

Representation of Indian Middle Class in Contemporary Television Serials

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Abstract- The Indian middle class forms a huge part of the country's population and plays a major role in shaping social values, consumer habits, and cultural identity. Television serials continue to be one of the most powerful mediums that influence how middle-class life is seen and understood. Contemporary Indian TV shows portray middle-class families through stories of financial struggles, aspirations for upward mobility, family bonds, gender roles, traditions, and social pressures. However, the picture they present is often idealized rather than realistic. While middle-class characters are shown as hardworking and rooted in values, their lifestyle, living spaces, relationships, and appearances are frequently exaggerated to match entertainment expectations. This research examines how Indian middle-class life is represented in contemporary television serials and how these portrayals shape public understanding of family, success, morality, and social expectations. The study uses the theories of Representation, Cultivation Analysis, and Social Learning to understand how constant exposure to such stories influences real-life attitudes and aspirations. Findings from audience survey research show that viewers enjoy the emotional storytelling in serials, yet many also feel that the middle-class life shown on TV does not fully reflect the financial struggles and pressures that real families face. The research concludes that television serials play a double role. They provide comfort by presenting relatable relationships and shared social values, but they also create unrealistic expectations of lifestyle, gender roles, marriage, beauty, and social success. There is a need for more balanced and authentic representation so that middle-class viewers feel seen without unnecessary exaggeration. Television can become a meaningful mirror of society only if it

evolves with the changing realities of the Indian middle class.

I. INTRODUCTION

The Indian middle class has become one of the most discussed social groups in recent decades. They are neither economically poor nor extremely wealthy. They are people who work hard, earn enough to live a stable life, dream of progress, worry about financial responsibilities, and value cultural and family relationships. Because this group is so large, it becomes the central target for the media and entertainment industry, especially television. Television serials continue to reach households across the country and often occupy an emotional space within daily family routines.

The representation of the middle class in television serials has changed over time. In the early 2000s, serials mainly showed joint families, traditions, and large homes that looked more like upper-class houses than typical middle-class homes. Over the years, the narratives shifted to working women, youth ambitions, romantic marriages, generational conflicts, and everyday social challenges. Yet, despite these changes, the heart of television storytelling remains the same: family bonds, emotional values, and the idea that love and sacrifice can overcome problems.

However, television serials tend to simplify or dramatize middle-class life. The struggles and responsibilities of a regular middle-class household are often toned down for entertainment. Financial stress, work pressure, high cost of living, parenting tension, and rising mental health concerns rarely become the main storyline. Instead, serials focus more

on dramatic conflicts such as misunderstandings, jealousy, and exaggerated villains within families. As a result, the middle-class life shown on television looks cleaner, more glamorous, and more dramatic than the real world.

One of the key attractions of television is its emotional familiarity. Viewers build a connection with characters because they seem like people around them, even if their homes and lifestyles are more polished. This emotional familiarity gives comfort and escape from real stress. For many families, watching television together becomes a point of bonding and relaxation. The characters act as role models, and the stories become conversation topics in family discussions.

At the same time, television shapes social expectations in subtle ways. Women on TV are often shown flawlessly dressed even in daily household work. Men are usually depicted as responsible earners without showing their stress of financial pressure. Marriages seem full of dramatic twists, but rarely show how couples balance work, family, and emotional health in real life. The portrayal of middle-class culture becomes a mix of reality and idealization.

Because television serials influence millions of viewers daily, it becomes important to study how the middle class is represented and how those portrayals affect people's thinking. When entertainment becomes the main source of social understanding, it begins to shape aspirations, beliefs, and dreams. The purpose of this paper is to explore whether television acts as a mirror of middle-class life or whether it creates a fantasy that pushes viewers to compare their own life with something unrealistic.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is based on three main communication and media theories: Representation Theory, Cultivation Theory, and Social Learning Theory. Together, they help explain how television serials shape the audience's perception of the middle class.

Representation Theory

Representation Theory explains that media does not simply show reality as it is. It recreates reality by

selecting certain images, characters, and values. In the case of Indian television serials, middle-class life is represented through stories of joint or nuclear families, moral values, emotional harmony, and traditional celebrations. However, this representation is often styled in a glamorous way that hides daily financial pressure, career stress, and other heavy realities. The repeated portrayal of ideal houses, expensive outfits, and dramatic lifestyles creates a picture that might not match the real situation of a typical middle-class family. As a result, representation becomes a filtered version of reality rather than a true reflection.

Cultivation Theory

Cultivation Theory explains that long-term exposure to specific media content influences how audiences see the real world. If viewers repeatedly watch serials that show middle-class families living in big houses and managing endless free time, they may begin to believe that this is how middle-class life should look. When reality is different, dissatisfaction and comparisons may arise. This theory helps us understand why some viewers feel inferior when their own lifestyle does not match what they see on television. It also explains how beauty standards, gender expectations, and family roles shown in serials become normalized in society.

Social Learning Theory

Social Learning Theory, proposed by Albert Bandura, says that people learn behaviours by observing and imitating others. Television characters become subtle teachers of social behaviour. For example, obedient daughters, ideal wives, self-sacrificing mothers, and emotionally strong men become behavioural standards. Viewers may adopt these traits because television rewards them emotionally within the storyline. Social Learning Theory helps explain why serials influence fashion, speech styles, relationship expectations, and even parenting approaches.

Conclusion of Framework

These theories show that television serials do more than entertain. They shape how middle-class identity is understood, admired, and evaluated. Even when the representation is exaggerated, it becomes a reference point for millions of viewers. This is why it is

important to analyze not only what television shows, but also what it leaves out.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

Academic studies on Indian television have consistently analyzed how family, gender roles, and social class are represented. Many scholars highlight that the middle class remains the central figure in most contemporary serials because it appeals to the majority of the audience.

Mankekar (1999) discusses how early Indian television explored nationalism and family values through middle-class characters. She explains that the middle class on television was seen as the moral backbone of the nation. Although this study discusses older shows, its influence can still be seen in modern serials.

Butcher (2003) studied audience responses to Hindi television and found that many viewers enjoyed serials because they presented an ideal and emotionally satisfying image of family life. According to her, even if viewers recognized exaggeration, they still felt comfort in a world where love and morality always win.

Munshi (2010) examined gender roles in Indian serials. She found that although women gained more visibility, their portrayal remained tied to household responsibilities and emotional sacrifice. This impacts how women in middle-class families see themselves and how their labor is valued.

Nair (2015) studied changing lifestyles in Indian serials and found that homes shown on television are far more modern than actual middle-class houses. He describes this as “aspirational realism” where characters are relatable, but their lifestyle is carefully polished to please viewers.

Khan (2018) focused on male characters in television. He noted that men are shown as responsible, calm, and emotionally grounded, even though actual middle-class men often face high stress in balancing work and family expectations. This selective portrayal hides mental health difficulties faced by men.

Sharma (2021) examined consumer behavior and concluded that television serials influence shopping and grooming habits of middle-class viewers. Dressing styles, wedding decorations, and even household products shown in serials inspire real purchasing trends.

Most scholars agree that television builds a world that the middle class finds emotionally familiar but socially glamorous. While the relationships feel relatable, the standards of beauty, wealth, and lifestyle create comparison pressure. This can cause discomfort when viewers begin to judge their own life through the lens of fictional entertainment.

The literature suggests that although serials reflect middle-class values, they often ignore deeper problems such as financial struggles, job insecurity, personal ambitions, and mental health issues. Therefore, contemporary television shows a selective side of middle-class life which affects viewers' expectations and thinking.

IV. METHODOLOGY AND FINDINGS

Methodology

A quantitative survey was conducted to understand how viewers perceive the representation of the Indian middle class in modern television serials. The questionnaire was shared online with respondents between the ages of 18 and 45. A total of 100 valid responses were analysed. The questions included multiple-choice, rating-scale, and short open-ended questions.

Participants were asked about their television watching habits, reasons for liking serials, emotional connection with characters, and the level of realism they see in the representation of middle-class families. Responses were collected from viewers across different Indian states and different income backgrounds.

Findings

The survey results reveal that viewers enjoy middle-class family serials for emotional comfort and familiarity. However, many respondents also believe that the representation is exaggerated.

Some key observations include:

- 68 percent said that serials portray middle-class families in unrealistic and glamorous settings
- 73 percent stated that women's appearance and lifestyle in serials do not match real daily life
- 64 percent agreed that financial struggles of the middle class are rarely shown in depth
- 59 percent felt that serials influence how people judge success, beauty, and relationships
- 55 percent said serials give them emotional support and hope during stressful times

Responses also show that viewers appreciate moral values and relationships shown on TV, but want more realistic stories on everyday challenges like work pressure, mental health, and rising living costs.

Reasons for Appreciation

Many participants shared that serials provide comfort after a tiring day. They feel emotionally connected to strong family bonds shown on screen and enjoy celebrating cultural traditions through storylines. Viewers also like characters who fight difficulties positively and protect relationships, which inspires them in real life.

Concerns

Respondents pointed out that middle-class homes on TV look more like luxurious upper-class houses. Characters are always well dressed and financially stable, even when the storyline calls them "struggling". Some viewers said that such unreal lifestyles put unnecessary pressure on real families. Women especially reported that serials make them feel obligated to look perfect while managing household responsibilities.

Conclusion of Findings

Television serials successfully capture emotions and cultural values of the middle class, but often misrepresent the economic realities. Viewers recognize this difference yet continue to watch because serials offer escape, comfort, and positivity. The audience is aware of the exaggeration but still depends on television for emotional connection.

V. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The findings point to a layered picture of how Indian middle-class life is represented in television serials. On the positive side, television creates a space where families, love, traditions, and emotional strength are celebrated. Viewers feel connected because the core values shown on screen reflect shared cultural experiences. This builds a sense of belonging and emotional relief.

However, the portrayal is incomplete. Real middle-class life includes high work pressure, long travel hours, rising costs of living, educational stress on children, competition at the workplace, and managing mental and physical health. These challenges exist in almost every urban and semi-urban household but are not shown deeply in serials. When they are shown, they are quickly solved through dramatic resolutions rather than realistic problem-solving. As a result, the representation becomes more fantasy than realism.

Television also shapes expectations in subtle ways. Viewers are repeatedly exposed to images of beauty, ideal marriages, expensive homes, and perfectly dressed women. Over time, as Cultivation Theory suggests, these images start to feel normal or desirable. This can create frustration when real life does not match what is seen on television. Gender roles become another area of influence. Even though modern serials show independent working women, they are also expected to manage household duties perfectly and remain self-sacrificing. Men are often shown as emotionally steady providers, which can hide the pressure they face. These patterns can make both women and men feel burdened by unrealistic expectations.

Yet, despite these concerns, the emotional role of television in middle-class homes cannot be dismissed. For many viewers, television becomes a companion and a stress-reliever. It brings families together and offers moments of happiness and entertainment. This shows that viewers do not necessarily watch serials to search for realism. They watch to feel comfort and hope. But the comfort should not come at the cost of reinforcing stereotypes and pressure.

There is a growing need for more balanced and authentic stories. Middle class life today includes

single-parent families, working couples, mental health conversations, career struggles, inter-caste marriages, and personal identity conflicts. When these realities are shown with sensitivity rather than exaggeration, viewers will feel truly represented.

Television serials have the power to empower rather than pressure. They can encourage realistic thinking instead of comparisons. They can show that being middle class is not about perfection, but about resilience, love, and balance. If creators embrace the evolving realities of Indian society, television can become not just entertainment, but also a positive influence on social understanding.

In conclusion, the Indian middle class deserves representation that goes beyond glamour. The future of television depends on how honestly it captures the everyday beauty and everyday struggle of this large and diverse group. Real life may not be perfect, but it is valuable, and storytelling can become more meaningful when it respects that truth.