

SHOULD YOU WATCH MOTU-PATLU?

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Many children today watch a show – it has two middle-aged men who are best friends, one small and round, the other tall and thin, and jokes that go like this “drink samosas and eat chai” and “cats running in my stomach” in response to the usual “rats running in my stomach”, a phrase common in Hindi. It’s painfully bright and eye-catching and the characters talk in an exaggerated comical way. The show is Motu Patlu, and seven years since its premier, it’s more popular now than ever.

The 2018 Google Trends report shows that in India, the 9th most searched keyword was Motu Patlu. Worldwide, Motu Patlu was the 4th most searched TV show. The website indiantelevision.com states that Motu Patlu has 400 episodes, 18 TV movies and a theatrical feature film. Further proof of the massive success of the show is that it garnered 3 billion views on WowKidz. This is especially impressive considering that the show is geo-blocked on Youtube in India.

This news might be great for Cosmos-Maya, the company behind Motu Patlu, but I can’t feel too happy upon learning that millions of kids really do watch this show.

For one, the naming of the main characters is problematic. They are identified by the size of their bodies and to make matters worse, they seem to reinforce stereotypes-Motu is fatter, dumber and

unable to control his craving for samosas while Patlu is thinner, smarter, and often irritated at Motu’s stupidity. These assumptions about people of different sizes has been discussed often, both jokingly as in Suzanne Britt’s “That Lean and Hungry Look” where she lists and discusses the perceived behaviours and habits of thin and fat people and seriously as in Gina Kolata’s “The Shame of Fat Shaming” where she mentions the various issues faced by obese people such as bullying, stigmatisation, discrimination, and how far reaching and harmful the consequences can be. To have a children’s show called Motu Patlu might normalise calling people fat. In a world where fat prejudice is pervasive and persistent, and there often aren’t resources to help people who suffer because of this, this could be a serious problem.

The show never seems to address Motu’s weight in a healthy way. He is seen as a gluttonous man who gets hypnotised by the smell of samosas, a food nowhere near as healthy as the spinach that Popeye convinced children to eat more of. More disturbingly, Motu often steals from the poor chaiwala. This not only trivialises the plight of someone already at a disadvantage but shows that Motu, despite being usually well-intentioned, lacks the self-control needed to not stuff his face with samosas if some are in his vicinity. And no, the seemingly parallel version of Motu, Dr. Jhatka, doesn’t exactly balance out this issue.

However, the problems with this show seem to run deeper than Motu’s name and character. There is a shocking level of violence in the show where in every episode, characters frequently threaten and beat each other up. In some episodes such as in part 2 of episode 163 in season 5, the villain John the Don is assumed to be the one who stole the locket because of his past antics, but even before hearing him out, Motu and Patlu kick him all the way to the castle without giving him a chance to even stand up or refute their false accusation. When they realise that John is innocent, they don’t even apologise. This is problematic because kids do imitate what they watch. The debate on whether portrayal of violence in the media is a longstanding one but there is evidence to show that viewing of violent media increases the chances of children engaging in violent behaviours. A study of 329 children over a span of 15 years in Chicago conducted by the APA in 2003 found a positive correlation between violent media and aggressive behaviour.

Compare this to a children’s show like Dora The Explorer and especially Blue’s Clues. The creators of Blue’s Clues made use of research about child development and especially designed the show to make their viewers learn. It encouraged the use of a notebook and even emphasised that it was to be kept in a drawer, the various items around the house were labeled so children

learned what each item was called and how to spell it, and it taught everyday things like paying for a ticket to go to a show, doing simple calculations and even solved jigsaw puzzles. Combine that with a host who children saw as their friend and who seemed to genuinely care about the kids watching him. The amount of thought put into this show to teach children is astounding and something more creators should do. Unfortunately that is often not the case and children watch shows like Motu Patlu.

Several children’s shows have been criticised for various reasons since their inception to their very ends. Motu Patlu is one that I am critical of. It not only has issues but seems vacuous, pointless and you can’t find a deeper meaning from the episodes even if you tried to. If these children go back to watch this show when they grow up, would they feel nostalgic and enjoy it? I don’t know. But what I do know is that there are better things for children to watch than Motu Patlu.

References:

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