

Foreign Media in India: Any Cause for Concern?

POINTS TO DEVELOP

Economic reforms have opened the gates to foreign investment and entry of foreign companies. So why not media?

Objections.

Working of foreign electronic media in India.

Can they influence Indians detrimentally?

What about print media?

Measures to liberalise.

With India adopting the economic reform programme in the 1990s, foreign companies and establishments have been making their presence felt in the Indian scene. The various sectors of the domestic industry one after the other have witnesses external competition with the unfurling of the country's globalization policies. Therefore, not surprisingly, the media's turn has come as well. Doors have already been opened to the foreign electronic media. The CNN, STAR TV and the BBC World service have become a part and parcel of daily viewing in all urban centers. Their programmes have found their way into the Indian living rooms and, shall we say, have come to stay for good. For the programmes have gained popularity.

The operation of the foreign media in general was once conceived as a 'threat'- a dangerous intrusion – that would present grave risks to national interests and endanger every aspect of the Indian society. It was also been suggested that it would prove a threat to India's sovereignty and finally its independent status! Such fears seem to have been exaggerated, and not quite valid. The power of the media is strong indeed, and no one would deny that. But can the foreign media successfully use this very power to work against the hopes and aspirations and to the detriment of the Indian people?

The media, an important means of communication, is a vast source of information and entertainment to people across the country. Its ability to mould thoughts and form opinions is such that one can say it is a governing force of sorts. The various impressions it leaves upon the human all in, all affect the people's lifestyles, their way of thinking and even being. As far as the Indian society is concerned, it is one in which traditional socio-cultural standards are deeply

engrained. It was mainly feared that the coming of the foreign media would not only have commercial ramifications but that it would disrupt India's social cultural and political fabric.

In all this opposition, it has been forgotten that foreign sources have been involved in providing information to Indians for years now. The BBC World Service news broadcasts, for instance, were long preferred to those of the domestic all India Radio especially by those keen on credibility. Foreign newspapers and magazines have not only been available on the news stands but zealously read as well. Though the more recent access to foreign TV may appear to have infused Western thoughts and standards among the people, the truth is that its effects have been very limited. And in no way have they disrupted the social fabric. Indian society, to whatever extent diverse and multifaceted, is made up of people who are sensible enough. There is nothing to suggest that they lack the keen sense of discrimination necessary to reject any nonsense that the Western media may throw their way. It is insulting to the Indian sensibility if one were to assume that the people here would swallow all the lies and hostile propaganda that the foreign media may choose to disseminate. Coming to the Western cultural influences communicated through the foreign media, a common viewpoint is that ignorance is bliss; the less we are exposed to their culture, the better for us. One cannot agree with this. Knowing more about other cultures and lifestyles would add to our own knowledge. In the end, one must rely upon one's own moral fiber to choose the best and leave the rest.

Even if the foreign media aim at strengthening their own vested interests – political, economical or of whatever kind- through news and views, it is doubtful if they would be successful at it. There are many safeguards in law to check activities that may promote antagonism between different religious, linguistic, caste and other groups.

Indeed, the presence of the foreign electronic media has done much to rejuvenate its domestic counterpart with the result that the standard and quality of our own television and radio programmes have very much improved. A number of Indian TV channels such as Aaj Tak Zee TV Network, Sony, and NDTV have also started making their helped the consumer get a variety of choice.

Regarding the foreign media's presence, there is another matter worth taking note of. How will these media groups operate and what are the checks and restrictions they will be subjected to? For one thing, the Indian Constitution, recognizing the importance of receiving and imparting information as a basic tenet of democracy, enshrines freedom for speech and information under Article 19. Free speech and expression where the media is concerned falls under the purview of the same article. But clearly, the about those who are not citizens of the country

and all the foreign corporations as well? It has been said that the terms 'person' and 'citizen' in order to guarantee free speech and expression to Indian citizens only. The question is whether the freedom to speak or express should be reopening or idea that is expressed or any simple information for that matter ought to hold weight for what it is and not for who utter it and where. It is ironical that any society democratic in character – that is, one which does away with all distinctions of caste, religion, sex – must erect a barrier in the form of nationality when it comes to a fundamental principle of democracy itself. Maybe it was to universally recognize this inherent and true nature of democracy the UNESCO declaration (1978) stressed “freedom of opinion, expression of information” as “an integral part of human rights and fundamental freedoms.” The international Covenant on Civil and Political Rights in Article 19(2) has expressed the same: “everyone shall have the right to freedom of expression , this right shall include freedom to seek , receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other of his choice.”

The problem becomes acute when we consider the entry of foreign publications, i.e. the print media, into India. The foreign newspapers, for instance, will have to register their titles or name only under the Press and Registration of Books (PRB) Act, 1867. But the act does not admit persons who do not reside in the country to edit or publish newspaper. The national policy has also been such that in 1955 itself it was decided that foreign newspapers and periodicals would not be allowed to publish from India. A large section of the Indian print media has been hostile to the entry of foreign newspapers on a regular basis into India. It would endanger national security and sovereignty, it is said. The government has partially opened up the print media, allowing foreign direct investment under certain conditions in the various media enterprises. As of 2005, India permits foreign direct investment (FDI) up to 26 per cent in news publications and up to 74 per cent in non –news publications. This, one believes, is in keeping with our economic policy. Significantly, it is stipulated that editorial control should be with Indian citizens. Caution is not to be laughed off; hundred per cent foreign entry into the media sector is not allowed even in the highly democratic Western countries; not even in the USA. This is because the press is seen as a vital part of a country's political and socio-economic well-being. And no outsider, however liberal, can be expected to have a country's interests at heart to the extent a citizen of that country does. So, ownership – at last the majority of the stake – of media is best left in Indian's hands.

The entry of foreign media has to be governed by strict rules. Any intention to cripple the country politically or economically or any attempt at cultural imperialism in order to make the country a slave to the designs of international

powers would not be tolerated. If the foreign media is keen on making a presence on the Indian soil, respect for the country's unity and integrity is essential.

Foreign media need not be a risk to the well-being of the country. The Western electronic media, for instance, healthy competition to the domestic media industry which has not only bettered its services but is now more conscious of people's wants. Some of our largest circulated dailies have tremendously improve their contents and quality with the entry of the foreign print media in India. Now they have become world class. The Times of India, in fact, has come to occupy a place among the top five dailies of the world, and this is not mean achievement. That foreign bring about a disintegration of the Indian society is an erroneous belief. As long as the people retain their sense of discrimination and have sensible approach, there need be no fear of their getting steps to facilitate the foreign media's entry are needed. However, foreign media ought to be treated on part with the domestic media industry in every manner.