



The India Quiz

Kiska Bharat, Kiske Liye Mahan?

by
Uma Chakravarti

DID you ever have problems with the numerous quizzes on TV in the last few years? I did, without being able to take them seriously enough to write about them until now. Everything wrong about quizzes is crystallised in the current India Quiz between "Swadeshis" and "Swarajists", sponsored by the Nehru Centenary Implementation Committee.

I had a great sense of unease even when I first saw the famous Bournvita Quiz, made what it was on TV (it had been going on for years on radio) by that "inimitable" compere of quizzes, Siddhartha Basu. Here was a programme which quickly became immensely popular with the young (all my students in college were undilutedly enthusiastic about it); why was I so incensed at it? As I watched it over the weeks, the slickness of the programme (psychedelic lighting and master quizman Basu with marbles in his mouth, exuding confidence as only he can) only heightened my discomfiture.

My gut reaction to quiz culture was that it represents the worst aspects of the kind of learning for which we are unthinkingly going in - the storing of mechanical information that the schooling system passes off as education. In the case of the quiz, the accumulation and storing of information is linked to the ability to muster up such information just as if one is a computer, epitomised in the "rapid fire" questions. The general idea appears to be to eliminate the thinking process and replace it with the capacity to function as an answering machine. Every question of course can have only one "correct" answer, and each such correct answer leads inexorably to establishing some people as geniuses and others as poor halfwits.

The most offensive dimension of quizzing is the tremendous sense of competitiveness amongst the contending participants - the sense of achievement at getting the answer "right", and the deep frustration, anger, even self disgust, generated by failing to measure up to the required standards.

If you had such problems with Basu's quiz programmes in his salad days, you can be delirious about the quantum leap he has now made in quizzing. Gone are the days of watching

young men and women looking smug or humiliated as the seconds ticked ominously by, while you struggled to come up with the answer yourself. Now you have a different kind of quiz - one that we can all be proud of, our kind of quiz.

To start with, Komal G.B. Singh isn't around just for glamour - she actually asks questions (and relieves us of having to decipher what the glamour boy is saying). The participants aren't a motley collection of college students. Now they are mature, charming, self possessed men and women, people whom many of us personally know, or know of. They are administrators, business executives, admen, theatre people, journalists, policemen, air force fighter pilots, even "feminist poets." Best of all, they aren't in an ordinary, cheap competition, but joyously participating in an event where we can all collectively embark upon a discovery of the 'wonder that is India' - *mera Bharat mahan*.

The tone of this new kind of quiz is set right at the beginning of each instalment when we are introduced to the participants, each eminently successful in whatever he or she is doing. Basu and Singh gush about each participant - we have the success story of someone who started as an Inlaks scholar or a fighter pilot from the IAF representing "the best fighter pilots in the world." Someone else is in an advertising agency, an industry which is both "fun" and "meaningful", and, above all, has a lot of "potential"; another is a feminist poet whose account of herself leads Basu to say with practised ease "More power to your poetry" before he moves to another equally fantastic participant.

Here is a sample of the questions:

At which meeting was *Jana Gana Mana* first sung?

In which year did the Indian team land in Antarctica (covering itself and the Indian nation in glory) and was the ninth Asiad hosted by India (when we proved to the world that we too could do it)?

Which economist started his career in Jadavpur university and now teaches at Harvard (the cause for pride seems to be his post rather than his work)?

What is interesting are the particular kind of questions which have everyone going for the buzzer at the same time. Equally if not more interesting are the questions that no one can answer. The latter land of question usually relates to a non public school world. No one, for example, seems familiar with Hindi literature so that all the clues leading up to someone even as well known as the “great” Harivansh Rai Bachan did not evoke the slightest glimmer of response - no one had heard of his early works *Do Chattaney* or *Tera Har*. Only *Madhushala* had a couple of people going for the buzzer. Other “problem” figures were Master Tara Singh and Satyajit Ray’s film on Balasaraswati. Clue had to be piled on clue until only a giveaway, like the suffix “Master” for Tara Singh helped people to the answer.

But the most telling example of what’s wrong with the India Quiz and its brand of patriotism and mainstream-ness was the question on Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya. No one knew of her participation in Indian politics, in the national movement and in the revival of crafts of India (clearly, no one had read **Manushi!**), despite the fact that the panel that day had a well trained historian who is now a well known journalist on it. This was in sharp contrast to everyone going for the buzzer when a

question relating to Pupul Jayakar was asked. Kamaladevi didn’t have a servile media building her up nor did she have the kind of clout with the Rajiv coterie that Pupul Jayakar had, nor did she render the kind of services to the Indian State that Pupul Jayakar has, over recent years. Kamaladevi ended her uncompromising career by indicting the Indian State in the supreme court for its illegal detention of children in Punjab jails, following Blue Star.

Would the India Quiz consider inserting other questions about India, the answers to which also need to be known? Questions such as:

Where were agricultural labourers killed and the guilty landowners let off on the ground that gentlemen farmers do not kill? (Kilvenmani). This might be more useful than the pseudo radical question as to which film depicts the peasant’s battle against dispossession.

Or, what is Bhagalpur famous for?

or, in which year was the railway strike brutally suppressed?

or, in which year was the Rajan case exposed? or, which incident led to the much needed focus on custodial rape?

or, who was the judge in the Sudha Goel case?

...Can we expect a new kind of India Quiz, ever?

Panchi

by
Prabha Rani

The reactions of an Indian family returning to India after 20 years in England was the major theme of the television serial *Panchi*. Intended as a critical study of Indian society through the eyes of members of this family as they try to acclimatise themselves to the Indian situation, the serial manages to reinforce not only the stereotyped Western image of India but also stereotyped Indian notions of Western moral values.

Anita, the elder daughter in the Bajaj family is shown as a fiery, stubborn, self willed woman given to childish tantrums and having an “immature” understanding of women’s problems. While in England she runs a counselling cell for women, in distress. She is shown encouraging victims of wife beating to sue their husbands for divorce. The subtle message in these sequences is that divorce is a Western way of solving marital problems and Anita, influenced by “Western culture”, subscribes to it. However, Anita’s character is “redeemed” when she is shown rejecting with horror the proposal of her boyfriend, also an NRI, for a live-in arrangement without marriage.

Anita’s encounter with Shashank starts off in Hindi film style. He humiliates her, asking her to return to England since her Western ideas are of no use in India. True to the image of

the ideal man that he is supposed to be, he reforms Anita by involving her in his social work. In contrast to Anita’s women’s cell in England, the organisation in India helps women to learn to sew and make money to supplement the family income or to eke out a meagre livelihood. This is projected as the correct way of social reform. But Anita does not fall at his feet the moment he proposes marriage. She asks for time and requests him not to pressure her into staying on in India for his sake alone, irrespective of her other needs.

The first major crisis faced by the family after their return to India involves their relationship with members of the extended family. The joint family system is romanticised and projected as a unit providing security to its members while the elders within it play the role of repositories of traditional values of “Indian culture” chiefly symbolised by the *gayatri mantra* which they hand down to the younger generation.

The idyllic picture is disrupted only when the women within this unit fail to get along with each other. The daughters-in-law of the Bajaj family quarrel and the tension builds up to such a pitch that Mr Bajaj decides to leave with his family and set up a separate unit. However, the crisis is tided over inexplicably in response to the emotional pleadings of the elderly

father-in-law. The problems leading to the crisis-lack of space, arrangement of family expenses and so on, are left unsolved while the family reunites in a teary scene. Incidentally, throughout the phase of family tension, the foreign returned *bahu* is shown as mature, understanding and forgiving and the *desi bahu* as petty and unreasonable.

In the public sphere Indians are shown to be lazy, undisciplined and corrupt. The Bajaj family, imbued with the culture of discipline, finds the situation in India insufferable. Their son fails to make it to the college football team due to unjustified entry of sons of influential men. When he protests he is threatened with expulsion. My point is not that this is unrealistic but rather that it is not uniquely "Indian." Cases of favouritism and corruption are not unheard of in European countries.

The serial maker's understanding of manager - worker relationship in India is equally prejudiced. Apparently, India does not progress because factory workers are headed by corrupt union leaders. The leaders are selfseeking trouble makers who have no concern for workers, while the workers themselves are good,

conscientious and hard working. So even when a well intentioned director, like Mr Bajaj, tries to improve production by enforcing discipline, his attempts are frustrated at every point by a handful of workers and their leaders. When he fails in his attempts to break the workers' strike he is asked by the head office in England to return. This is done not because of his incapacity to deal with the workers but because management does not want him to waste his superior talents on people who do not deserve it.

The serial ends on an uncertain note. Mr Bajaj decides to stay on in India after considering returning to England. His children who had objected to shifting from England in the first place are happy to stay on in India, giving out a subtle message of patriotism. The factory workers decide to go back to work unconditionally, after seeing the "true face" of their leaders. Thus in each case an emotional response is substituted for a rational thrashing out of the issue raised. As a result, the serial itself ended up as a farce.

Mr Yogi

by

Ruth Vanita

The charm of Ketan Mehta's *Mr Yogi* lay in its refreshing lack of didacticism. The tendency to preach is perhaps the most universal tendency on our screen, big and small. Family melodramas, thrillers, art films, soap operas - few of them can resist the temptation to not only tell us the moral of the story but also to underline it. One has only to contrast *Mr Yogi* with the other two concurrent serials on non-resident Indians - *Panchi* and *Gaurav* to feel the difference. The defining characteristic of both the latter was the protagonists' insufferable self righteousness. Gaurav has nothing to do but rearrange the lives of his less enlightened fellow beings, delivering lengthy sermons to each one, while the Bajaj family's attempts at reforming everything from labourers (Mr Bajaj) to women (Anita and Shashank) to the schooling system (Bajaj senior) ended appropriately with the family holding lighted candles in a sea of darkness -which presumably represented benighted India.

Mr Yogi, on the other hand, had the rare ability to play rather than preach. People, ideas, images - all were played with, and the humour was persuasive because it included the ability to laugh at oneself. The pretensions and mixed motives not just of dowry seekers and dowry shunners but also of serial makers were delightfully sent up.

Although no obvious or simplistic message was presented, the women in the serial did emerge as more frank, dignified, even more startlingly independent than did the men - from Yogi's gracious sister-in-law to the girl who turned out to be taller than he in more ways than one, to the overprotected daughter who rescued him from an attack by hoodlums. The characters' liveliness and ability to take one by surprise sprang from the director's having, by and large, broken away from the stereotyped modes of characterisation which pervade Hindi films and TV serials. This was particularly true of the portrayal of the women. The presentation of Yogi's marriage was a bit of a disappointment, with the wife somewhat too faceless. In a few earlier episodes too, the director seemed to lose his grip at times, for example, in the handling of the Peggy-Yogi relationship and their irrelevant touristic forays.

Mr Yogi was also near-unique in making creative use of TV as a medium. It broke away from the linear narrative in such devices as the reversal of roles between narrator and Yogi, and the comic use of the rewind mechanism in the last episode.

Superb acting, especially by Mr Yogi, and a successful evocation of the Gujarati ethos, also contributed to making the serial a pleasure to watch.



Parinda: Powerful or Puerile?

Touted as the most powerful film, ever made, *Parinda* is the usual vendetta formula film. What it has in unusual abundance is pretentiousness - and pigeons. These birds, who give the film its title, and are supposed to symbolise the hero's innocence, flutter around in large numbers with irritating frequency.

The hero Karna's innocence is established by his fair complexion, hep clothes and US education. Anna Seth, the villain, who also grew up as a street kid like Karna and his brother Krishna, is condemned from the start - even as a child, he is dark, ugly and rough. Anna's henchmen, Abdul, Rama and Francis, are divested of background so that we can more easily approve of Karna's mercilessly slaughtering them. His girlfriend, Paro, (also an orphaned street kid but fair, cute and inexplicably well dressed and educated) exonerates him: "You are not a murderer. You are different from them", and we are supposed to desire a happy ending for him. If the revenge motive is a justification for Karna's committing murder, then Anna's murder of Karna should also be justified. But the film operates on the logic, all too dangerously common today, that some people deserve to suffer and die. We are expected to delight in Anna's being burnt to death by Krishna.

One is tired of seeing, in film after film, the policeman as the upright and innocent victim of evil forces. This may be the Hindi film makers' way of getting their scenes of gratuitous violence past the censors, but this naked distortion of reality is an insult to the viewer. In *Parinda*, it is the shooting of Karna's police officer friend, Prakash, which triggers off Karna's murderous career. The scene where Prakash, shot thrice in the back, dies in Karna's arms, amid a plethora of pigeons, is repeated several times in the film to justify Kama's later killings.

No doubt, some policemen do die at the hands of criminals. But a far larger number of policemen engage every day in deliberate torture and murder of petty criminals and also of innocent people. The recent massacre of hundreds of innocent Muslims by the BSP in Bhagalpur is only one in a long chain of such massacres passed off as riots. In this context, it seems a mockery of the Indian people's suffering to project the police as victims. The real *parindas* are neither the police nor the vigilante heroes of the underworld whom this film romanticises, but ordinary, unarmed people, the victims, of government violence, who appear only as a faceless background in the film.

-Ruth Vanita