's image in consumer culture, Kumar notes, empties his authorship of the national even as his spectral presence assumes a kind of authority that polices the boundaries of 'appropriate' national expression in Indian public culture.

Towards the end of *Gandhi Meets Primetime*, Kumar suggests that the unimaginable community is limited in its capacity to avow its identity as national, since any declaration of collectivity only opens up the ineluctable forms of difference that render this national collectivity untenable. Here, Kumar turns to a discussion of Hindu nationalism, which has been the topic of many recent books on Indian visual culture, from Arvind Rajagopal's *Politics After Television: Religious Nationalism and the Reshaping of the Indian Public* (Cambridge, 2001) to Christiane Brosius' *Empowering Visions: The Politics of Representation in Hindu Nationalism* (Anthem 2005). Hindu nationalism, espoused by the majoritarianism of right-wing movements like the Shiv Sena, demonstrates how community serves the violent epistemology of cohesion in the national project.

For Kumar, the unspoken (if not unspeakable) identity of the unimaginable community is founded upon a loss or lack of imagination where the symbols of nationalist expression become valuable precisely because of the collective's failure to imagine itself as such. That is why, Kumar suggests, transgressions against the appropriate devotional circulation of the Mahatma's image are unforgivable in the context of Hindu nationalism. For Kumar, loss serves as the foundation of unimaginable communities for Kumar, while in a number of works published in English in the late 1980s and early 1990s – Maurice Blanchot's *The Unavowable Community* (Station Hill, 1988), Jean-Luc Nancy's *The Inoperative Community* (Minnesota 1991), and Giorgio Agamben's *The Coming Community* (Minnesota 1993), loss and the impossibility of an immanent communitarian subjectivity is actually inscribed *within* the radical possibility of community. Kumar does not engage with these important texts and this limits his discussion of community to the conventional spheres of political action.

The most conventional sphere of political action is, of course, the nation. In posing the question 'is there an Indian community of television', Kumar does not consider whether Indian television can take part in imagining a

community other than the nation. Perhaps it is the reluctance to think of community outside of the nation that constitutes a real failure of the imagination? While *Gandhi Meets Primetime* is a crucial investigation of the ways in which the national has been evoked in the images and logics of South Asian media, it might finally be time for something new on Indian television.

Contributor details

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