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The Time of Television: Broadcasting, Daily Life, and the New Indian Middle Class

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This article develops a temporal framework for analyzing television's role in shaping the formation of a new and powerful urban middle class in 1980s India. Focusing on the first sitcom produced in India, Yeh Jo Hai Zindagi *[Such Is Life], we argue that the unique temporal affordances of broadcast television facilitated a broader shift in the national imaginary. Not only did broadcast television, via the vehicle of such neglected genres as sitcoms, synchronize the rhythms of daily life to* its *schedules, but sitcoms also recast the daily lives and experiences of the middle classes as ordinary, relatable, and achievable. Casting the 1980s as the time of television illuminates a critical period and medium of communication in Indian cultural history.*

Keywords: Media History, Nation-State, Middle Class, Sitcom, Temporality, Daily Life.

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The 1980s are widely remembered as the "time of television" in India. As even a casual glimpse at YouTube collections, Facebook pages, and blogs reveals, television programs from the 1980s offer a rich set of imaginative resources for remembering life in urban India at the time. Largely nostalgic in nature, these myriad references to the iconography, advertisements, and programs aired on Doordarshan, the state-run broadcast network, suggest an affective charge that is distinct and specific to the period's newly forged urban middle class.

In pioneering studies, scholars and critics including Mankekar (1999), Ninan (1995), Pendakur (1989), Rajagopal (2001), and Singhal and Rogers (1991) have traced and analyzed the cultural pervasiveness and significance of broadcast television in the 1980s. However, this period remains understudied and scholarship on television remains largely focused on the period following economic liberalization (1991 and later), when the television landscape shifted from being defined by one

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national state-run channel to a rapidly expanding range of mass-market and niche cable and satellite channels catering to various audiences segmented by language, region, religion, age, and so on. In fact, this relative lack of attention toward a formative period in the media landscape in India and other postcolonial countries is symptomatic of a broader neglect in scholarship on television and, even more generally, media globalization. Our current understanding of television outside Anglo-American spheres is informed largely by concerns regarding the cultural politics of neoliberal globalization and the increasing prominence of transnational television networks across the Middle East and North Africa, sub-Saharan Africa, Asia, and Latin America (Curtin, 2003; Kraidy, 2009; Kumar, 2005; Rivero, 2015; Sinclair & Straubhaar, 2013; Willems, 2010).

In the Indian context, scholars have called attention to the fact that the foundation for economic reforms and cultural globalization that marked the 1990s was laid during the "the long 1980s."[1] The years between the Emergency (June 1975 – March 1977), when civil liberties and rights were suspended, and the introduction of structural economic reforms (1991) involved dramatic and enduring shifts in Indian political and social life. As Menon and Nigam (2007) point out, the ruling Congress Party's defeat in the elections that followed the lifting of the Emergency led to a thoroughgoing transformation of the political sphere. The 1980s saw not just the rise of the right-wing and largely upper-caste Hindu nationalist BJP but, most strikingly, the emergence of a number of vernacular leaders and the articulation of new lower- and middle-caste and -class alliances. Even though the Congress and Indira Gandhi returned to power in January 1980, political and democratic aspirations that had transformed the public sphere through the period of the Emergency and in its immediate aftermath could not be wished away or controlled.

In this political conjuncture, the media — broadcast television, in particular — came to play a prominent role in remaking ties between the state, the market, and the urban middle classes. As Rajagopal has argued about the post-Emergency period, with consent displacing coercion as the major form of governance, the mass media came to play a central role in shaping the formation of a new middle class that defined itself "through cultural and consumerist forms of identity" (2011, p. 1011). During this period, a series of technological, industrial, and policy changes in the media and cultural industries paved the way for the shift from state-run, development-oriented media to an advertising-driven media culture that gained tremendous force after 1991 with the entry of transnational media conglomerates (Mazzarella, 2003; Roy, 2008). Rajagopal's (1993) analysis of Doordarshan's embrace of sponsored programs and the broadcast of Hindu mythologicals (2001), and Mankekar's (1999) ethnography of television viewers in a New Delhi neighborhood remain landmark studies that show how television, through its representation of middle-class lifestyles and endorsement of consumerist desires, remediated links between the state and the urban middle classes. However, despite these authors' foundational work, this era of Indian television remains understudied and is regarded as a minor interlude in the nation's shift from one major imaginary (Development) to another (Globalization).

In this article, we call for a renewed focus on broadcast television in the 1980s and its role in mediating a profound temporal shift—the de linking of the time of everyday life from statist notions of Development and aligning it with emergent, yet powerful affective regimes of advertising and consumption that were transforming daily life. The challenge facing the state, in other words, was to reimagine the experience of daily life as one that was not overdetermined by discourses of nation-building and progress, wherein citizens were asked to embrace scarcity and sacrifice in the present so as to ensure a secure future for the nation. Instead, citizens were to take pleasure in, and value, the now.

To understand how broadcast television facilitated and legitimized this temporal shift, we offer two interventions. First, we propose conceptualizing the 1980s as the "time of television." This phrase describes the texture of life in urban India during the 1980s and reminds us how quickly Doordarshan realigned the ordinary routines of daily life to *its* particular program schedule. It acknowledges the profound impact of the expansion of television as a technology, industry, and cultural form during this period. We bring together these and other dimensions of the phrase "time of television" in our granular account of the introduction of commercial, sponsored programming on state-regulated television in the early 1980s. In building on and reframing other scholars' work on Doordarshan in terms of temporality, we illuminate just how critical television's emergent rhythms and narratives were to a nation weary of the tropes and temporality of Development.

Second, we argue that by centering the quotidian aspects of middle-class life in urban India, Doordarshan's family sitcoms rendered the emergent middle class and different aspects of its daily life (work, family, and notions of leisure and pleasure) as unremarkable, relatable, and, crucially, desirable. In a political conjuncture marked by a series of challenges to state authority from various regional and caste groups, Doordarshan's positioning of urban middle-class life as *the* defining aspect of the national-popular assumes even greater ideological significance. Focusing on *Yeh Jo Hai Zindagi* [Such Is Life; henceforth *YJHZ*], the first commercially sponsored and immensely successful sitcom on Indian television, we show that the significance of this program lay in its very ordinariness and uneventfulness. By revaluing the quotidian present of the middle class, programs like *YJHZ* offered a new way to think about the time of daily life and, in doing so, helped set the foundation for market liberalization and the prominence of the urban middle classes in the new imaginary of India as a "global nation" that took root by the late 1980s.

As our two-pronged argument demonstrates, bringing a temporal perspective to bear on television entails examining not just the production logics that give rise to a daily and weekly schedule of programs but also textual time, the ways in which media content work to construct our experience of lived time (Keightley, 2012). Even in the case of a single-channel broadcasting service there always are, as Keightley points out, "a whole host of temporal frameworks in play … from the glacial time of the natural history documentary, to the narrative time of the soap opera, to the real-time of reality TV" (2012, p. 4). Scholars of radio and television have, of course, focused not

just on the issue of liveness (Feuer, 1983; Scannell, 2014; White, 2004), regarded as the defining characteristic of the medium, but also on how varied television genres structure and mediate audiences' sense of time (Asthana, 2014; Das, 1995; Mankekar, 2014; Modleski, 1979). That said, scholarship on Doordarshan and other national broadcasters the world over has tended to focus on a narrow template of programs—mainly, prodevelopment dramas and soap operas. When we begin to acknowledge the astonishing diversity of genres on Doordarshan, what comes into view is a far more richly textured and plural sense of time, one that weaves together the "eventful" (news, disasters, sporting events, national ceremonies, and so on), the "historical" (mythologicals, historical and quasihistorical costume dramas), and the "ordinary" (sitcoms, soap operas, children's programs, and so on). The multiple, entangled temporalities of these televisual genres were, no doubt, critical to the shifting experience of everyday life for the new Indian middle class in the 1980s. Our analysis of sitcoms takes into account the copresence of multiple genres and varied temporal frameworks that marked Doordarshan's program flow.

Focusing on early sitcoms such as *YJHZ* and *Wagle ki Duniya* [Wagle's World; henceforth *Wagle*] in this article, we seek to broaden the study of Indian television to include an understudied historical period and a genre that is well-loved but typically dismissed as "just" entertainment. As feminist media scholars have long argued, it is precisely the focus on ordinary, domestic affairs that makes sitcoms and other "feminine" genres like soap operas and telenovelas persuasive sites of discourse concerning gender, race, class, and nation (Brunsdon, D'Acci, & Spigel, 1997). We extend this argument through our emphasis on temporality. Reading early Doordarshan programming, and *YJHZ* in particular, in terms of time clarifies that what broadcast television offered middle-class viewers was not simply a new subject position, but a new way of experiencing time itself. To be a middle-class Indian in the time of television was to be oriented to the present—to consumption and pleasure in the present—like never before. The generic characteristics of the sitcom (its episodic structure and comic mode, for instance) and the dailiness of broadcasting helped garner the middle class's consent as the nation gradually divested from the temporality of Development.

Television, time, and everyday life

Every media technology has a particular mode of structuring and communicating time. And the generalizable effect of broadcasting, as Scannell has shown, is to "re-temporize time" (1996, p. 149). Scannell's account of broadcasting in England reveals that "dailiness" is the organizing principle at work, particularly as listeners and viewers orient the rhythms of daily life—school and office routines, tea time, dinner and bedtime habits, and so on—to program schedules. In a similar vein, Silverstone has focused on the ordinariness and dailiness of television, arguing that television "is very much part of the seriality and spatiality of everyday life" and that its schedules "reproduce (or define) the structure of the household day" (1994, p. 22). As a

number of columnists and television critics have observed, in the Indian context too, Doordarshan, being the only national broadcast television service during the early 1980s, had the effect of synchronizing the time of daily life to the time of television (see e.g., Singh, 1985). Across urban India, the beginning of daily television services at 4 p.m. and the broadcast of a popular sitcom at 8:30 p.m. on Friday evenings, a Hindi-language film on Saturday evenings, and, famously, Hindu mythologicals on Sunday mornings, all became crucial temporal markers for organizing daily and routine activities.

Consider, for instance, this cartoon from 1987 by Ajit Ninan, entitled "Breakfast TV" (see Figure 1). The television set is at the heart of the morning rush to get to school and work. So powerful a temporal force is television that it holds the entire family, including the dog, in the now — in *its* now. The parents and children stare at the television in varying states of undress and in the middle of various incomplete tasks, from shaving to eating breakfast to putting on school uniforms. While Ninan's cartoon clearly shows television reigning supreme over this interior, domestic space, it undoes any easy association of the medium with femininity. Here, the man looks away from his shaving mirror and up at the television screen in order to fashion his body into an impossible position. The woman is also distracted from such stereotypically feminine tasks as cooking and combing her daughter's hair. Even such urgent matters as the hot iron burning a hole in a shirt and the smoke billowing from the kitchen stove (images in the foreground and background respectively) go unnoticed by everyone in the family. In the middle of these competing pulls on the present sits the triumphant television, beaming an image of a man in a contorted yoga position. It is 7:20 in the morning, but no one's eyes are on the clock, at least not any more. Mounted on the wall just above the television set, the device is a reminder of just how closely the time of everyday life — and clock time itself — is aligned with that of television. Meanwhile, the newspaper, that older technology of time and nation (Anderson, 1983), lays unopened on the floor. The presence of the clock and the newspaper in this scene suggests that these technologies do not simply disappear in the time of television; they take on a new role, reminding us of what programs are to be broadcast and when, that is, when it is time to turn on the television set.

Ninan's incisive rendition of a middle-class household's breakfast routine gestures to the ways in which television reorganized the spatial geographies of everyday life in 1980s India. Domestic space was newly oriented toward the television, shifting gender and generational dynamics within middle-class households. Television's aspiration to render space anew is enshrined in the very name of the national broadcaster — *Door* (distant) *Darshan* (vision). And indeed, spatiality has shaped our understanding of television and other media forms in India and across the postcolonial world. As Mankekar has pointed out in a recent essay, "as implicit in terms like flow and dissemination, spatiality is the dominant trope in scholarship on media … in paradigms like Stuart Hall's classic model of encoding/decoding, and more generally, in conceptions of the circuits and circulation of translocal media" (2014, p. 41).

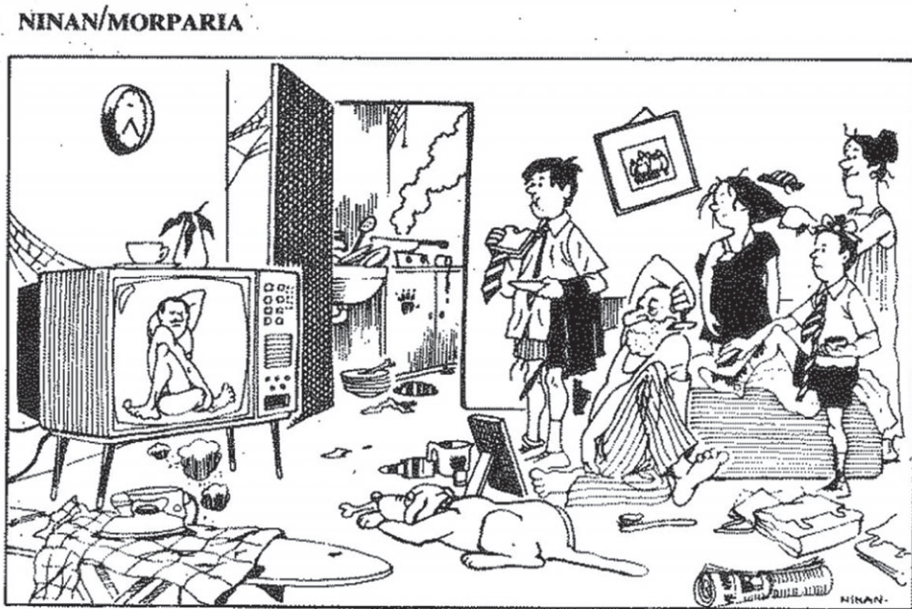

Figure 1 "Breakfast TV"

But, Ninan's cartoon makes clear that television had an equally powerful impact on our experience of time. It is, among other things, the ordinariness of this scene, its familiarity to middle-class television audiences who likely started each morning in this manner, that makes it so funny. A trade-press article from the same year suggests that Ninan's image is spot on, in its broad brushstrokes as well as in such minor details as the abandoned newspaper. Speaking of how rapidly media habits changed over the course of the 1980s, the author writes:

> You wake up to the humdrum telecast of Breakfast TV. Choosing between the telly and the newspaper, many opt for the former. Evenings are reserved for the latest serials, film songs, feature films, and what-have-you. If you visit a friend while a popular serial is on, it is assumed that you've come over to watch the serial. And if you're expecting a visitor while a serial is on, you're wasting your time. (Kapur, 1985, p. 51)

In other words, television's structuring effect on the rhythms and routines of ordinary, daily life had a profound impact on the emergent middle class's experience of the present.

The urban middle class was the key audience for the project of imagining and experiencing time anew. Program schedules were, after all, carefully crafted to work in sync with work and school schedules that defined everyday life for the urban

middle class. Television programming began toward the end of the school day when children would return home, and the "prime time"—that is, Doordarshan's "National Programme" from 8 to 10 p.m.—was determined by ideals of middle-class leisure on weeknights. Further, a number of accounts of television's commercial turn beginning in 1982–1983 concur that a vast majority of programs that were deemed successes from the perspective of advertisers, as well as Doordarshan, were directed at the urban middle class (Mankekar, 1999; Pendakur, 1991; Rajagopal, 1993). To be sure, the term "middle class" is not a straightforward descriptive term that maps neatly onto income, occupation, education, and other socioeconomic variables. A range of cultural and political factors including language, region, religion, and caste mediate claims and experiences of being middle class making it, as Beteille argues, "the most polymorphous middle class in the world" (Beteille, 2001; see also Dwyer, 2000; Fernandes, 2006). Rather than approach the term from a sociological perspective, we draw on Mazzarella's argument that the middle class as a "concept structures and enables a certain set of 'imagined Indias'—both utopian and dystopian—to be articulated" (2004, p. 3). The sharp decrease in development-themed programming targeting rural publics and the turn toward entertainment programming for middle-class leisure facilitated a reconceptualization of the time of the nation.

That it was the urban middle class's present that mattered is most evident in the genre of sitcoms like *YJHZ* and *Wagle*, which dealt explicitly with the ordinary, everyday aspects of life in urban India. Indeed, it is in this realm of the daily and the quotidian that middle-class interests and desires were privileged and presented as natural. They were emblematic of a nation embracing market-driven ideas of progress, one in which commodities were no longer scarce and suspect but rather, were quickly becoming desired, unobtrusive, and taken-for-granted things in the lives of the urban middle class.

While a detailed analysis of the industry logics and production cultures during this formative period of television in India is not our main focus here, we outline some of these developments in the next section to explore how television—as a technology, an object in homes across the country, and a site of cultural production—became ordinary and unremarkable within a brief time-span (between 1982 and 1987). We then provide an analysis of textual time in *YJHZ* to show how everyday life was made meaningful and resonant with the experiences of the urban middle class.

1980s as the time of television

Television in postcolonial India, as several critics and scholars have pointed out, arrived not so much due to efforts by the government and its policymakers but in large part as a result of initiatives taken by international aid agencies that urged newly independent "Third World" nations to explore using communication technologies for development. Black-and-white television sets, cameras, and other production and transmission equipment first arrived in New Delhi through a 1955 industry exhibition attended by Philips (Netherlands) and RCA (United States)—both companies

donated their equipment to the government when the exhibition concluded (Pendakur, 1989). With the help of a grant from UNESCO, personnel at All India Radio began producing the first television programs with the explicit goal of broadcasting to promote “community development and education” (Pendakur, 1991, p. 237).

As early as January 1960, All India Radio’s experimental television unit began producing live broadcasts of the Republic Day Parade in New Delhi, and established tele-clubs in 20 urban and rural centers in and around the city (TOI service, 1960). With outdoor television production equipment from West Germany, All India Radio covered other live events, such as a United Nations convention, and began producing newsreels in English and Hindi (Malik, 1968). However, it was only with the appointment of Indira Gandhi as the Minister for Information & Broadcasting in 1966 that the expansion and development of television as a mass medium became coherent policy goals. Ambitious experiments such as SITE (Satellite Instructional Television Experiment, 1975–1976) characterized this initial period, but as Rajagopal points out, these initiatives were “reduced to an exercise in the technology of state expansion, serving state interests” (Rajagopal, 1993, p. 95). Further, growth in terms of number of transmitters and television sets was slow, to say the least. To put it simply, television remained extraordinary and out of reach.

The year 1981–1982 marked an important turning point. With India poised to host the Asian Games (Asiad) in 1982, the need for producing live coverage in color translated into the announcement of a “Special Expansion Plan” (Rajagopal, 1993). Under the leadership of S. S. Gill, this plan aimed at providing coverage to at least 70% of India’s population. Figures indicate that signal reach was extended from approximately 0.5 million people in 1971 to 210 million by 1983, with a concomitant increase in the number of television sets (Pendakur, 1989). In 1981, Doordarshan had only 18 transmitters and this number rose to 39 in the year of the Delhi Asiad, covering 19% of the country’s population. In the next few years, following what the government dubbed the “one-transmitter-a-day” initiative, 119 transmitters were commissioned, ensuring that television broadcasts could reach nearly 70% of the population by the late 1980s (Bajpai, 1985). While television infrastructure was being addressed, it was clear that with the conclusion of the games, Doordarshan was caught unprepared when it came to television programming—there were simply no programs to fill the hours and generate revenues.

In 1983, signaling a transition away from an earlier model of public service broadcasting with the goal of utilizing television for Development, Doordarshan issued a call for sponsored programming and, in 1984, aired *Hum Log* [We the People]. Modeled along the lines of a successful Mexican telenovela, *Hum Log* revolved around the fortunes of a lower middle-class joint family in Delhi. Sponsored by Food Specialities Limited (a Nestle subsidiary), *Hum Log* was intended as a “prodevelopment” soap opera that would induce attitudinal shifts in matters of health, family planning, and, more generally, women’s positions within family structures. As a number of studies and reports have documented, audience reactions to *Hum Log* were completely unexpected—the show’s producers began receiving hundreds of letters from

viewers who identified with the show's characters and were invested in the narrative's progress, leading some to observe that entertainment had overshadowed Development (Mankekar, 1999; Rajagopal, 1993). *Hum Log*'s success also demonstrated to advertisers the immense potential of television as an advertising avenue. With major advertising agencies in Bombay establishing television production units, a number of small-scale production companies emerging to meet the demand for television programs, and influential film producers jumping into the fray, Doordarshan began commissioning a series of programs. *YJHZ* was the second sponsored program broadcast as part of Doordarshan's National Programme (8 – 10 p.m. on weekdays and 9 a.m. to noon on Sundays).

YJHZ, which went on air on 14 September 1984, less than 3 months after *Hum Log* began, marked Doordarshan's first clean break from its developmentalist mandate, setting the institution on a path of commercialization and the sustenance of a lucrative, middle-class audience base. Produced at a cost of Rs. 1.5 lakh per episode, the show soon had the highest ratings at the time, and remains ensconced in the urban middle class's collective memory as India's first and funniest comedy series. *YJHZ* was produced by S. S. Oberoi, an advertising executive, and sponsored by Vicco Laboratories, one of Oberoi's oldest clients and a company that manufactured a range of cosmetics and toiletries. Hindi humorist Sharad Joshi wrote the script (he was later replaced by Ajay Kartik) and Kundan Shah and Manjul Sinha, both graduates of the Film and Television Institute of India (FTII, Pune), were the directors. Initially slated to go on air by December 1984, production was rushed so Doordarshan could broadcast the pilot of the first "homemade" entertainment program to coincide with its silver jubilee celebrations. Viewer reactions to the first two episodes of *YJHZ*, while not discouraging, were certainly disappointing for Doordarshan executives who were struggling to devise ways to attract advertisers. As one trade report noted, "there were no rave reviews. However, from the third episode onwards, the series really took off … as a result, *YJHZ* firmly entrenched itself as something to look forward to. For a time, it even challenged the monolithic position of the Hindi soap opera *Hum Log*" (Ahmed, 1985, p. 15). Several trade-press and newspaper articles cited a Doordarshan-commissioned survey that revealed that *YJHZ* had a 91% rating, leaving behind *Hum Log* (83%), and even the fillm-song-based *Chitrahaar* (just above 80%) and the Sunday evening Hindi feature film (83%). For the first time in India, there emerged an audience for entertainment television.

The 1980s can also be regarded as the "time of television" from the perspective of professionals working in other cultural industries in Bombay and other cities. The novelty and reach (national distribution) of television, and a new and relatively stable circuit of capital attracted a range of creative personnel from theater, film, and other cultural arenas and spurred the production of a range of critically acclaimed programs. Television emerged as a major distribution platform for politically oriented film directors associated with the "Parallel Cinema" movement, and many established filmmakers and writers took the opportunity to produce serials and sitcoms including *YJHZ* and *Wagle* (Kundan Shah), *Nukkad* [Street Corner] (Kundan Shah and Saeed

Akhtar Mirza), *Circus* (Aziz Mirza and Kundan Shah), and *Mr. Yogi* (Ketan Mehta); telefilms such as the Partition saga *Tamas* [Darkness] (Govind Nihalani); and historical programs like *Bharat Ek Khoj* [Discovery of India] (Shyam Benegal). However, it was far from clear during this early phase what producing television content on a daily and weekly basis entailed from creative, technical, industrial, or organizational perspectives. As Scannell points out, broadcasting's orientation toward dailiness stems in large measure from the fact that success entails the "production of a daily service day by day and every day" (1996, p. 152). Television production in 1980s India had yet to settle into this daily rhythm, and as trade narratives suggest, it was no small feat.

YJHZ was produced in record time and in the face of several limitations. To begin with, there were no precedents. As director Kundan Shah said in an interview, "we wanted to prove that we too could make a television serial which was as good as *Lucy* or *Yes Minister*" (Nagdev, 1985, p. 17). Recruiting the four leading actors — Satish Shah (in different roles each week), Shafi Inamdar (as Ranjit, the husband), Swaroop Sampat (as Renu, the wife), and Rakesh Bedi (as Raja, Renu's younger brother) — proceeded smoothly, with each actor providing bulk dates for the project. Finding scriptwriters, however, proved extremely difficult. While Sharad Joshi, a renowned Hindi humorist was brought in, building a team around him proved impossible. Shah admitted in a 1985 interview, "we have tried nearly 25 scriptwriters … so far we have not found anyone satisfactory" (Ahmed & Bajpai, 1985, p. 40). The lack of training for television, particularly in the script-writing department, was not the only problem. According to Ajay Kartik, who wrote the script for several episodes of *YJHZ* and other programs, writing for television during the 1980s involved negotiating not only what the producer imagined but also keeping in mind Doordarshan policies regarding "family friendly fare" (Gehlot, 1989).

Once negotiations between Vicco Laboratories and Doordarshan were completed, producers rented equipment and booked a film studio for a period of 8 months (Rajkamal Studio no. 2). The dearth of high-quality technicians with experience in television production proved to be another significant obstacle. Moreover, shooting a television program in a film studio that had a high ceiling and no switchable mics forced the crew to use boom mics, which made it impossible to follow a three-camera set up. Each shot had to be taken three times from different angles, with different actors participating in that scene. "A shot that would appear on screen for probably thirty seconds, would take about two hours to shoot," explains a behind-the-scenes trade report (Nagdev, 1985, p. 19). Despite these constraints in resources and pressures to keep Doordarshan supplied with at least four episodes in advance (a policy maintained until the late 1980s), *YJHZ* was regarded by critics as the show that "set the pace for serials in the future" (Nagdev, 1985, p. 19). Within a few months of *YJHZ* going on air, Doordarshan was swamped with proposals for sponsored programs. By the summer of 1985, bureaucrats at Mandi House, the headquarters of Doordarshan in New Delhi, had authorized the production of 20 new sponsored programs including sitcoms, quiz shows, dramas, thrillers, detective serials, and children's programs (Bajpai, 1985, p. 39). In yet another indication of their confidence in imagining and

mobilizing a national audience, in August 1985 Doordarshan officials decided to telecast the National Programme, comprised of two sponsored programs and a news-based program, across the country instead of just a handful of stations. With a steady output of a range of programs, increasing rates of television set ownership (from 2 million in 1981 to 23.4 million in 1990), and dramatic spikes in the sales of consumer goods (Mankekar, 1999), television no longer seemed remarkable and out of reach. Switching on the TV set and expecting to see something on it every day of the week had become a routine and ordinary affair for a wide range of people across urban India.

If, on the one hand, television became ordinary over the course of the 1980s, on the other hand, *ordinariness* came to matter on television. The mundane routines and concerns of the urban middle class were placed front and center in sitcoms like *YJHZ* and *Wagle*. These shows naturalized the day-to-day experiences and desires of this social group, in Doordarshan's prime time slots no less. In studying the production of ordinariness—that which seems trivial and laughable, but which nonetheless has important ideological implications—we take our cue from feminist media scholars (Brunsdon et al., 1997; Mankekar, 1999). But we also draw on the growing body of scholarship on media and temporality to demonstrate that ordinariness on television was more than a way to consolidate the privileged position of the urban middle class in the national imaginary. Sitcoms played a crucial role in rearticulating the time of everyday life as valuable in and of itself. As we demonstrate below, *YJHZ* offered glimpses of a life unburdened by notions of sacrifice and the deferral of pleasure that had, until the mid-1980s, defined everyday life in postcolonial India. For Abhijit Roy, *YJHZ* and other sitcoms would likely fall under the umbrella of the "developmental modern," a term that captures the "negotiation between the developmental State's pedagogic project and the emergent commercial popular" (2008, p. 38) throughout the 1980s. Roy also takes an expansive view of "progressive melodramas" to include such diverse shows as *Nukkad, Malgudi Days*, *Rajani*, and *Udaan* [Flight]. But a different argument emerges when we consider textual time in each of these television genres. In the following section, we analyze how time structures the lives of the middle-class characters in *YJHZ* by attending to the episodic structure of the show, its mise en scene, and the themes echoed in the title song and various episodes.

Such Is Life in 1980s India

YJHZ revolves around three members of an upwardly mobile, middle-class nuclear family: Renu, Ranjit, and Raja. Renu and Ranjit are both employed, and have been married for 3 years. Raja, Renu's younger brother, lives with them and is unemployed. They all live in a two-bedroom flat in Bombay. Over the course of the first four or five episodes, we learn that they like to dress well, eat out often, entertain guests, and provide Raja with some pocket money. Current consumer products fill their flat, particularly the living room, which is where they spend most of their time. This room holds a *diwan* with cushions (replaced by a sofa-cum-bed in the second episode), a

Figure 2 Renu emerges from the kitchen "portal" to address Raja (in blue) and Ranjit, seated at the dining table

dining table that flanks the kitchen wall, a side table for the telephone, and a built-in shelf with a number of decorative pieces, an alarm clock, and a radio (see Figure 2). To the side is a refrigerator atop which are a framed picture of the couple, a potted plant, and a fruit basket. Paintings adorn the walls. The mise en scene's investment in contemporary products is supplemented by the characters' frequent references to purchasing gifts and household appliances. In fact, season 1 is framed by episodes about big purchases: "The Sofa Cum Bed" (episode 2) and "The Cooking Range" (episode 23). All in all, Renu, Ranjit, and Raja's lifestyle and the space they occupy are firmly middle class.

Much of the trio's time is spent on quotidian activities: quarrels between husband and wife, consultations with neighbors, concerns over pregnancy, penny-pinching for a new cooking range, the purchase of a sofa-cum-bed that is the envy of their neighbors, and so on. These and other commonplace events—nonevents, really—constitute the temporality of *YJHZ*. Even the inciting incident in each episode, the thing that sets the plot in motion, is usually a nonevent: For example, the husband forgets their wedding anniversary in the inaugural episode "Divorce"; a salesgirl comes knocking in "Blackmail"; the wife makes sweets for a visiting friend in the two-part "Thief's Sweet Tooth." Of course, as the episode titles indicate, things quickly spiral out of control and bigger problems come to the fore. Even so, *YJHZ* is not a show about momentous events: it deals with the daily and the ordinary. Moreover, its comic genre allows it to foreground not so much the struggles but the foibles of

Figure 3 R. K. Laxman's rendition of Wagle in the opening credits of *Wagle ki Duniya*

middle-class folks. As we demonstrate below in our analysis of the cooking range episode, *YJHZ* mercilessly pokes fun at the habits and desires of the middle class.[2]

Wagle ki Duniya, another popular sitcom directed by Kundan Shah telecast on Doordarshan between 1988 and 1990, takes this uneventfulness a step further, being even less plot-driven than *YJHZ* (Ojha, 1988–1990). More anxiety-ridden than its predecessor, *Wagle* also concerns itself with day-to-day matters in an urban, nuclear household. Srinivas Wagle, his wife Radhika, and their school-going sons Manoj and Raju seek the same ease of life the characters in *YJHZ* do. Their one-bedroom flat and their interactions with neighbors and colleagues place them in the same middle-class milieu as Renu, Ranjit, and Raja. But *Wagle* is more interested in capturing its protagonist's befuddled and bumbling response to life—as evidenced in the time the camera spends on actor Anjan Srivastava's contorted expressions—than on articulating a clear narrative arc in each episode. This makes *Wagle*'s "common man" a funny and endearing figure; it also emphasizes the nonevents that constitute daily life (see Figure 3). While a detailed analysis of *Wagle* is outside the scope of this essay, we gesture to it to note that the work of retemporizing daily life and privileging middle-class experience was not limited to *YJHZ* and that it continued well into the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Compare the uneventful humor of these sitcoms with the seriousness of a genre like the news, wherein "important" information is culled from around the world to assure us of the "eventfulness" of our days. The news is continually "filtering and

discarding the past, while orienting the present towards emerging events and processes" (Scannell, 1996, p. 160). The sitcom, by contrast, is interested in the present and *only* the present. It focuses on events not worth reporting on in the daily newscast, or memorializing in televised mythologicals like *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* or historical dramas like *Bharat Ek Khoj*. The sitcom's commitment to ordinariness and the present is also evident when it is set against live telecasts or highlights of international sporting events such as the Asiad or the Cricket World Cup, which broadcast India's modernity and competitiveness in relation to other nations. Where the mythologicals, historicals, and sports programs articulate India's importance by pointing to real and imagined events that have a bearing on history, *YJHZ* and other sitcoms train our attention on trivial incidents and daily routines.

The well-loved soap operas of the 1980s, particularly *Hum Log* and *Buniyaad* [Foundation], also dramatized ordinary, middle-class lives. But their generational sweep, melodramatic mode, and weighty topics (e.g., marriage, dowry, women's career ambitions) made their social, historical, and national significance hard to miss. *YJHZ* is very different, in that it makes no grandiose claims. Even as it raises important social concerns, it seems not to carry the weight of history.[3] It articulates a different relationship to time than other television and film genres do. Notably, the first and last episodes of season 1 of *YJHZ* are about the constitution of the family unit. That the season begins with "The Divorce" (episode 1) and ends with "New Member Arrives" (episode 24, when Ranjit's aunt, played by Farida Jalal, replaces him in the standing cast of characters) highlights the importance of the nuclear family structure in urban India. But it also sharply distinguishes this sitcom from the soaps, where characters manage multiple cross-generational relationships and are keenly worried about history, particularly as it affects the family. The continuous temporal structure of *Buniyaad* and *Hum Log*, the fact that characters' concerns (about finding a suitable husband for a daughter, for instance) continued from one episode to the next, gave these serials a brooding quality that is distinctly absent from the comical and carefree world of *YJHZ*, where each episode begins anew, the concerns of the past — the concerns of *last week* even — long forgotten. As it urges middle-class audiences to not take life too seriously, to enjoy the present, *YJHZ* revalues mundane, everyday life. This reconstitutes the new Indian middle class as quintessential national subjects, and redirects that audience's attention away from the past and the future, and to the present. The show insists on the present and nothing besides.

The episodic structure of the sitcom as a genre intensifies our sense of always returning to and dwelling in the present. Indeed, it is not just the present but a particular moment in the trio's daily routine that *YJHZ* continually highlights: conversations over breakfast. Renu and Ranjit leave for work (both hold 9–5 jobs) and the conflict continues when they return from work in the evening. Thus, the plot in each episode is largely structured by the humdrum routines and rhythms of the middle-class household. Much of what we see in *YJHZ* is not just ordinary, but part of the characters' *daily* lives. While routines have a way of linking and erasing the distinctions between past, present, and future, in *YJHZ* they anchor us in the present. Given the episodic

structure, one senses the distinct lack of a linear logic—there is no need to move forward or back in time because each day is as inconsequential and as pleasurable as the next.

YJHZ's contemporary mise en scene and its relative lack of scene and set changes also keep it anchored in the present. There is a temporal consequence to not straying out of the space of the apartment (the drawing room) that Renu, Ranjit, and Raja inhabit. There are virtually no outdoor shots apart from the title song sequence. Almost none of the action happens in other indoor spaces, in other people's houses or offices, either. Thus, we dwell with our protagonists in a space that is very clearly the interior of a middle-class apartment in the 1980s. While most of the action happens in this domestic space and Renu performs all the stereotypically feminine jobs (cooking, cleaning, serving breakfast), the show is by no means focused on feminized domestic routines. As was the case in the "women-oriented" shows Mankekar analyzed, gendered expectations with regard to work are explicitly critiqued in at least two episodes, "Renu as Sales Girl" and the two-part "Women's Liberation" (Mankekar, 1999). But *YJHZ* also challenges these expectations implicitly in other episodes via its temporal structure. Life in Renu and Ranjit's household revolves around the 9–5 routine, that is, the fact that *both* of them work outside the home and value leisure time when they return. That this—and only *this*—is the temporality of life is established by the constant repetition of this structure, and the occasional jokes about Raja being "jobless." Thus, while Renu is very much like the "new Indian woman" on other Doordarshan shows of the period, the organization of time in *YJHZ* arguably takes those women-oriented narratives' gendered critique a step further by making leisure and pleasure a key part of Renu's daily life as well.

The musical montage that opens and closes *YJHZ* does not just emphasize the present, it focuses on *enjoying* the present. In the first shot of the song sequence, Ranjit and Renu hurriedly cross the street on their way to work. But the rest of the sequence has them doing fun stuff: Ranjit mistakenly rides off on his motorbike without his pillion rider, Renu; Ranjit cons Raja of his ice cream; the trio take a camel ride and are stuck walking like camels afterward; as they eat *channa* [spiced gram] on a street bench (see Figure 4), a policeman shoos them off and takes over the bench for a nap; Raja and another man (try to) flirt with a woman. The montage at the end of the show uses the same melody and refrain, but depicts other humorous moments: The trio's rush to occupy their new sofa-cum-bed and a street bench causes other characters discomfort; Raja and the neighbor Bhattacharya have Ranjit's boss dress up as a server; Ranjit buys *bhutta* [corn] from a street vendor while Renu gets a ride from a stranger. Singer Kishore Kumar's famous yodeling and the song lyrics also make it clear that the point of life is to have fun.

The song sequence takes the very specific routines of work and leisure of the middle class and makes them stand for life in general. The way this group spends their time—rushing to work in the mornings, taking a camel ride on the beach—and the ups and downs they encounter in their everyday lives are naturalized. "Such is life," the song lyrics assert, "a little sweet, a little tart, a little spicy, a little bland." In other

Figure 4 *Yeh Jo Hai Zindagi*'s credit sequence emphasizes Renu, Raja, and Ranjit's leisure activities

words, although what we see on the show is the quotidian life of the middle class, that very specific way of organizing and experiencing time comes to represent life itself in 1980s India. The middle class's hopeful attitude toward the present is also naturalized, via repetition across episodes — not just in dialogic references but in the very structure of each episode — and in the lyrics and montage of the title song. This ascribes importance to the middle class, but it also makes their temporal experience utterly ordinary. This generalizing move is key to reimagining the nation's experience of the present, wresting it from the tropes (scarcity, saving, and progress) and future-oriented temporality of Development.

Together, the themes and episodic structure of *YJHZ* urge viewers to value the present for what it is, not for what it means for some distant, utopian future. In fact, there is a strong aversion to the future. Saving and planning for the future are deemed very hard, even ridiculous. For instance, "The Cooking Range" episode has the family pinching pennies to save the Rs. 3,000 they need to purchase the appliance. In the opening sequence, Renu establishes ground rules about eliminating all unnecessary expenditures such as Raja's pocket money, dinner and film outings, and taxi rides. Even the use of shampoo, toothpaste, and the water heater is curtailed. Their daily breakfast, she decides, will no longer consist of cheese, eggs, toast, and jam, but more economical items like *channa* and milk. Their entertainment is now limited to watching television at a neighbors' place. Close-up reaction shots depicting Ranjit and Raja's horror at these announcements are accompanied by a laugh track and a lighthearted melody. The funniest sequence focuses on the piggy bank that Renu buys to

Figure 5 Saving money for a cooking range

facilitate their frugal ways. The family performs a *pooja* [religious ceremony], complete with bells and chants and incense, to a big, square box with a Pinocchio-like smiley face now installed on top of the refrigerator (Figure 5). Since Raja is unemployed, he is assigned to stay home and watch over the piggy bank. Renu concocts various terms of endearment for her boyish piggy bank ("my sonu, munnu, sweety sweety pie") and fills it lovingly with bills extorted from family and friends. The ridiculousness of this newfound frugality is magnified through close-ups of the piggy bank laughing or crying, depending on whether the trio is successful at saving money.

If the cooking range episode highlights a desirable consumer good and the difficulties of saving for those expensive status symbols, the "Raja as Salesman" episode draws attention to the way consumers are conned into paying too much for products in department stores. Despite this awareness of the excesses of advertising and consumerism, and despite the characters' occasional worry about expenses, the world of *YJHZ* is very much a world of leisure and pleasure—and that, the show insists, is as it should be.

Conclusion

In this article, we focus on a popular family sitcom to address two critical limitations in the scholarship on television and, more generally, global media, and communication. First, our current understanding of television outside Anglo-American contexts rests on scholarship that has focused largely on the cultural politics of neoliberal globalization—specifically, the period following structural economic reforms and

the opening up of the media and communication sectors across the postcolonial world in Asia, Latin America, and sub-Saharan Africa. Arguing that the foundation for shifts in state-media relations and the role played by mass media in legitimizing market-oriented models and ideas of growth were laid during the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s, we highlight the emergence of television as a dominant cultural force in India in the early 1980s. Through a discussion of news and trade-press articles from this period and the production history of the first Indian sitcom *YJHZ*, we provide a granular understanding of the 1980s as the time of television.

Second, we develop a temporal framework that binds production histories with the textual time of specific genres. These elements work together to mediate audiences' sense of time, and this has broader (national and global) ramifications. In our argument, the "dailiness" of 1980s Indian television — as evident, in particular, in the neglected genre of sitcoms — was key to legitimizing middle-class life as both ordinary and desirable. This revaluing of the middle-class experience of daily life formed the basis for a broader temporal shift in the Indian national imaginary: from the temporality of Development, marked by scarcity, sacrifice, and deferral in the interest of the larger goal of nation-building, to that of a global market-economy defined by choice, consumption, and the ability to live in and value the present on its own terms. Thus the 1980s, understood here as the time of television, was no mere harbinger of economic reforms and cultural globalization. Changes that took place throughout the long 1980s were foundational to the notion of India as a "global nation" that gained currency in later years, and the centrality of the middle class in that new imaginary. While this article is rooted in the Indian context, we hope that the temporal framework we develop here — one that is attentive to both industry logics and textual time — might encourage comparative work on television's many global histories and move us beyond a predominantly spatial understanding of media and globalization.

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Notes

1 "The Long 1980s: Recovering a 'Lost Decade'" was the title of a conference hosted by the American Institute for Indian Studies (Ramaswamy, Zitzewitz, Brown, & Rajagopal, 2012).

2 The misunderstandings and coincidences complicating the plot also make *YJHZ* akin to the "middle-class" films of the 1970s, which featured middle-class lives and an "affable" hero (Poduval, 2012). As in those films, episodes exploring what it means to be a modern subject quickly turn farcical (e.g., episode 3: "Renu as Salesgirl", episodes 8 and 9: "Women's Liberation"), and episode 10: "Raja Falls in Love."

3 In this regard, *YJHZ* can be situated alongside numerous other sitcoms the world over that have mediated sociocultural and political transitions while remaining focused on seemingly mundane and ordinary matters (see, e.g., Dow, 1996).

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