

The Idiot Box Mania: Let us Turn off TV

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Recently we went out of town to meet and visit on some family members. In the morning their grandson about 4 ½ years old had the television on and was watching the Disney Channel. The parents and the grand parents wanted to watch the live telecast of the *Keertan* from Darbar Sahib, and they told him to change the channel. He would not let them switch channels and kept saying no. Then they explained to him that he can always watch Disney Channel later on but then the *Keertan* program cannot be watched later as it is coming on now only. But the little kid would not agree and kept saying; " No! I am watching now." With great difficulty the parents were able to switch the channel but the kid started crying. He was not willing to give his right to watch his own show. He was disciplined for infraction and he kept crying for a while. Then he stopped crying and went to the computer room and logged on the Disney channel and started playing games.

Fun Vs. Addiction:

This whole scenario that I experienced would appear very normal to any parents raising kids today. However, it appeared little strange to me for two reasons. One, I have not have had interaction with growing up kids in a long while as my kids are grown up. But I would admit that they too watched a lot of television and played lot of games on game console and television. Secondly, when we were growing up, we did not have the privilege of having a TV, so have not developed a great addiction to it. Now that I have that privilege, I do enjoy occasional good programs on it. But still I have not become addicted in the sense that I need my two hours of evening television before going to bed. I feel more fortunate that my wife is even less interested in television. I am really thankful that this very useful electronic device that has acquired the proportions of giant monster does not rule us. These may seem to be harsh words to use but I feel they are apt as everywhere you see, you will find that it rules our lives. The normal lives in entire nations can come to a standstill if a particular show or program is on. In many households the family dinners are shuttled based on what is on TV. Now the question is not what is for dinner, instead it is what is on tube (TV)? In fact these shows have made people so addicted to them that it is not just disrupting their daily lives, but it is raising the anxiety level to find out what will happen in the next episode before its scheduled telecast. Because, of it that they will call their family, friends in countries where that particular episode has already been played, because of the time difference to get the latest scoop.

Passivity:

Let us now explore the pros and cons of excessive TV watching. The first and foremost that amazes me is how TV has become a babysitter. Parents, grandparents and or the servants did the baby-sitting when we were growing up. Then when kids grew a little older they would hang out with their friends in the neighborhood and they would baby-sit younger siblings. Today most of the kids are growing up inside the four walls of the house and play with their friends for organized events only be it soccer (football), basketball, baseball, cricket or any other game. The games are not just played with

neighborhood kids coming together and deciding what to do, instead these are organized like a professional league. The trapping includes uniform, full gear, with referee, and clock timings. In fact these parents take these games so seriously that there have been incidents of parents attacking opposing team member's parents. The fracas assumes serious proportions and even lives have been put on jeopardy. Today as per survey of University of Michigan the kids between the ages of 5 and 12 occupy themselves after schools with 100 minutes of watching television. The greatest surprise is not just the duration of the TV watching, but the fact that it was largest time, biggest slice of the pie in terms of the various activities that were recorded in this survey. The time kids spent in front of television and the total time for television per family was found to be whopping 7 hours and 32 minutes. Imagine that an average child is exposed to 5500 acts of violence and 10,000 well made commercials. How all this time spent in front of television effects the quality of life or development of brain has not been comprehensively studied. Now, without seeking an outcome of a formal study on the effects of these acts of violence and commercials have on the developing brains one can visualize the impact. Adolescence and adults are now spending on an average 64 days in a year watching television. Further this is not alone in vying for our attention; we need to add videos and DVDs to this category. As there is no statistical data on the usage of these two mediums, it is hard to pinpoint time spent watching movies, serials, musicals, dramas etc. However, the long queues at the checking out counters at the mega video stores like Blockbusters and the new services like Netflix, that deliver movies to your home are indicators of the central roles of these DVDs and other entertainment mediums have on our lives. Blockbusters alone rent 1 billion videos and DVDs in a year. This gives us an indication as to how the entertainment media have come to acquire central place in our lives. The total value of sales of DVDs and videos was 10.3 billion in 2001 as per data by Video Software Dealers Association (VSDA), and it keeps growing every year.

How about the video gaming segment? This segment of industry has seen blistering growth and kids growing up with Mario Brothers have become gaming addicts. Self-proclaimed Junkie Jacob Schulist, Age 14, claims that he played for 10 hours straight on some days. According to James P. Rutherford, Executive Vice President of Veronis Schler Stevenson; the media investment firm; "The demand for information and entertainment seems almost insatiable."

Psychological Damage:

While the debate on the psychological impact of all this excessive watching of media is raging the American Academy of Pediatrics' (AAP) and American Medical Association (AMA) have taken a cautious stand. Although they have urged limiting the time spent in front of TV but asked for more research on the effects. While some of the direct effects are obvious, here are a few of them listed briefly:

- Obesity
- Increased inactivity time period
- Increased snacking especially unhealthy, high sugary foods.
- Attention Deficit problems (See research by Dr. Dimitri Chistakis of Children's Hospital

and Regional Medical Center in Seattle, USA.)

- Exposure to sexual content and violence
- Increased aggression in kids
- Impact on the sleep pattern of children (This has been documented by a study by Dr. Judith Owens)
- Stimulating consumption culture and addiction.

But unless we are aware of the effects of TV watching we will not be doing anything to exercise control. At present it seems to be exercising an unrelenting grip on our lives. The images that the media projects is cynicism, skepticism, violence, indulgence, fatalism and materialism. According to Jerry Mander in his book *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television*; "We've moved our lives inside an artificial, technologically contrived environment."

Dr Shad Helmstetter American leading Behavioral Psychologist observes that "The less television you watch, the more successful you will be. Most television shows wastes your time, while it programs your mind with the wrong input to be successful. Do your future and your family a favor. As much as you can break the habit, spend your time doing something of value and turn the television OFF." Another very famous professor and psychologist Dr. Mihaly Csikzentmihalyi who has spent life studying creativity and successful people support this concept in his book *Flow* as; "Most jobs and many leisure activities-especially those involving passive consumption of mass media-are not designed to make us happy and strong. Their purpose is to make money for someone else. If we allow them to, they can suck out the marrow of our lives, leaving only feeble husks."

Now imagine if we asked Guru Nanak Dev Ji for his advice on this issue, Guru Ji's reply will be in line with these words of his:

"mqu dyiK BUlw vlsrY qyrw iciq n AwvY nwau]"

"*Mut dekh bhoola veesarai, tera chit na aavai naao*" (SGGS: 14)

Meaning: By seeing these may I not go astray and forget You. Oh Lord! Your Naam may not enter into my heart.

Ethics & Moral Awareness:

Here Guru ji is talking about the three effects – slipping from mind, failure of efforts to remember and finally inability to remember as it is not firmly itched in the memory. These lines Guru Ji quoted in relation to human desire for material possessions, desire of lavish life styles, occult powers, desire of power and authority. But if we view TV, does it not entice us to indulge, live and strive to acquire that life style? While watching television, are we not fantasizing about them? Its relevance to the effects on mental and physical growth will be debated, as well as challenged by the experts and proponents of these mediums as it generates profits for them. But how it bankrupts our spiritual capital and leads to mental decadence? No

specialist will ever investigate! At least each of us can ask ourselves one question? Does all this entertainment ever produces satisfaction and contentment where one can say I had enough? No! We can never say we had enough. Bhai Gurdas Ji has summed up the mental condition in these words:

"AKI vyK n rjIAw bhU rMg qmwsy]"

"*Akhee vaekh n rajeeaa bahu rang tamaasae.*"

(Bhai Gurdaas, Vaar No. 26)

Meaning: The eyes never find contentment from watching all the colourful shows.

If we want not to be stunted by this artificial, technological wizardry, we need to act now. It is possible to have a life without a television and spending a minimal amount of time in front of TV. It will surely produce the withdrawal syndrome early but soon one will realize that there is not just life but better life without it.

It is possible to generate that kind of awareness. Just as smoking has become socially and morally distasteful, even watching TV could be relegated to that fate.

The matter is in our hands. If we can see the corrosive effects of entertainment medium on the families and more on the growing young children and galvanize efforts in the right direction. The first step will be unplugging of the television. What did I hear? That it is going to produce a void in lives, make evenings chillier? How about putting a timer on the wall outlet so that TV gets electricity according to your designated timetable? Now that is not difficult but the free time that it will generate will be blessings in it not to talk about deflecting the direct effects of staying mentally soaked in unreal world instead it will free time for activities that promote family relationships and provide opportunity for exploring creative talents.

Turning off TV allows us to make a new turn in our lives it will free time to attend a gym, walk, have quality family time or even have additional time to explore and read the book we always wanted but never had time. If not for our sake at least for our kids' sake let us turn TV off. It is not my advice it is advice of child psychiatrist who says in his book, *The Epidemic*; "Our culture is toxic to children." and he ranked children's TV as particularly harmful. As concerned parents we won't give them any toxic thing to eat, so why feed them on TV? Why make TV their baby sitter and provider of moral and social values? The effects of obesity, health issues such as blood cholesterol and violence and sexual crimes have been documented. So why as responsible parents will we give them free rein? It is time to act and control it. If we do not take control over it, then like a monster it will be controlling our lives. If we want our lives and our children's lives not to be governed by them, then it is time to act now.

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