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Stirring Power: Kitchen Politics, Gendered Labour, and Domestic Authority in Indian Television Soap Operas

Abstract : Since Indian Hindi-language soap-operas have long targeted the domestic sphere, asserting power, gender roles, and authority have taken center stage. This paper analyzes the dramatization of kitchen politics, the exercise and performance of gendered labour, and the negotiation of domestic authority in Hindi television serials. Focusing on the most commercially successful “saas-bahu” (mother-in-law-daughter-in-law) soaps, such as Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi, Kahaani Ghar Ghar Kii, and Saath Nibhaana Saathiya and more recent dramas such as Diya Aur Baati Hum, and Anupamaa, the paper examines the portrayal of the various nuances and dimensions of power in the ‘home’ There is a detailed dialogue and scene analysis to explain how, in the performance of routine domestic activities such as cooking, cleaning, and caregiving, the kitchen is a site for struggle over authority and the various forms of power that can accrue through respect and control. From the perspectives of feminist media theory and literary criticism, the soaps reinforce the cultural ideology of patriarchy by idealizing the domestic attributes of a woman, but they also sometimes resist the hegemony of patriarchy by focusing on a woman’s agency and resistance in the domestic sphere. This paper demonstrates how Indian TV melodramas perpetuate and respond to the cultural perceptions of gendered domestic work and power.

Keywords

Indian Soap Operas; Saas-Bahu Serials; Kitchen Politics; Gendered Labour; Domestic Authority; Hindi Television; Melodrama; Feminist Media.

1. Introduction : Spectacular television soap operas in India can be

traced back to the 1980s, and they blend together conflicting storeys regarding family and love. Scholars, as Ien Ang and Christine Geraghty, maintain that soap operas, while being a worldwide genre, have a structural underpinning that emerges from domestic settings and relationship-induced dramas, with the emphasis often being placed on the life of a woman. This "domestic turn" is pronounced in India, and the home is more than a setting, but the main stage for the performances and roles of desire, duty, and conflict. Thus, the expression "kitchen politics" has gained popularity in reference to the politics of the interpersonal relations and the intra-family conflicts. From Hum Log to Buniyaad, state-run serials of the 1980s that introduced social realism and family sagas, to the rapid growth of cable television and the subsequent soap operas that dominated, Indian melodrama has provided representation of the domestic sphere coupled to the elements of conflict and moral struggles.

The rise of family sagas at the turn of the millennium strengthened this trajectory, particularly with the phenomenon of the "saas-bahu" serials, featuring the long-running, sprawling family epics "Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi" and "Kahaani Ghar Ghar Kii." These shows became cultural landmarks, romanticizing the "ideal" life of the "joint family" and broadcasting this fantasy into millions of homes. While the domestic sphere is often regarded as trivial, these serials magnified the all-encompassing, yet routine, household activities of cooking, serving, fasting, ritual observance, and daily disciplining into grand spectacle. It "stole episodes from our lives and relationships and dressed them into a glamorous but certainly overstated version" (Ojha). The kitchen, therefore, is both an actual workspace and a symbolic one where social roles are reiterated, contested, and, at times, weaponized.

Hindi television soap operas depict modern morality plays. From a literary point of view, these plays are set in the middle-class family room and portray relatable, self-sacrificing ideal wife/daughter-in-law, the domineering mother, the errant but redeemable husbands, and the plotting vamps (often another woman within the family). Narrative tensions are often centered around the domestic power structure, the possessor of the resources and the decision maker, most closely of the kitchen. The rasoī is a more than just a cooking space, it is also a place in which the a charged hierarchical structure is enacted, and, often, contested, in a symbolic sense. As Akshaya Kumar and Mahima Singh observe, Indian soaps impart the "melodramatic valences of domestic disputes, especially the kitchen politics of joint families."

This recent research examines representative scenes and dialogues from prominent Hindi-language soap operas to address three intertwined issues: (1) what power dynamics among women within the household does the kitchen impoliteness portray; (2) how is gendered domestic labour framed as social destiny, and as skill and sacrifice; and (3) how is the control and order of the domestic sphere created, contested, and sometimes re-envisioned within the family structures? This research, drawing from close reading and the existing scholarly work on gender and media, seeks to demonstrate that these melodramas are complex cultural artefacts, texts, and that the power and work of women are, through the mundane drama of everyday life, repeatedly narrated, tested, and made visible.

2. Kitchen Politics: The Drama of the Domestic Sphere

Restless and competitive behavior within the kitchen, as portrayed in Indian soap operas, is precisely what is meant by the term 'kitchen politics.' It is repeatedly framed as a key conflict in the domestic sphere where the matriarch's majesty and legitimacy as a sovereign is law, and a space where newly married women must fight (and win) their rights to access. Thus, 'possession of the kitchen' is shorthand for 'possession of the family.' A well-known motif in Hindi soap operas is the ritualistic and symbolically rich transfer of the keys of the house (and, by extension, the keys to the food storage and the safe) from the mother-in-law to the daughter-in-law, marking a negotiated change in the positioning of domestic power. Until this symbolic

transfer of power is completed, the kitchen is a source of conflict, and a space for suspicion and watchfulness.

An example of this can be seen in the Star Plus serial *Saath Nibhaana Saathiya* (2010–2017), which takes place in a joint Gujarati family. One of the main antagonists, Kokila Modi, exercises her power through her obsessive control over what and how her family members cook. In a scene that went viral, she chastises her younger daughter-in-law Rashi for throwing away a pan of chickpeas. In a clipped and stoic manner, she repeats the phrase “*Rasode mein kaun tha?*” (Who was in the kitchen?). She escalates the intensity of her interrogation with the phrases “*Main thi? Tum thi? Kaun tha?*” (Was it me? Was it you? Who was it?) (Team Theorist). The over-dramatic nature of the interrogation of a simple domestic issue turns into a moral issue. The kitchen is a courtroom, and Kokila’s power remains unchallenged as she assigns “fault.” What may appear to be an absurdity in meme culture highlights the genre’s underlying rationale drawing from the aforementioned examples, we can conclude that the *rasoi* is where trust, adherence, and feminine skill are all probed.

These confrontations serve as proxy battles for respect and control. Kokila’s inquiry goes beyond the element of blame as she asks who had the audacity to disturb the peace of her family’s domestic sphere. While the dialogue appears to be simple, there is much to unpack; the demand on women to sustain order in the so-called “perfect” household, and the poorly concealed, and often punitive, judgment women direct towards other women once they acquire power.

Most soaps focus on the conflicts of mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, which are enacted through grinding rituals of cooking and household management, and daily acts that serve as performative displays of loyalty and virtue. In the example of *Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi* (2000–2008), for example, Tulsi replies to the scolding of Savita with an order centred on duty: “*Ghar ki shanti tab tak nahin milegi jab tak hum apne farz nahin nibhaayenge*” (“The household will know no peace until we each fulfil our duties”) (*Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi*, Episode 145).

There is a subversive potential to the term kitchen politics, as it suggests the possibility of disruption within the apparently harmonious domestic setting. The kitchen may be depicted as a waiting space of collusion, a space where women conspire, and where manipulative, subversive rituals can be performed. Shlok Kumar, analyzing *Saath Nibhaana Saathiya*, notes that Rashi is often depicted to be “in collusion” with her mother, as Kokila moves between the different rooms, supervising the two daughters-in-law (Kumar 40-41). The cyclical nature of these showdowns – disruption, detection, confrontation, punishment/forgiveness – frames the exercise of the matriarch’s control as the fine line between order and disorder, so that the act of housework becomes the act of stewarding a morally regulated order.

3. Gendered Labour on Screen: Glorification and Tensions

Indian TV serials often strict portrayals of gender roles, most notably with regards to domestic labor. Female characters are nearly always shown to be the ones who do the cooking, cleaning, and serving, while the male characters are rarely shown doing any of the regular chores around the house. A content study of the Indian television shows by Jain and Pareek (2018) shows that between 1990 and 2016, the majority of Indian television shows continue to portray women as doing domestic work, with men as the primary characters in the show who do not do any of these jobs. This reflects the reality of women in India, where they are the majority of the people who do the unpaid labor in the house. This is often considered to be normal, and the way that culture should be. By making this disparity natural and expected, these soap operas are likely to perpetuate the problem of an unevenly divided, and highly gendered, labor force.

In the stories, the ideal woman is nearly always a housewife, or a woman with jobs, but in the end, always

puts the house first. Ruby Jain and Surbhi Pareek explain that such descriptions normalize and perpetuate traditional inequalities and, arguably, glorifying women's roles in domesticity, prevents society "from achieving gender equality" (Jain and Pareek 108). The career-oriented woman is often, or even, present, coded as a failure in sufficient nurturance. If a female character is working, it is a problem: she is blamed for her abstention from some other duties, and the plot compels her to resign or to prove she is able to "do it all," which usually entails finishing her office work after everyone is served food and after the dishes are cleaned. This structure resonates with a "patriarchal bargain" that Deniz Kandiyoti identifies, whereby women take on domestic work to receive the prize of some degree of power later in life (Kandiyoti 279). Classical patriarchy is predicated on the young wife, who is made to suffer a life of subordination, with the promise that she will, as mother-in-law, position herself to dominate the next generation. This inter-generational cycle is one that Indian soaps dramatize time and again.

Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi illustrates this cycle in its very title ("Because a Mother-in-law Was Also Once a Daughter-in-law"). Savita practices severe domestic disciplining of Tulsi; later, Tulsi is a somewhat more gracious matriarch, empathetic, as if suggesting a possible respite in tyranny. Yet, Tulsi's strength is predominantly within the domestic sphere as she "wins" by preserving the joint family through the crises. Shoma Munshi comments that the "bahu" protagonists demonstrate considerable agency, albeit within the confines of traditional structures (Munshi 128).

The domestic labor of women has been glorified; however, this has been occurring alongside the invisibility and devaluation of their work. The television drama Anupamaa (2020–present) highlights this contradiction: After 25 years of unpaid caregiving, Anupamaa is dismissed with the derogatory title of "just a housewife." This is followed by Anupamaa's declaration, "Main is ghar ki naukrani nahi hoon" ("I am not a maid in this house"). Divyani Dubey encapsulates the cultural perception: "domestic labour is either glorified or trivialised... depending on convenience" (Dubey, 2024). Even seemingly progressive shows, such as Diya Aur Baati Hum, portray men doing housework as commendable, while Sandhya is required to demonstrate exceptional proficiency in both cooking and policing. The genre is often forced to straddle these conflicting readings: on the one hand, it honors women's everyday struggles, and on the other hand, it often reinscribes these struggles as women's destiny. Aaliya Ahmed observes that while soaps often reinforce "problematic aspects of women's lives," they may also be seen as honoring "the fabric of women's lives." (Ahmed 5).

4. Domestic Authority and Hierarchies: Who Rules the Roost?

Indian soap operas stage multiple hierarchies and portray roles and authority within the home as a function of gender and age. While families are widely structurally patriarchal, the day-to-day management of the family unit is often the domain of one older woman, the matriarch. Whether she is Baa in Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi or one of the countless Ammaji figures, she is cast as the guardian of custom and the rule of law: she determines the details of how rituals are observed, who participates in meals, and in some cases, who is arranged to marry whom. Men, as husbands, fathers, and sons, may possess and exercise formal authority in the public sphere, but in the private sphere of the family home, they often assume a role that is passive or completely absent, leaving the "inside" matters to the women. A paradox is produced by these arrangements: the matriarch who is the master of the younger women and who often has authority over the men as well, is herself the subject of patriarchal authority. She is a supervisor of the public sphere, but not an equal in the private sphere.

The influential and at times, tyrannical role of mothers-in-law within family structures can most appropriately be framed within the dramatization of the patriarchal bargain. As Kandiyoti describes, women can gain a measure of power within a patriarchal system by reinforcing the structures that oppress them (Kandiyoti 279).

The power of a senior woman is contingent upon the enforcement of discipline upon the subordinate women who enter the family and create a succession of subordinate positions. Shlok Kumar articulates how this logic is normalized in soaps by stating that for the 'urban saas,' serials are 'training programmes' cautioning against 'minimising her control over her son' or 'allowing her bahu unrestrained liberty' (Kumar 49). The genre therefore often legitimizes the matriarch's fear of losing power and positions the matriarch's watchful supervision as a prerequisite for the maintenance of order in the home.

Saath Nibhaana Saathiya illustrates this very well. Kokila's control over Gopi and Rashi is comprehensive. She regulates Rashi's movement and employment and works to control all of Rashi's time, suggesting that a 'good bahu' must be wholly devoted to the work of the household. While Kokila's micromanagement seems excessive, the narrative often goes out of its way to attack rebellion, positioning the resistive daughter-in-law as a 'vamp' figure. As Kumar observes, 'Kokila's agenda... is to domesticate Rashi and rob her of the ability to think for herself' (Kumar 42).

Soaps often present counter-narratives. Parvati, in *Kahaani Ghar Ghar Kii*, exemplifies reform from the inside: submissive and loving, she challenges unfair commands by invoking dharma and the family's long-term welfare, acting as a conduit between the old and the new. Likewise, in *Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi*, Tulsi gradually gains a kind of moral authority that can transcend the so-called senior women. When she breaks her silence, countering the encroachments of "evil" behind the "family's honor" and the "silence," her position acquires legitimacy, and Baa's subsequent handing over of the *ghar ki chaabi* is a loss of legitimacy and a gain of righteousness for her. Yet, the overarching order endures: men rule the outside, and women govern the inside, a division of labor that critiques an upper-caste, middle-class conception of gender roles (Ahmed 3; Sinha 2). The woman may "rule" the house, but her authority is limited and defined by patriarchal lines and enforced by the subjugation of other women.

5. Conclusion

The Hindi television soap operas want to teach a lesson about a certain aspect of culture that can be seen as *gulaal* (powder thrown in celebration during the festival of Holi). These soap operas teach a lesson about the different structures of power and patriarchy in the Indian home by using the techniques of heightened melodrama and everyday super realism. In the everyday routines, negotiations, and compromises that structures of power and patriarchy create, there is often a great deal of unsaid anger. The term "stirring power", which is central to this paper, has two meanings. First, there is the literal meaning of stirring which refers to the act of stirring a cooking pot, an action that is considered to be the epitome of a woman's work in the home. Second, there is the figurative meaning that is a reference to the power that is asserted and contested in spaces of the home such as the kitchen, the living room, and the corridors.

The portrayal of kitchen politics in the narratives is more than just gossip, but a dramatization of real hierarchies in the extended family. In the narratives, the kitchen is the centre of the household. To control the *rasoi* is to have the recipe for domestic harmony, both literally and symbolically. There is ambivalence in the gendered division of labour. Women's work in family life is glorified as the cement that holds the family together, while at the same time, the stories expose the drudgery and the burdens of that work, in the drudgery of that work, and the burdens of that work. There is equally an aspect of drudgery in the work, as for women, the only prize after the transformation to become a respected matriarch (a Tulsi or a Parvati), is domestic authority. The prize is the transformation into a respected matriarch, after years of service and moral endurance, for a woman to become a respected matriarch.

Indeed, there are sometimes critical voices in these serials. Characters, like Sandhya in *Diya Aur Baati Hum*, and Anupamaa, express unfulfilled ambitions and self-worth beyond the need for families to approve. The

narratives cover domestic violence, the dowry system, widow remarriage, and the education of women. These are social issues that are bound to provoke dissent. As contemporary household epics, the soaps use the pooja room, spice jars, keys, and other household artifacts to theatre the merging of samskara and adhunikta with the dialogue, "The household will know no peace until we each fulfil our duties." The soaps raise the question of who really has power in the household and at what price that power, particularly when the women in the household exercise that power by controlling other women.

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