

## Cartoon Realities: Gender Stereotypes in Indian Animation affecting Pre-Adolescents

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**How to cite this article:** Ms Mudita Raj, Dr Umang Gupta (2023). Cartoon Realities: Gender Stereotypes in Indian Animation affecting Pre-Adolescents. Library Progress International, 43(2), 2367-2381

### Abstract

Cartoons are especially aimed at children and significantly impact their psychological development. This influence can be observed in children's behavior and social perception, as they form their ideas of reality based on what they see, including defining gender roles. The portrayal of gender in television cartoons greatly influences development of gender identity. While governments strive for gender equality, early childhood exposure to media plays a crucial role in shaping these views. This study investigates how gender is portrayed in Indian cartoon shows. Researchers employed content analysis to identify instances of stereotyped gender portrayals in these programs. The study examines popular animated characters analyzing their portrayal of gender and the potential impact on young minds. Specifically, the analysis focuses on popular cartoons Chhota Bheem and Motu Patlu. The findings revealed the absence of female main characters, while male lead characters dominated the shows. With the increasing number of dedicated children's channels in India, understanding these narratives is crucial to ensure that media reinforces rather than hinders progress towards gender equality. The study underscores the need for more balanced gender representations in children's programming to promote a more equitable social reality.

**Keywords:** Gender, Stereotypes, Animation, Children, Social Learning

### 1. Introduction

“Gender roles are ingrained and performed from childhood, with television playing a crucial role as a catalyst in this process” (Fowler & Thomas, 2015). There is a lot of disagreement over how to help kids develop their identities, especially in relation to gender roles. Both genders' perceptions are shaped in part by television, a strong medium. Males are typically portrayed as powerful, muscular, and robust, mirroring traditional expectations, whereas femininity is frequently connected with quality, domesticity, and meekness.

“Television cartoons are increasingly reinforcing these stereotypical roles. During their formative stages, children learn about gender roles through various influences such as books, toys, clothing,

television, and interactions with their grandparents” (Lemish, 2010). Commercial merchandise, such as Kinder Joy chocolate, are prime examples of gendered marketing as they associate blue with boys and pink with girls. This gendering even extends to toys. Concerns concerning the maintenance and reinforcement of patriarchal standards are raised by this artificial gender role.

Cartoon shows have a significant influence on how kids behave. Children are a special category for research since they are the future of civilization. Daily activities play a significant role in shaping the development and growth of a kid, with television playing a major role. The expansion of children's channels and programs emphasizes the role of TV as a storyteller in the contemporary era (Gerbner et al., 2002). Kids' TV shows engage young viewers with vibrant imagery, animated characters, and captivating tales that shape their attitudes and actions.

“Children, being natural imitators, replicate what they see on screen. The content of TV cartoon programs, including the appearance and actions of characters, leaves a lasting impact on young minds” (Emmers-Sommer & Allen, 1999). Because television cartoon programming frequently spreads diverse narratives about personality, society, culture, and commerce, it is necessary to closely examine it. Children are a different audience, and certain programs are tailored to their needs, influencing how they conceptualize gender roles.

TV cartoons in particular teach youngsters numerous social structures, including the notion of gender and the responsibilities that go along with it. Numerous scholarly investigations across multiple fields, including behavioral science, political science, sociology, pediatrics, and cultural studies, have examined the portrayal of gender in various media, underscoring the continuous importance of this subject matter.

### **Visual Depiction**

As a form of communication, cartoons have spread across the nation and are considered "the most constant, persuasive, and powerful" way to communicate ideas for younger viewers. Due to its widespread use, it has a significant impact on kids. When children are between the ages of two and four, they start watching cartoons with great interest, and many of them end up being fixated on them to the point of addiction.

Children greatly relate to the characters in these cartoons, therefore they have a significant impact over them. These figures act as role models for kids, encouraging the formation of social concepts. Children's conceptions of gender are greatly influenced by these cartoons since they watch and try to imitate the movements and behaviors of the characters that they see. Being exposed to gender stereotypes, especially in animated cartoon programs, reinforces the behaviors that are portrayed as acceptable in real life.

Cartoons since introduced by parents goes beyond simple amusement and includes socialization elements, one of which is gender stereotyping.

It's noteworthy that these cartoon figures can be objects, animals, or humans. Even inanimate objects that play significant parts in the films have human-like traits like voice and movement. Cartoon characters who are lifeless and frequently fit into stereotypical ideas of male or female gender roles contribute to the perpetuation of cliché gender norms. Gender bending happens in certain animated cartoons, which can often make kids nervous or uneasy since they can't always tell what's genuine and what's not.

### **Impact of Television on children**

Television has a significant influence on people's conduct, particularly when it comes to the interactions between characters. Youngsters frequently take after the communication patterns they

see on television, making them their own, which in turn affects how they behave. Children attempt to imitate the acts and behavior of TV characters, which goes beyond simple speech in this observational learning process.

The comprehensive report "What Media Teach Kids About Gender" by Knorr, C. [2017] provides insight into how television may significantly alter children's conceptions of gender roles. The study claims that youngsters pick up particular characteristics linked to gender identities, with heroic, fearless superheroes serving as an excellent example. Knorr asserts, nevertheless, that these ostensibly powerful personalities may unintentionally communicate antagonism and violence. On the other hand, figures that are presented as "fearful and meek," like princesses, might unintentionally contribute to the stereotypes of weakness and submission.

The report essentially highlights the necessity of critically analyzing television material and its possible effects on children's attitudes and actions. Understanding and resolving the complex messages regarding gender in media becomes essential for promoting a more equal and diversified viewpoint among the younger generation, as tv continues to play a significant role in forming cultural standards.

### **Children constructing their social ideas based on TV**

"Childhood is impacted by a variety of societal frameworks, including law, politics, religion, culture, socioeconomic class, gender, and ethnicity" James & James (2008). It is troubling that there don't seem to be any gender- or feminist-based studies assessing kids' connections with TV cartoons in the academic archives. Gender representations have a significant influence as youngsters are exposed to this material from morning to night. However, there is a chance to raise awareness of this issue via conversation and debate.

Television continues to have a significant influence on children's lives even with the internet and other media technologies being widely used (Lemish, 2007). In 'Children and Television – A Global Perspective,' Lemish contends that kids actively interact with TV, responding, pondering, experiencing, and constructing meanings according to their inclinations, capacities, wants, and experiences. Lemish stresses the need of comprehending both the ways in which television affects kids and the things they do with it. Theoretically and ideologically, research with children, as opposed to research on children, has become more prevalent, and a variety of methods, such as participant observation, interviews, and task-based approaches such as using children's drawings and written reports, have been used. The major method used in this study's qualitative, phenomenological research inquiry is interviewing youngsters to learn how they interpret gender representations in television cartoons. The children's reception research incorporates observations, in-depth talks, interviews, and analysis of the respondents' personal tales, building on Lester's (1999) idea of personal texts. This study's theoretical approach is based on the idea that reality is socially constructed. By using this method, the study hopes to clarify how kids understand and create gender identities through their interactions with TV cartoons, which will provide important context to the conversation on kids' media consumption and its effects on society.

## **2. Review of Literature**

With specialized material, television media has deliberately targeted the younger age, especially with cartoon shows and movies. Researchers that use content analysis as a method for in-depth study have raised their focus to the possible effects that television cartoons, whether direct or indirect, may have on youngsters. Children regard media as a mirror reflecting societal narratives and discourses, and they utilize information from television to learn about society and its workings,

claim Habib and Soliman (2015).

According to Jane (2015), prejudices about women in society are often realized through their portrayal as meek and unequal in the media. In their study of gender role depiction in cartoon shows, Baker and Raney (2004) looked at superhero characters, physical characteristics, communication behaviors, and psychological factors. Superheroes, who are prominent characters in several cartoon shows, have been seen to have specific gendered traits. According to Baker's (2007) research, there were more male superheroes than female superheroes. Male superheroes were typically shown as muscular, while female superheroes had average body types. In addition to generally being portrayed as more beautiful, female superheroes were also more likely to exhibit questioning and advice-seeking behaviors.

The number of channels for TV, both public and private, has increased recently. Still, there remains a noticeable gender disparity across all program types, animated and non-animated (Gotz, 2008). An imbalance in the depiction of gender roles in animated television shows has also resulted from the growth of private television networks in India. In these shows, female characters are usually confined to supporting roles next to male stars (Jaggi, 2015). Gender stereotypes are so common on television that they have permeated society standards, claim Anderson and Cavallaro (2002). When contrasted to their female counterparts, male characters get more screen time and participate in a wider variety of activities. Furthermore, gender bias may be found in the titles of TV cartoon shows (Rozario, 2018).

In cartoon shows, the genders of men and women are shown inequitably. For example, women are mostly seen doing housework, which makes them appear weaker and less powerful than men (Magotra, 2018). These trends raise concerns about the wider societal ramifications of such depictions in children's programming in addition to serving to reinforce pre existing gender prejudices.

Several theories, such the social learning theory and cultivation theory, examine the psychological effects of media, with a focus on television in particular. Theorists such as Gerbner contend that television plays a pivotal role in a dynamic process, molding attitudes and beliefs to become an effective educational tool. Children learn social norms and values from television in a crucial way, which helps to create a social reality that has a lot of influence.

Because of its dual character, the media has the ability to favorably or negatively impact public opinion. It is a means of establishing new trends and forming culture; this is known as "mediated culture." Television distinguishes out above other mass media as a tool that creatively and graphically portrays information, exposing societal truths and being essential to children's socialization. Because of their naiveté and limited comprehension, children see television as a big part of their life, making it difficult for them to distinguish between fact and fiction and accepting what they see as part of society.

Compared to verbal media, visual media has a longer-lasting effect on society because of its emphasis on visuals. In line with George Gerbner's viewpoint, television is acknowledged for having a long-lasting impact on people, influencing perceptions and fostering a common sense of the world.

### **Cultivation Theory**

According to Gerbner, people assume that what they see on television is genuine the more time they spend in front of the screen. People mistakenly believe it to be social reality despite the fact that it is purely imaginary. Television broadcasts visual representations of things and characters,

influencing the audience's view of reality.

Adolescent TV consumption, according to Gerbner, can change a person's perception of social reality. According to him, television masks the characteristics that currently constitute the cultural norms.

The term "first-order" effect refers to fact, observation, and confidence that there is an abundance of cruelty in the world.

The term "second-order" effect refers to how an individual feels about the law, the courts, regulations, or commands.

### **Social Learning Theory**

In the context of media, the Social Learning Theory, developed by Albert Bandura, provides insights into how individuals learn and acquire behaviors through observing and imitating others within a mediated environment. Here are key aspects of the Social Learning Theory as applied to media:

1. **Observational Learning in Media:** The theory suggests that individuals can learn from watching characters, personalities, or figures in the media. Whether through television shows, movies, online videos, or social media content, people observe behaviors and actions and can learn from them.
2. **Modeling in Media:** Media often provides various models that individuals may choose to imitate. These models can be fictional characters, celebrities, or even peers represented in the media. The degree to which individuals identify with and admire these models influences the likelihood of imitation.
3. **Imitation of Behaviors:** The media serves as a platform for presenting a wide range of behaviors. Individuals may imitate these behaviors, especially when they perceive the modeled actions as rewarding or when they observe positive consequences for those actions in the media.
4. **Reinforcement in Media:** Media content often portrays the consequences of behaviors, either positive or negative. Through these portrayals, individuals may vicariously experience the rewards or punishments associated with certain actions, influencing their likelihood of engaging in similar behaviors.
5. **Cognitive Processes in Media:** Cognitive processes, such as attention, memory, and motivation, play a crucial role in media-based social learning. Individuals need to pay attention to the behaviors portrayed in the media, remember them, and feel motivated to replicate those behaviors.
6. **Self-Efficacy in Media:** Media can influence individuals' self-efficacy, impacting their beliefs about their ability to perform certain behaviors. Positive portrayals of successful behaviors in the media can enhance self-efficacy, making individuals more likely to attempt similar actions in real life.
7. **Reciprocal Determinism in Media:** The interactions between media content, individual viewers, and their environment are dynamic and reciprocal. Media content can shape individuals' perceptions and behaviors, while individuals' preferences and behaviors also influence the types of media they engage with.

Understanding the Social Learning Theory in the context of media helps explain how media content becomes a source of learning and socialization. It sheds light on how individuals can adopt behaviors, attitudes, and norms from the mediated environment, and how media plays a role in shaping the social reality for audiences. The theory is particularly relevant in discussions about the influence of media on behaviors, values, and social norms.

### 3. Methodology

To investigate, the topic at hand Qualitative Method is used. The researchers have analyzed cartoon characters on the basis of gender. On the basis of narrative analysis the cartoons, *Chhhota Bheem* and *Motu Patlu* are analysed. Further, parents of girls between the age of 7 to 10 were interviewed to understand their perception and interaction.

### 4. Observations

#### *Chhota Bheem - A hero and women sidekick*

One particularly well-known cartoon series among Indian kids is Chhota Bheem, which tells the stories of a little boy in the charming city of Dholakpur. The main characters—Bheem, Chutki, Kaalia, Indumati, Raju, Jaggu, Dholu, and Bholu—maneuver through the storyworld together. Being the clear protagonist, Bheem always comes through for his pals, proving to be a skilled problem solver as the narrative progresses.

Bheem, who is well-known for his mighty strength and kind heart, gets his name—which carries connotations of strength and power—from a figure in the Mahabharata. Nonetheless, Bheem's strong portrayal highlights the gender gap in the animation, particularly when compared to Chutki, who is shown as a weak and delicate female. The story's prevalent gender relations are highlighted by this striking contrast.

#### *Main Characters:*

- Chhota Bheem: The main male protagonist, known for his strength, courage, and leadership skills.
- Chutki: A female character, one of Bheem's close friends, often depicted as caring, helpful, and resourceful.
- Raju: Another male character, Bheem's friend, known for his mischievous yet endearing nature.
- Indumati: A princess in the series, portrayed as kind-hearted and occasionally adventurous.

#### *Personality Traits:*

- Chhota Bheem: Strong, brave, and portrayed as a problem-solver.
- Chutki: Caring, helpful, and often seen supporting her friends.
- Raju: Mischievous, energetic, and a loyal friend.
- Indumati: Kind-hearted, occasionally adventurous, and associated with royalty.

#### *Occupations and Roles:*

- Chhota Bheem: Often engages in adventures, protecting the fictional town of Dholakpur.
- Chutki: While not explicitly tied to a profession, she is actively involved in supporting Bheem and his friends.
- Raju: Engages in playful activities and adventures with Bheem.
- Indumati: Associated with royalty, representing a leadership role.

#### *Interactions and Relationships:*

- Chhota Bheem: Leads the group and shares a strong bond with his friends.
- Chutki: Actively participates in group activities, showcasing camaraderie and friendship.
- Raju: Provides comedic relief and contributes to the group's dynamics.
- Indumati: Interacts with other characters, occasionally participating in adventures.

#### *Appearance and Clothing:*

- Chhota Bheem: Typically portrayed in traditional attire, reflecting his Indian cultural context.

- Chutki: Wears traditional Indian clothing, emphasizing cultural representation.
- Raju: Typically dressed in casual attire.
- Indumati: Adorns traditional attire, reflecting her royal status.

#### ***Storylines and Themes:***

- Chhota Bheem: The show revolves around Bheem's adventures, emphasizing bravery and friendship.
- Chutki: Actively participates in storylines, contributing to problem-solving and friendship themes.
- Raju: Contributes to the show's humor and adds to the dynamics of the group.
- Indumati: Represents elements of royalty, occasionally involved in adventurous plots.

#### **Motu Patlu - Women characters missing**

##### **Main Characters:**

- Motu and Patlu are the main male protagonists of the show, known for their comedic adventures.

**Motu:** Motu is one of the titular characters and is known for his larger-than-life personality. He is depicted as overweight, lazy, and often clumsy. He is also known for his voracious appetite and love for samosas. Despite his shortcomings, Motu is portrayed as good-natured, loyal, and brave when faced with challenges. His laziness and impulsive nature sometimes lead to comedic mishaps and trouble for himself and others. Motu is characterized by his physical strength, which he often taps into during moments of crisis. He is also known for his catchphrase "Patlu, mujhe ek idea aaya!" (Patlu, I've got an idea!)

**Patlu:** Patlu is the other titular character and serves as the straight man to Motu's antics. Patlu is depicted as intelligent, thin, and responsible. He is often the voice of reason and serves as Motu's sensible counterpart. He is known for his quick thinking, problem-solving abilities, and resourcefulness in challenging situations. He can be overly cautious at times, and his rationality may clash with Motu's impulsive nature, leading to humorous misunderstandings. Patlu is characterized by his logical approach to solving problems and his knack for coming up with clever strategies to overcome obstacles. He is also known for his catchphrase "Oh my god!" when reacting to Motu's antics.

- Female characters like Chingam's mother, Motu's mother, and others play supporting roles, often portrayed in traditional gender roles such as homemakers or caretakers. They exhibit stereotypical traits like being nurturing, caring, or occasionally authoritative (e.g., Chingam's mother).

#### ***Occupations and Roles:***

- Motu and Patlu are often depicted in various professions such as mechanics, chefs, or even superheroes, showcasing a range of skills and abilities.
- Female characters typically have roles centered around domestic activities, though some episodes may portray them in diverse roles briefly.

#### ***Interactions and Relationships:***

- Motu and Patlu share a strong bond of friendship and camaraderie, often facing challenges together.
- Female characters may interact with each other or with the main characters, but their relationships are usually secondary to the main storyline and often revolve around familial or supportive roles.

### ***Appearance and Clothing:***

- Motu and Patlu have distinct physical appearances, with Motu being notably overweight and Patlu being slim.
- Female characters may adhere to conventional standards of appearance, with emphasis on traditional attire and modesty.

### ***Storylines and Themes:***

- The show's storylines predominantly revolve around the adventures and misadventures of Motu and Patlu, with humor as a central theme.
- Female characters may feature in specific storylines or subplots, but their roles are often peripheral and tied to supporting the main narrative.

Overall, while "Motu Patlu" provides entertainment for children, its portrayal of gender roles and representation may contribute to shaping the perceptions and attitudes of young girls in India, highlighting the importance of promoting diverse and empowering portrayals of gender in children's media.

### ***Other Characters:***

- Dr. Jhatka: He is an eccentric scientist and inventor who often assists Motu and Patlu with his gadgets and inventions. He is known for his catchphrase "Mere paas ek formula hai!"
- Ghasitaram: He is a loyal friend and ally of Motu and Patlu, often providing them with sage advice and support. He is also known for his catchphrase "Arre bhai log!"
- Chingam: He is a police inspector known for his exaggerated accent and humorous attempts to catch criminals. He is portrayed as brave and dedicated to his duty, although his efforts are often comically ineffectual.
- Chingam's Mother: She is depicted as a traditional Indian mother who dotes on her son Chingam and occasionally dispenses wisdom and guidance.

These characters, with their distinct personalities and quirks, contribute to the humor and charm of "Motu Patlu" while also conveying certain underlying messages and values to the audience, including themes of friendship, bravery, and the importance of using one's intelligence to overcome challenges.

### ***Limited Roles and Occupations:***

Female characters in the show are often depicted in traditional roles such as homemakers, caregivers, or authority figures within the family sphere. For example, Motu and Patlu's mothers are primarily shown cooking, cleaning, and taking care of household chores, reflecting the stereotype of women as primarily responsible for domestic tasks.

### ***Appearance and Clothing:***

- Female characters typically adhere to conventional standards of appearance, wearing traditional attire such as sarees or salwar kameez.
- The emphasis on modesty in their clothing and presentation aligns with traditional expectations for women's appearance in Indian society.

### ***Supportive Roles:***

- Female characters in "Motu Patlu" often play supporting roles to the male protagonists, Motu and Patlu.
- They are usually depicted as providing emotional support, advice, or encouragement to the male characters rather than taking active roles in the central storyline or engaging in independent adventures.

**Limited Agency and Decision-Making:**

- Female characters in the show typically have limited agency and are rarely depicted as making significant decisions or taking leadership roles.
- Their actions and choices are often influenced by or dependent on the male characters, reinforcing the stereotype of women as subordinate to men.

**Stereotypical Traits:**

- Female characters may exhibit stereotypical traits such as nurturing, caring, or being emotionally sensitive.
- While these traits are not inherently negative, their portrayal without balance or diversity can contribute to limiting the representation of women to a narrow set of characteristics.

**Depiction of Motherhood and Family Dynamics:**

- Female characters in "Motu Patlu" are frequently depicted in maternal roles, emphasizing their role as mothers or caregivers within the family unit.
- This portrayal reinforces traditional gender roles by associating women primarily with caregiving responsibilities and nurturing roles within the family structure.

Overall, the representation of women in "Motu Patlu" predominantly conforms to traditional gender stereotypes, portraying them in limited roles and reinforcing societal expectations regarding women's roles and behavior. This depiction may influence the perceptions of young girls watching the show by presenting a narrow and stereotypical view of what it means to be a woman in society.

Children who watch cartoons develop ideas about gender stereotypes because they dream about the characters and try to imitate them in different ways. This leads to the realization that the imposition of gender norms is a social ill that is supported by the media and has its roots deeply ingrained in the psyches of young children who are still developing their ability to distinguish between fact and imagination. But society's attention to matters of masculinity is still insufficient: The first step in changing our cultural views of hegemonic masculinity and the hierarchical structures that support it is to rethink masculinity as a gender. In order to provide youngsters the opportunity to see themselves as change agents, it is necessary to emphasize how socially created and dynamic it is (Wannamaker 148).

Cartoons have their own unique cast of characters, led by the dominating and solver. Bheem is an example of this hegemonic male figure who plays the protagonist and problem-solver, reinforcing traditional ideas of masculinity in which the idealized male character flaunts physical attributes that are culturally prescribed. On the other hand, figures such as Dholu and Bholu are shown as devoid of attributes, frequently described as subservient and, occasionally, helpless. The majority of Chutki and Indumati contributions to dispute resolution are advisory in nature, which serves to further reinforce conventional gender norms. Their hilarious attempts at dispute resolution draw attention to their shortcomings. It's crucial to remember that these representations may promote gender stereotypes and affect young viewers' expectations and views.

The way society views issues is greatly influenced by the media, and portrayals such as these might unintentionally normalize particular gender relations. Media makers should always be aware of the messages they are sending out and work toward more varied and strong female character representations.

There are just three female characters in the series, whereas there are five or more male characters, indicating a noticeable imbalance in character representation. This uneven allocation suggests that

female characters are given less weight than the considerable room provided for examining masculinity. Judith Butler's performativity theory provides a useful framework for analyzing Chhota Bheem's gender stereotypes. Butler argues that gender is created via recurrently adhering to social norms and expectations rather than being an innate or fixed characteristic. People "do" gender through their behaviors, and these acts support the maintenance of gender norms.

The program may accidentally help normalize and reinforce conventional gender norms among its young viewers by perpetuating these gender stereotypes. Children's perceptions of what constitutes "normal" behavior for boys and girls can be shaped by the media's repeated presentation of these gendered roles, which can restrict their options for expressing themselves. More varied and non-conforming gender portrayals might be used by producers to challenge these prejudices and provide a wider platform for performances that defy expectations. This may help ensure that gender is portrayed in children's media in a more empowered and inclusive way.

It is possible to see Chutki's representation as a subservient character in Chhota Bheem from her interactions and behavior in the program. Chutki's portrayal conforms to conventional gender norms, as she frequently adopts a more submissive demeanor in contrast to Chhota Bheem, the male protagonist, who is bold and daring. Chutki is often shown in scenarios where she needs Chhota Bheem's help or protection, perpetuating a gender stereotype. The depiction perpetuates conventional gender standards by implying that female characters are less independent than their male counterparts and are more likely to take on caring or domestic tasks. Chutki's persona further conforms to conventional Indian social norms by portraying Indian wives as happy with their husbands' successes. Because her mother is away, Chutki spends much of her time taking care of the house. She represents the satisfaction that comes from Bheem's successes and the fulfillment that comes from doing the tasks. These aspects of Chutki's personality, as shown in the chosen episode, are subtle mirrors of the standards and expectations that are now in place in society.

Bheem is the embodiment of all things manly; he has a broad shoulders, six-pack abs, courage, strength, and intellect. Through the character of Bheem, the cartoon's title song perpetuates an image of a strong, forceful, and capable man: "Bheem ki shakti dhoom machaye, samne koi tik na paye... "Dushman bach ke na jaye, Bheem shakti aisi dikhaye" (Bheem's physical strength is so great that no one can stand before him; opponents are unable to break free from his hold because of their strength).(Chilaka, Bheem Chotta)

Like the protagonists of classic fairy tales, Bheem always makes an appearance as a savior throughout the episodes. In the cartoon, female characters like Chutki follow Bheem's example, while Princess Indumati constantly asks Bheem for protection. Within the group, Bheem is regarded as the pinnacle of excellence; King Indravarma even turned to him for assistance in rescuing Dholakpur. The cartoon suggests that there is a great deal of responsibility placed on the shoulders of Bheem, the male lead. He is supposed to be the perfect guy, putting other people's needs ahead of his own, even if it means making sacrifices. Bheem, who is well-known for his powerful strength and kind disposition, takes his name—which denotes strength and might—from a figure in the Mahabharata. But this strong portrayal of Bheem only draws attention to the gender inequality that permeates the animation, especially when it comes to Chutki, who is presented as weak and fragile. This stark contrast highlights the pervasive gender relations weaved throughout the narrative.

Chutki is shown as having affections for Bheem in a number of episodes, as seen by her jealousy of him when he hangs out with other girls. The fact that Chutki's mother makes ladoos, which

gives Bheem strength, highlights the conventional gender roles that are associated with female characters. Both Chutki and Indumati are depicted according to a preset framework that limits their character development, always wearing skirts and blouses and having long hair. One recurrent motif in culture is the representation of women as helpless, meek, subservient, and inept, which reinforces preconceptions about femininity in a younger setting.

Monique Wittig raises the following queries in her piece "One Is Not Born a Woman": "The construction of concepts that we accept as natural about gender and makes an explanation about what we naturalize as human beings." Recognizing the "natural" distinction between men and women normalizes history and presupposes that "men" and "women" have always existed and always will. Change is unachievable because, in addition to normalizing history, we also normalize the social phenomena that reflect our subjugation (Wittig, "One Is Not Born a Woman").

Raju emerges as the group's most physically skilled friend, pushing Chutki to a supporting role in the story. Chutki is a subordinate character in the group, but she has a kind, generous, and appraising personality toward Bheem and the other members of the group. Though she occasionally demonstrates intellect, her talents are frequently overlooked in the setting of a patriarchal and male-dominated industry.

It's interesting to note that every character in the series, even Jaggu the monkey, has a unique name. Chutki's name, which means "small" or "tiny," nevertheless, appears to consign her to an unremarkable and unimportant realm. This terminology obliquely perpetuates the idea that her character is seen as little and maybe ignored in the larger story.

Taking into account Sally Armstrong's remarks, which highlight the ability of the present generation to effect change, it becomes essential to assess the messages that are shown in children's media attentively. The contrast between the assertion of power and change and Chutki's restricted presence draws attention to the necessity of a more inclusive and diverse depiction of gender roles in children's programming.

In order to encourage a more inclusive and objective depiction in children's media, it is imperative to acknowledge and address these challenges. The lessons that children acquire from books and tales are immeasurable. They might be moved by a word or picture that they can never adequately describe. Children should be taught to read enthusiastically and with an open mind, rather than concentrating on a single moral.

### **Gender Roles and the perception of female children (aged 7 - 10)**

Based on the interview of parents of female children the following points were highlighted.

- Children spend on an average of 3 hours watching TV
- Children try to buy merchandise of their favorite characters. The characters are usually of the same gender and are often shown in stereotypical manner.
- Even though girls have the realization of the fact that cartoon characters often have exaggerated body features, they reinforce in traditional gender roles
- Girls confessed they try to imitate the accent, words and body language of female characters.
- Limited representation of diverse female characters in varied roles may restrict the imagination and aspirations of young girls, potentially shaping their perceptions of what is considered appropriate or achievable for their gender.

- Though inclusion of male and female characters in the same storyline helps break the gender bias, the roles of girls within friends group becomes restrictive as the kids imitate everything they see.

From the interview the following arching observations can be made on the themes:

### **Role Models and Stereotypes**

Cartoons often present gendered role models that reinforce traditional stereotypes. Male characters typically exhibit dominance, bravery, and leadership, while female characters are portrayed as nurturing, passive, or focused on appearance. A common example as quoted by the children was:

- Chhota Bheem: Bheem is the epitome of the traditional male hero. He is strong, brave, and often takes on the role of a leader, solving problems and protecting his friends. His dominance and heroism are highlighted in every episode, making him a clear role model for boys.
- Chutki: In contrast, Chutki is portrayed as caring and helpful, often taking on a nurturing role. Despite her intelligence and resourcefulness, her character is primarily supportive, reinforcing the stereotype of women as caregivers.
- Motu and Patlu: Both characters exhibit traits that challenge and conform to traditional male stereotypes. Motu is brave but clumsy, and Patlu is intelligent and responsible. However, their primary roles as the main characters still emphasize male dominance in leading adventures and solving problems.

### **Occupational Representation**

Animated content often depicts gendered occupations, influencing children's perceptions by associating certain professions more with one gender, thereby reinforcing stereotypical gender roles. A common example as quoted by the children was:

- Chhota Bheem: The characters are typically seen engaging in adventures rather than specific occupations, but the implied roles align with traditional gender expectations. Bheem, as the hero, takes on the role of a protector, a traditionally male-dominated role.
- Motu Patlu: The show occasionally depicts Motlu and Patlu in various professions, such as mechanics or chefs, showcasing a range of male-dominated occupations. Female characters like Chingam's mother are shown in domestic roles, reinforcing traditional gender occupations.

### **Appearance and Body Image**

Cartoons often emphasize physical appearance, with male characters exhibiting strength and muscularity, while female characters conform to stereotypical standards of beauty. This portrayal can influence children's perception of idealized gender-specific physical traits. A common example as quoted by the children and reported by their parents was:

- Chhota Bheem: Bheem is portrayed with a strong and muscular physique, embodying the idealized male body image. This reinforces the notion that physical strength is a key male attribute.
- Chutki: She is depicted with traditional beauty standards, including long hair and modest, culturally traditional attire. This emphasizes stereotypical female beauty and modesty.
- Motu and Patlu: Motu's overweight appearance is often a source of humor, while Patlu's slim figure and intelligence are portrayed positively. Female characters, though less prominent, are typically shown in traditional attire, conforming to societal beauty norms.

### **Behavioral Expectations**

Animated narratives often assign specific behavioral traits to each gender, such as bravery for boys and empathy for girls. This reinforcement of behavioral expectations can shape children's views on how they should act based on their gender. A common example as quoted by the children and reported by the parents was:

- Chhota Bheem: Bheem is consistently brave and strong, reinforcing the expectation that boys should be courageous and leaders.
- Chutki: Her empathetic and supportive nature emphasizes the expectation that girls should be nurturing and helpful.
- Motu Patlu: Motu's bravery, despite his clumsiness, and Patlu's rational problem-solving reinforce traditional male behavioral expectations. Female characters, when present, display supportive or nurturing behaviors, such as Chingam's mother's caring nature.

### ***Relationship Dynamics***

The way cartoons depict relationships between male and female characters can contribute to the reinforcement of gender stereotypes. Traditional dynamics, where males take charge and females play supportive roles, can shape children's expectations regarding interpersonal relationships and gender roles in society. A common example as quoted by the children and reported by the parents was:

- Chhota Bheem: The dynamic between Bheem and Chutki often shows Bheem taking charge in adventures, while Chutki supports him. This reflects traditional gender roles where males are leaders and females are helpers.
- Indumati: Though a princess, her interactions often involve seeking Bheem's help, reinforcing the male savior stereotype.
- Motu Patlu: The central relationship is between the two male protagonists, Motu and Patlu, who share a strong bond of friendship and camaraderie. Female characters are rarely part of the main narrative, often playing secondary, supportive roles.

### ***Conclusion***

Gender role stereotypes consist of predefined lists of duties and activities that society expects men and women to perform. Conversely, gender-trait stereotypes involve psychological and behavioral characteristics attributed to men and women. Children are exposed to these gender stereotypes from an early age, significantly shaping their attitudes and behaviors, leading them to believe that men and women should conform to these predefined roles.

Parents often assume that children's programming is inherently safe and educational, which prevents them from scrutinizing their children's television habits. However, this lack of supervision can negatively impact the moral development of children, especially during their formative years. Children tend to imitate the societal norms they observe on television, from their peers, or their parents. As the Parents Television Council noted in 2006, "children's television is no safe haven for children, and parents must be vigilant as to what their children are watching."

Many scholars have explored the impact of media, particularly television, on children's learning processes (Gerbner et al., 2002; Grusec & Hastings, 2007). According to Shehab (2008), children use television not only to learn about their environment and lives but also to interact and socialize. Rashid (2015) found that children mimic what they see on TV. Therefore, it is crucial to review and monitor media content, as young people are particularly impressionable and susceptible to its messages.

Watching and interacting with animated content significantly contributes to social learning, which

fosters the development of stereotype-based gender roles. As children are exposed to animated television shows, they observe and internalize the behaviors, traits, and roles of characters, often modeled along traditional gender lines. This social learning process, where children imitate what they see on screen, reinforces societal norms and expectations regarding gender. Consequently, boys and girls may develop fixed ideas about appropriate behavior for their gender, leading to the perpetuation of gender stereotypes in their own actions and interactions. Therefore, the content of animated programs plays a crucial role in shaping children's perceptions of gender roles from an early age.

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