

## TELEVISION AND DEVELOPMENT COMMUNICATION IN INDIA: A CRITICAL APPRAISAL

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**Abstract:** *The paper traces the journey of television in India which started for promoting development and serving the cause of the poor and the underprivileged. While some efforts were made to fulfil these brave goals, television also earned the unholy reputation of being a vehicle for government propaganda. Doordarshan – the public service broadcaster was the only available terrestrial network till 1991 when transnational satellite television channels began to make forays into the country. Soon Indian players entered the television industry thereby leading to enormous expansion. Since then, the very nature of Indian broadcasting has changed. Television has transformed from a medium devoted to development communication and the cause of the marginalised, to a true middle-class medium. Contemporary Indian television is divorced from the realities of the 'other half of India that lives in abject poverty and deprivation, thus presenting a distorted view of social reality. This paper seeks to examine these and other related issues, and make some suggestions for policy initiatives to put the development agenda back on television.*

**Keywords:** *Indian television, Doordarshan, television and development communication, public service broadcasting, commercialisation of Indian television, broadcast regulation*

## **Introduction**

Out of the different mass media such as newspapers, radio, television, internet among others, the one introduced in the country with the aim of promoting development was television. Television began in India in 1959 as an educational project supported by the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) and the Ford Foundation. Television was based on the model of a public broadcasting system prevalent in many countries of Europe. In independent India, the political leaders recognised the value of information and its use for accelerating the process of development. Thus was started a model of public broadcasting committed to inform, educate and entertain the people.

The then Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru decided to have full government control over broadcasting for the time being. In retrospect, many observers feel that it was the hangover of the colonial legacy of controlling the media and fears about the power of the mass media to inflame social conflicts that prevented Indian policy makers from thinking creatively about radio and television in the country (Agrawal and Raghaviah, 2006; Jeffrey, 2006).

In the decades since 1959, vast changes took place in the television landscape of India. In its early years, apart from being used as an educational tool, television was also misused as a mouthpiece for the central government and the party in power. Programming was primarily in Hindi and much of the news and current affairs focussed on Delhi – the seat of political power (Johnson, 2000; Singhal and Rogers, 2001). Thus, while television was entrusted with the brave goal of promoting national integration, the same medium was found to reinforce a sense of alienation in many parts of the country particularly in the north-eastern states (Joshi, 1985; Ninan, 1995; Page and Crawley, 2001).

Despite being the world leader in experimenting with television and satellite technology, India failed to capitalise on the lessons learnt from early development communication projects such as the Satellite Instructional Television Experiment (SITE) and the much acclaimed Kheda Communication Project (Singhal and Rogers, 2001).

Contemporary Indian television is criticised by many for having shifted from its humanitarian goals and becoming a medium for the urban middle class. It is this class which owns and operate most of the television industry in India. It is the same class which is transmitting its own values, principles, and opinions to the rest of India (Johnson, 2000). Consequently, the cause of the poor, underprivileged people for whose development the medium was brought to the country has suffered a setback.

Changes in the television system did not occur in India alone. There was a worldwide trend during the 1980s towards the commercialisation of television. Herman and Mc Chesney (2001) argue that during this decade the policies of deregulation and privatisation were applied to national broadcasting and telecommunication systems that were traditionally regulated and often publicly owned and operated. This had a detrimental impact on public service programs which were replaced with more and more entertainment programming.

The subsequent sections in the paper examine the divergence between the rhetoric of television for development and actual practice. Some of the ground-breaking initiatives in development communication using television are also captured. Before that, it becomes essential to dwell on the concept of development communication and the role of media is social change.

### **Role of Media in Development**

It is important at this point to clarify the meaning of ‘development communication’ for the term has a wide variety of connotations. Development communication is more than

agricultural extension or rural communication. It doesn't restrict itself merely to the development of rural areas, nor is it concerned with agricultural development alone. It is oriented towards development whether it be in rural or urban areas, or in areas such as agriculture, family planning, or nutrition (Gupta, 1995).

Theory and research suggests that mass communication can act as a positive agent of social change for some people while impeding and obstructing change for others (Johnson, 2000). There are many who dispute the role played by the mass media in bringing about social change (Gupta, 1995; Rodrigues, 2010; Vilanilam, 2005). Gupta (1995) asserts that radio and television are the best sources for creating awareness and interest among the audience regarding a new message or idea "but when it comes to adoption of the idea, interpersonal sources such as extension agents, friends, neighbours, family members are the most effective" (Gupta, 1995, p.72).

In the 1960s, communication scholars and media experts were quite sure that television and the other media of mass communication would help national development. The media were considered the prime motivators of development. Eminent communication scholars such as Daniel Lerner, Wilbur Schramm and Everett M. Rogers, who based their theories of development and media efficacy on the important work of Walter Rostow, namely, *The Stages of Economic Growth*, stressed that the economic and technological development achieved by the Western nations were the result of increased media use (Vilanilam, 2005).

However, since the 1970s the dominant paradigms of development have been challenged by different disciplines (Gupta, 1995; Vilanilam, 2005). It has been realised that distribution of goods and services along with economic and political opportunities among the majority is a pre-requisite for development. An information revolution ushered into a largely private society without appropriate changes in the social structure will not benefit the large majority of the people (Vilanilam, 2005).

Everett M. Rogers and many other theorists criticised the dominant paradigm of development (as cited in Rodrigues, 2010) and broadened its definition from one that centred on materialistic economic growth to other social values such as social advancement. The concept of development in the 1970s was expanded as a widely participatory process of social change in a society, intended to bring about both social and material advancement, including greater equality, freedom, and other valued qualities, for the majority of the people by giving them greater control over their environment.

Similarly, the new concept of development communication that began to emerge dealt with the promotion of social change leading to improvement in people's quality of living, by encouraging better health, higher literacy and higher production of goods through more effective communication (Rodrigues, 2010).

There was also a tendency in communication theory and practice to regard the television audience as passive beings moulded and manipulated by those who create the media messages (Johnson, 2000). Many development communication campaigns suffered on this count. However, it is increasingly being realised that for such messages to be effective, people must be involved at all stages – planning, production, and presentation. The need for localisation of development communication has been emphasised by many researchers and commentators (Joshi, 1985; Page and Crawley, 2001; Singhal and Rogers, 2001; Verghese, 1978).

### **The Beginning of Television in India: In the name of Development**

When television was introduced in the country in 1959, it started as an experiment in social communication for which small teleclubs were organised in Delhi and provided with community television sets. Educational television began in 1961 to support middle and higher secondary school education. Its experiments in teaching of science,

mathematics, and language proved successful and received appreciation from many UNESCO experts (Kumar, 2000).

A few years later telecasts for farmers began in the form of *Krishi Darshan*. It was telecast on Wednesdays and Fridays for 20 minutes each day and served 80 villages (around Delhi) provided with community television sets. This pilot project was initiated by the Department of Atomic Energy in collaboration with the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, All India Radio, the Indian Agricultural Research Institute and the Delhi Administration (Kumar, 2000).

Vikram Sarabhai, the architect of India's satellite communication experiments, in 1969 presented a paper entitled "Television for Development" at the Society for International Development Conference in New Delhi. The idea that the backward countries can and should tap the most advanced communication technologies including television for leapfrogging into rapid economic growth and social transformation was first presented here (Joshi, 1985).

Indian television in its infancy was managed by All India Radio. In 1976, television was separated from radio and given a new name – Doordarshan. This adjunct arrangement is seen by some commentators as an impediment to the natural development of television in its initial years (Page and Crawley, 2001).

The public service broadcaster – Doordarshan has been used over the years to deliver a number of useful messages. These include messages on family planning, immunization, nutrition of the mother and the child, the need to stem bias against the girl child, among others. Experience suggests that some communication campaigns have worked better than others. A key reason for the failure of many development communication campaigns was the lack of co-ordination with field level agencies (Ninan, 1995; Singhal and Rogers, 2001). Ninan (1995) explains just why the family planning message, the mainstay of development communication messages on television, failed to work. She attributes the

failure to the inability of state agencies to provide back-up facilities in rural areas that were required to make the campaign successful.

On the other hand, certain messages conveyed through television have worked well. Notable in this category are the health, hygiene, sanitation, and oral rehydration messages which people have adopted to a large extent (Ninan, 1995).

Educational Television is another area in which Doordarshan has made significant contribution. Ever since the inception of television in India in 1959, one major responsibility entrusted to it is to provide support for the education system in the country. School television (STV) was launched in October 1961 as an organised, systematic and sequential support to formal school instruction. Teachers appreciated STV as a tool for teaching and presentation of content (Kumar, 2000).

The country-wide classroom initiative of the University Grants Commission dedicated to higher education started its telecast on Doordarshan in 1984 with one-hour educational programmes. Though the urban youth may not even be aware of such programmes, these were found to be very useful in the small towns and remote areas of the country where people had less access to other sources of information (Ninan, 1995). In order to boost educational telecasts, a satellite channel devoted exclusively to education *Gyandarshan* was launched in 2000 in collaboration with the Ministry of Human Resource Development and the Indira Gandhi National Open University.

*Gyandarshan* offers interesting and informative programmes of relevance to special categories – pre-school kids, primary and secondary school children, college and university students, youth seeking career opportunities, housewives, adults, and many others. In addition to educational fare, programmes from abroad are also broadcast to offer viewers a window to the world (Agrawal and Raghaviah, 2006).

For three decades ever since the inception of television, the dominant theme was communication for development so as to improve the quality of life for the vast rural

majority. The logic was that in an underdeveloped, largely rural country; television could be used to convey messages on agricultural improvement, health care, and family planning to millions of people without depending on the extension infrastructure such a task would normally require. But the irony was that none of this was done imaginatively or consistently (Ninan, 1995).

Commenting on the weaknesses of India's educational and instructional broadcasts, the Verghese Committee set up in 1977 to suggest an autonomous framework for broadcasting, noted that in the absence of co-ordination with concerned government departments and educational institutions; the health, farm and educational broadcasts have not been very effective. Another area where it felt the broadcast media was found inadequate was in promoting social justice and educating the underprivileged about their rights (Verghese, 1978).

Despite some such shortcomings, Indian television also has to its credit significant initiatives of promoting social change in rural areas. Notable among them are SITE, the educational telecasts and the Kheda Communication Project. One of the most extensive educational and social research projects, perhaps the largest national television experiment in the world, has been SITE (Vilani, 2005). Some of these landmark initiatives are discussed in the next section.

### **Landmark Initiatives in Development Communication using Television**

The journey of television in India took a new turn with the launch of the Satellite Instructional Television Experiment in 1975-76. It was a one year pilot-project using the National Aeronautics and Space Administration's ATS-6 satellite to broadcast educational messages through satellite to 2400 villages in the six states of Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Bihar, Orissa, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh. Its objectives were to improve rural primary education, provide teacher training, improve agriculture, health



and hygiene, and nutritional practices and contribute to family planning and national integration (Singhal and Rogers, 2001).

SITE was “an unqualified success in terms of hardware but the software wasn’t specific enough to the area and audience in content or language, and therefore was not so useful and comprehensible” (Joshi, 1985, p.32). The important lesson learnt was that the software has to be area-specific, relevant to the needs and aspirations of the audience, and has to be in the local language (Page and Crawley, 2001; Singhal and Rogers, 2001).

The Kheda Communication Project (KCP) launched in 1976 remains to-date the most innovative experiment in using television for empowerment and participatory rural development. Initially known as Pij TV, it used a one-kilowatt transmitter. The Pij transmitter could be received in a radius of about 30 km from Pij village (Agrawal and Raghaviah, 2006). It was India’s first effort at decentralised community television broadcasting and received the prestigious UNESCO-IPDC prize for rural communication effectiveness.

Some 650 community television sets were provided to 400 villages and installed in public places. One of the reasons for the success of the KCP was due to its ability to tap into the existing development infrastructure of Kheda district. It collaborated with extension agencies working in dairying, agriculture and health services, with local banks, co-operatives and employment exchanges (Singhal and Rogers, 2001). The accent was on participatory programme making, the themes were often local, dared to deal with controversial subjects such as caste discrimination, alcoholism etc., and for the first time systemic audience research was carried out (Thomas, 2010).

Recognising its contribution, UNESCO noted, “Kheda was an exceptional example of the combining of modern technologies with a participatory approach to communication. The project employed traditional cultural expressions of a rural community in the creation of its audiovisual programmes, while using modern evaluation techniques for its programme planning. Overall, this project proved to be a good example of the applications of

communication for the promotion of human development, particularly of the rural poor, women and children” (UNESCO website, 2011, para. 14).

Despite being such a success, the Kheda Project was carried out in splendid isolation from the mainstream and its lessons were not allowed to influence the development and programme trajectory adopted by Doordarshan (Thomas, 2010).

### **Indian Television goes Commercial**

If the 1970s was the decade of experiments in social communication using television, 1980s was the time when the brave goal of development communication began to be sacrificed and Indian television started going commercial. The Working Group on Software for Doordarshan created in 1982 taking note of these changes observed that, “India embarked on television in the name of development but used it in practice to provide trivial entertainment and to churn out government-oriented rather than people-oriented news” (Joshi, 1985, p.35).

The practice of accepting advertisements on Doordarshan started in 1976. By the mid-1970s, the proportion of entertainment programmes including feature films and song and dance sequences along with commercial advertisements and sports coverage had increased considerably while the school and rural telecasts had begun to take a backseat (Joshi, 1985). At the same time, no attention was being paid to expand community-based public broadcasting such as the Kheda and SITE experiments (Singhal and Rogers, 2001).

Television licensing was abolished around the same time and advertising was to fill the gap of budgetary shortfall. In the initial years, advertisers did not take much interest in Doordarshan as television penetration was low in the country and the network didn't have a national reach. All this changed with the introduction of a 'national' service in 1982

coinciding with the launch of colour television during the Asian Games held in the same year (Mehta, 2008).

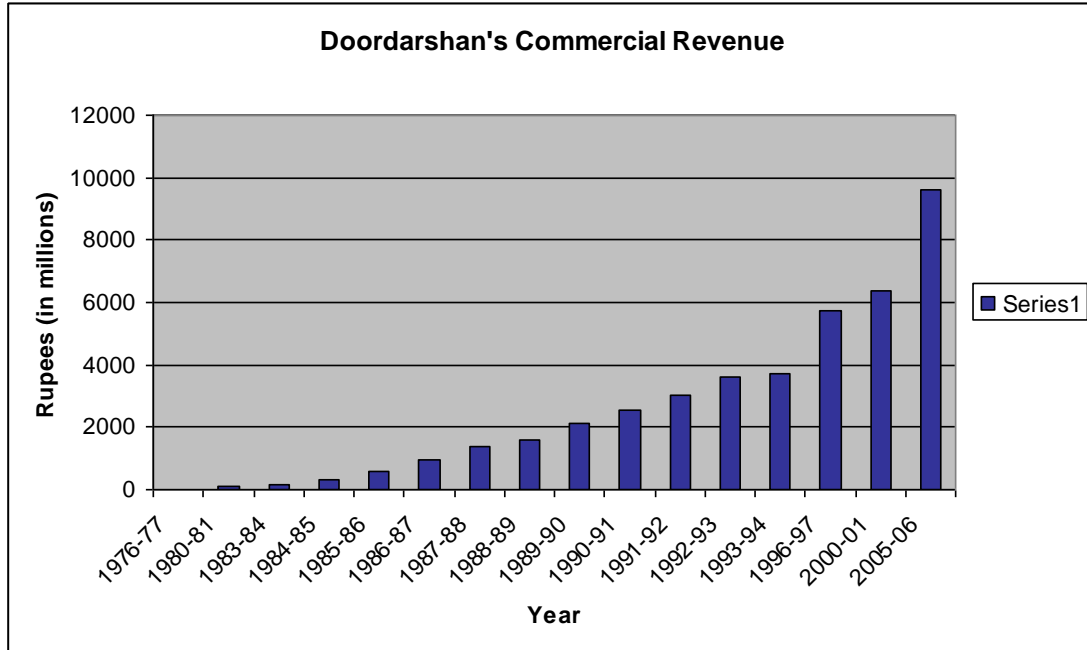
The expansion of the television network in the 1980s aided by the indigenous satellite programme INSAT was also accompanied by the commercialisation of Doordarshan (Mehta, 2008; Page and Crawley, 2001; Singhal and Rogers, 2001). The launch of the national network meant that an advertisement placed on Doordarshan could be viewed by a large audience across the length and breadth of the country. Colour television started in 1982 added further appeal to television as a medium for advertising.

The telecast of the first soap opera *Hum Log* in 1984-85 marked the first step towards sponsored programmes on Indian television. *Hum Log* was launched as an entertainment programme in July 1984 with themes such as family harmony, matrimony and family planning embedded in the storyline. At the end of each episode, veteran actor Ashok Kumar would deliver an epilogue. *Hum Log* was very hopeful of its family planning message at the beginning but it was diluted along the way (Ninan, 1995).

The advertising carried by *Hum Log* promoted a new consumer product in India – Maggi Noodles. Public accepted the new product suggesting the power of television commercials. Advertisers began to purchase television time and the commercialisation of Doordarshan was thus underway (Mehta, 2008; Singhal and Rogers, 2001). From a public service medium, television was gradually becoming a commercial mass medium.

The success of this advertising campaign resulted in other advertisers jumping on the Doordarshan bandwagon, enabling the network to raise its advertising rates 150 percent in three years (Johnson, 2000). *Hum Log* was quickly followed by serials such as *Buniyaad*, religious epics such as *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, *Khandaan*, *Nukkad*, and *Chanakya* which caught on with the imagination of the audiences as well as the advertisers (Mehta, 2008).

Since then there has been no looking back for Doordarshan in terms of its dependence on advertising: from just 1 percent of its annual budget in 1976-77, advertising grew to account for 70 percent of its annual expenditure in 1990 (Mehta, 2008). The advertisers were particularly interested in the urban middle class population, as a result television programming increasingly catered to their interests resulting in a sharp urban bias in programming which continues till date.



Source: ddindia.net, 2003; exchange4media.com, 2006 as cited in (Rodrigues, 2010).

By the mid-1980s, there was considerable increase in the volume of commercial advertisements, sponsored programmes, imported foreign films etc. This was a complete shift from the original mandate of applying this medium for education and development and it was happening at a time when many countries across the world were using television for social purposes. For instance, the satellite loaned to India for SITE was earlier used to provide programmes of social education to people living in isolated communities in Alaska (Joshi, 1985).

The trend towards commercialisation of television that began in the 1980s with sponsored programmes consolidated throughout the next decade. In the 1990s, the television

landscape in India changed dramatically and at a pace that was difficult to grapple with especially for policy makers who could not do anything to rein control.

It was technological innovation rather than state policy that brought about deregulation and privatisation in television broadcasting in India. The advent of satellite television in the 1990s is a watershed in the history of television broadcasting in this country as it changed the television landscape forever and led to issues that we are still grappling with. Indian television suddenly became much for entertainment driven (Page and Crawley, 2001; Singhal and Rogers, 2001; Sinha, 1998).

The public broadcaster Doordarshan was forced to change by the winds of commercialisation and privatisation. It started a parallel entertainment channel, put on more Hindi films than ever before, sold time slots to private producers, and rationalised its advertising rates (Ninan, 1995; Mehta, 2008). However, Doordarshan's response strategies have been widely criticised. Sinha (1998) argues that in the wake of its biggest crisis of credibility and survival, Doordarshan tried to emulate the commercial satellite television channels rather than reinventing itself as a public service broadcaster.

The irony was that Doordarshan was not trying to compete in quality but for retaining its unchallenged market share and advertising revenues. Consequently, it became as aggressively market-oriented as any other commercial network (Mehta, 2008). The most glaring manifestation of this was when Music Television or MTV (a transnational music channel widely noted for its sexually explicit content) parted ways with the STAR group and appeared on Doordarshan's Metro channel in a regular two-and-half hour slot in the evenings (Ninan, 1995; Singhal and Rogers, 2001).

Thus, a medium that was started with the brave goal of educating and empowering the masses was betrayed even by its most trusted player. In its bid to compete with the private satellite channels, the public service agenda of Doordarshan was severely compromised.

By 1994, Doordarshan was asked by the Planning Commission to raise its own revenues for further expansion of services, thereby cementing the new dependence on advertising. Commercial revenues of the network almost doubled from 1991-92 to 1996-97 (Rodrigues, 2010). But on the flip side, whilst Doordarshan increased its appeal for middle-class urban viewers, it weakened its programme offer for rural areas, and educational programming suffered (Banerjee and Seneviratne, 2005).

### **The state of Development Communication in Contemporary Television**

The greatest concern for the cause of development communication in India remains that the public service broadcaster committed to the task of educating and empowering its audiences has been forced to edge away that role. Due to competition from the private satellite television channels, the agenda of Doordarshan as a public service broadcaster was changed irrevocably (Mehta, 2008; Ninan, 1995; Singhal and Rogers, 2001; Thomas, 2010). Constant erosion of budgetary support also played its part. Consequently, the network placed decreasing emphasis on acting as a catalyst for social change, promoting national integration and contributing towards literacy campaigns.

The private channels changed the very mandate of broadcasting in India. The aim of education and development through television was made to seem outdated, and rural India was no longer a viable constituency to cater to. Western programmes and Indian-produced programmes on the private networks conveyed consumerist and material values (Singhal and Rogers, 2001). It created wants and desires that were not always synchronous with the needs or financial resources of the people (Ninan, 1995; Page and Crawley, 2001).

In the space of two decades, the media in India has become the vanguard of consumerism. All this is done at the expense of difficult stories and issues such as poverty, exploitation and the dark sides of globalisation. While one can argue that the satellite television revolution has increased choice for the 'consumer', it is fuelled by a

ratings war, advertisement revenues and is located at and responds to the demands of urbanity (Mehta, 2008; Thomas, 2010).

There is a new found interest in fashion, lifestyle, sports particularly cricket, gadgets and celebrities. In the genre of news, this is particularly stark as the above mentioned items have become newsworthy whereas the struggles and concerns of rural India and those of the urban poor have been relegated to the backburner. Little or no space is devoted to issues related to how the other half of India as distinct from the young urban middle-class lives and dies in rural and urban India (Thomas, 2010).

The increasing marginalisation of issues affecting the lives of the poor and disenfranchised in mainstream media particularly television was aptly brought out during the 'India Shining' campaign launched by the Bhartiya Janata Party-led government prior to the general election of 2004. The media euphorically and unquestioningly got on the 'India Shining' bandwagon even as the rural hinterland was reeling under a severe agrarian crisis and the consequent suicides of small farmers (Pavarala, 2007).

There have been some positive developments too with the coming of the private satellite channels with the availability of less biased news and current affairs programming than in the days of Doordarshan monopoly. This led to an improvement in the quality of the televised public sphere though it still leaves much to be desired (Herman and Mc Chesney, 2001; Thomas, 2010).

There are also some attempts at participatory, and informative programmes though such experiments are far and few. The regional kendras of Doordarshan are playing an important role here which most of the times goes unnoticed as it is away from the national media glare. One such experiment is the *Green Kerala Express*, a social reality show on Kerala Doordarshan that brings to light success stories from the grassroots on sustainable development (Chandiram, 2010, para. 2). The 'Green Development Story' is covered on this prime time show in detail and presented to a studio jury who give their views and ideas for further refinement (Chandiram, 2010, para. 4).

A good example of public broadcasting facilitating public participation and acting as a watchdog was the 'Mukyamantri tho Mukhamukhi' (Face to face with the Chief Minister) television programme in Telugu on Hyderabad Doordarshan. In this question and answer programme, viewers could dial into the programme with their questions or complaints, and the Chief Minister would answer them live on air. This was a unique experiment where citizens were given a chance to directly debate government policy with their leaders (Banerjee and Seneviratne, 2005).

Such experiments at development communication are not limited to Doordarshan, some of the private channels have been forthcoming in playing a social role. During the 2004 general election, the private news network New Delhi Television (NDTV) held a contest for advertising agencies to make a 30-second public service television commercial to educate viewers on the importance of casting their vote on election day (Banerjee and Seneviratne, 2005).

While such and many other case studies do exist of Indian television fulfilling its social obligations, the problem remains that such initiatives are at best one-off experiments which are most often not followed up or done regularly. Explaining this in the context of poverty-reporting, Thomas (2010) argues that there has been an increase in the number of journalists covering poverty. He, however, cautions that, "it is only occasional that a journalist opts to investigate the larger, long-term reasons for events such as drought or is inclined to frame poverty as a process rather than as an event" (Thomas, 2010, p. 104).

The historical cause of poverty and the obscene economic disparities in Indian society receive very little attention. Television as it exists today suppresses the Indian reality. It creates a world of fantasy for the rich and the poor; the rich have access to at least some of the ingredients that construct that fantasy while the poor have none. This world of fantasy does not deal with the pressing problems faced by the majority (Vilanilam, 2005).



Herman and Mc Chesney (2001) note that the media system of India was built on a system of great inequality and continues to further those inequalities. Despite some of the changes introduced with the growth and proliferation of the private networks, it is still a top-down system which allows for a certain amount of debate and alternative views of the news from other elite interests, but the mass of poor people still remain grossly unrepresented.

It is rather unfortunate that India which embarked on television in the name of development has used it in practice to promote trivial entertainment. This is not to argue against entertainment-oriented programming but to remind that a medium with great potential to educate and empower the less-privileged is being used solely to provide information and entertainment to a class who already has it in abundance. This can lead to a new kind of inequality in society between the information-rich and the information-poor.

Commenting on the power of information Ghosh (1996) argues that previously information was seen as a source of knowledge, wisdom and enlightenment whereas now it is also a source of 'power'. He adds that information empowers whereas disinformation makes one vulnerable; media being a source of disseminating information is thus under immense pressure and yields easily to the market forces.

### **The Way Forward**

In the final analysis it can be said that television has grown at a tremendous pace in the country over the past two decades. It has opened a window to the world for millions in the country, redefined entertainment, produced many innovations and also democratised and levelled, opening the eyes of millions to things of which they had been long deprived (Johnson, 2000). Nevertheless, the potential of television still remains vastly unexplored not only in relation to spreading awareness or educating the audience, but also in

providing quality entertainment. This section offers recommendations for making best use of this creative medium for the benefit of the people.

Genuine autonomy for the public broadcaster is a major reform which is required. The Prasar Bharti Act has brought some structure and uniformity to Doordarshan, however its independence from the government in respect of editorial matters remains far from satisfactory. The Prasar Bharti Act of 1990 proclaimed in 1997 was a severe dilution of the earlier Acts as well as the spirit of the Verghese Committee Report that argued for such a body (Ninan, 1998; Page and Crawley, 2001).

The influence of the central government on Doordarshan was amply demonstrated recently during the anti-corruption agitation by the civil society group led-by Anna Hazare. While the agitation was receiving tremendous support from a large section of the urban middle-classes and widely covered and debated by the rest of the media, Doordarshan had little to present or comment about the same. The government's viewpoint was given prominence while little space was provided to the agitating civil society groups or to debate the larger questions raised by the movement.

Funding for the public broadcaster is another area of debate. Ever since the days of the New Economic Policy 1991, Doordarshan has seen a steady reduction in budgetary support from the Government. Hence, the dependence on advertising revenue has gone up with deteriorating consequences for the public service mandate.

Perhaps, the key issue that merits attention is the absence of an overarching broadcast law that can adequately deal with the issues presented by today's advertising-dominated television industry. Having a national television policy to which both the private and public sectors would comply is the need of the hour. Any such policy should also ensure some measure of public accountability for the broadcasters. Page and Crawley (2001) in their analysis of South Asian broadcasting systems noted that the state has to play a more creative regulatory role if the public interest is to be safeguarded in the commercial media environment.

Enabling regulation may also go a long way in making the tele-visual space available for enlightening and empowering the public instead of allowing it to be hijacked by the forces of commercialisation. Many countries such as Germany, Britain, Canada and South Africa have laws that require private operators to fulfil certain public service obligations (Ndlela, 2007: Page and Crawley, 2001). The same could be tried out in India. The draft Broadcasting Services Regulation Bill, 2007 attempted to do the same through a Public Service Broadcasting Council. It was expected to govern the manner in which licensees fulfil their public service broadcasting obligations stipulated under the license's requirements. The Bill also sought to provide a grievance and redressal mechanism to the public which is long overdue (Ninan, 2007).

The extent to which private channels might be willing to accept public service obligations is debatable; more so as the experience of Doordarshan in this context hasn't been exemplary (Herman and Mc Chesney, 2001; Mehta 2008). But when public service objectives are seen as being an obligation to provide quality programming to suit a wide variety of tastes, to challenge and promote debate about relevant social issues, they can be seen as common to both public and private broadcasters (Crawley, 1999). The present system of television dependent on advertising doesn't focus on quality as that is not what the advertisers want but in securing large audiences.

There are many who oppose any regulation in broadcasting as they argue that the free-market principles currently applicable to Indian television can fulfil all public service and educational needs of the audience. However, the problems with this ideology can be explained by referring to the present situation of a commercial television market in India. Though there have been many positive influences with the coming of private television in India such as superior production values, wider programme formats and news free from government propaganda; at the same time, the virtually unregulated market in satellite broadcasting has also demonstrated the negative influences of commercial pressures on programme quality and standards (Page and Crawley, 2001).

It is important to note here that the privately owned media depend on advertiser revenue and therefore have to compete to garner the same and hence, will serve the advertiser's interest not necessarily those of the audience. Advertisers show little interest in documentaries or issue-based programmes (Page and Crawley, 2001). Further, the commercial broadcasters aim only at the urban well-to-do neglecting the large numbers of people who are poor or illiterate or live in rural areas. Advertisers target rich urban audiences who are affluent enough to afford their products. It is because of these reasons that television is characterised as the true middle-class medium in India (Raghavan, 2003).

Reliance on advertisements as the main source of revenue means the creation of a large audience. The quickest and the easiest way but not the socially most desirable way to build up a large audience is to serve entertainment that appeals to the lowest common denominator of popular taste i.e. crime, sex, and violence (Joshi, 1985).

Experience from the United States suggests that with commercial sponsorship of programmes becoming rampant, serious programming, documentaries, or anything that could be controversial saw a decline. Environmental series in particular could not be undertaken as they found no sponsors. Documentaries that appealed to sponsors and advertisers were about travel, dining, dogs, flower shows, lifestyles of the rich and celebrities (Herman and Mc Chesney, 2001).

The important thing to realise is that moving towards a situation where the media are entirely commercial in their funding and approach may not be desirable for our country, where despite the phenomenal growth of the middle-class; serious issues of poverty, health, and underdevelopment prevail.

At the same time, there has to be new ways of defining the public interest and the 'public' must have a say in it. Most often issues related to broadcasting are discussed by the industry and the government alone, whereas the public on whose behalf both claim to fight is hardly represented (Joseph, 2007). In many developing countries, for a long time,

it was the state which had the sole authority and legitimacy in defining the public interest (Page and Crawley, 2001). This has to change for any meaningful transformation in the role of television in society.

## **Conclusion**

Broadcasting has generally been perceived the world over as a powerful medium for social and cultural change. In India too, broadcasting has essentially been informed by developmental and public interest objectives. But as the analysis in the paper shows, clearly television's earlier mandate to aid in the process of social and economic development has been diluted over the years. Low-quality entertainment and trivialisation of news have taken the centrestage in today's television. The public interest finds itself increasingly squeezed out of the country's television agenda.

However, the original goals of educational and developmental television need not be lost. What needs rethinking is perhaps the ways and means of doing the same. Public service programming need not abandon the entertainment element as it helps to win and keep audiences (Joshi, 1985). Independent constituencies such as educational institutions, community groups and the like can develop and maintain independent local television stations. However, television is a costly medium hence some support from the state would be expected in this regard.

Because our television networks including the publicly-funded Doordarshan are so dependent on advertising; they are unlikely to fulfil the social objectives of the media. In this regard, the broadcast sector may do well to learn lessons from certain sections of the print media which prove that legitimate commercial interests can be pursued without sacrificing social responsibility (Raghavan, 2003).

Broadcasters believe that a totally free market can fulfil all public service needs of the audiences. However, experience suggests otherwise as brought out by the preceding

sections of this paper. Hence, some intervention from the state may be required to ensure a wider range of programmes and the representation of all sections of society especially the weaker sections. Further, the poverty of rural communication on television must end. In an information-age, we cannot afford to deny the benefits of the new technologies to the most deserving and needy.

Broadcasters in India display unprecedented unity when it comes to resisting any effort at regulating the television industry. However, many countries such as Canada, USA, Britain, Denmark, Finland, Netherlands, Greece, Portugal, Hungary, France, Germany and Pakistan have laws to regulate the broadcast sector (Ninan, 2007). Broadcasters in these countries do not see this as a violation of their freedom of expression, but merely as a necessary way of maintaining some ethical and professional standards.

It needs emphasis that the 'public' which is missing from any debate on broadcasting needs to be included through various means such as public meetings, debate, soliciting opinions through information campaigns, involving civil society groups etc.

Public opinion on media issues is underdeveloped in our country. Civil society groups and media critics need to pay attention to this aspect. The media and communication systems of a country play a vital role in the nation's socio-economic activities particularly in settings priorities and agendas of policymakers as well as the people. Hence, how the media performs in society is a subject matter of concern to anyone who has interest in the country's all-round development.

The paper has focussed more on the performance of the public service broadcaster as it is believed that the commercial broadcasters are unlikely to fulfil the vision with which television was started in this country. They have obvious commercial constraints to offer any hope though that may be altered through regulation as has been suggested here.

However, it is not wrong to expect the same from the public service broadcaster – Doordarshan. It is still remembered for many of its pioneering efforts and remains the

only network till date where one can see some reflection of rural India, its culture and its concerns. However, going by the recent performance of the network this seems a difficult task; but with assured funding the trend of commercialisation of the public broadcaster may be reversed. It can also capitalise on its strengths. Doordarshan remains one of the largest television networks in the world with 31 channels, 66 studios, 1413 transmitters and access to 128 million households (Thomas, 2010).

To conclude, it can be said that the performance, utility and relevance of broadcasting in India should be measured in its contribution towards providing impetus for educational, cultural, economic, social, political, and development projects in the country and not just by growth in the number of networks or the so-called choice available to the viewers. India may not be a poor country, but it is a country with millions of poor people. Television as one of the most ubiquitous elements of modern life must make the country aware of this 'other' segment of the population so that they do not fade away from national consciousness, and steps are taken to address their poverty and the accentuating inequalities in our society.

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