

Challenge Before Television in India

POINTS TO DEVELOP

Influence of television substantial: its reach has grown tremendously in recent times.

Door darshan- official channel – its problems.

Advent of satellite channels.

Popular programmers/entertainment versus 'serious' and information –based programmers.

The need to improve content and style in both official and private channels.

Television is admitted by everyone to have a tremendous attraction for and impact on viewers. But it is the last few years that have witnessed a stupendous spread of the reach of this medium (especially in India). The last decade of the twentieth century saw the beginnings of international satellite broadcasting in India and the government started a major economic liberalization programme. Both these measures taken together radically changed the country's television environment. Towards the end of 1996 more than 50 million households in India had television sets. Introduced in 1991, the international satellite broadcasting caused a revolution in the TV scene in India because of the speedy explosion of small-scale cable systems. By the end of 1996, Indians had access to several foreign and local TV channels and the competition for audiences and advertising revenues was one of the highest in the world.

Cable TV revolution in India started with the beaming of the Gulf war- almost like the telecast of a 'live' cricket match – by the CNN, courtesy Star TV, and the telecast of the mega religious serials, Ramayana and Mahabharata, probably proved a turning point for the Indian population. Almost overnight there was a proliferation of cable operators in almost every block and street corner, and all those with a television came to have an immense choice of channels. The introduction of DTH (Direct to Home) services has further given a boost to the popularity of the satellite channels in India. Of course, we are nowhere the American scene, but the verity of choice is clear to anyone who knows what it was like at one time, not long ago; the two channels on Door darshan, the second a mere apology.

Indian television, that is, Door darshan, is an official medium with all the disadvantages that go with government control and unaccountable officialdom. Complacency marks the official response to the blitzkrieg of satellite channels.

Slowly the government has moved from totally ignoring the challenge to making some lukewarm efforts to counter it as DD barite, and regional language channels. Though it later discontinued the 'Metro' channel, the DD national channel dishes out both 'mature and serious' and light programmers.

It is worthwhile pondering about what the Indian viewer watches, given the multiple choice at the end of a button. There is no clear-cut data available from authentic or reliable surveys, but if one goes from the sounds coming from the houses in the neighborhood, it is films, film-based programmers, and more films. Equal in popularity are serials, sports, pop and rock, crime and espionage, travel and amount of screaming, 'cultural invasion' or 'pollution of young minds' is not going to change things. People will with the passage of time and with a growing number of information conscious and alive to happenings in the world and the country, news and information –based programmers TV, discovery and National Geographic, and the so –called reality and chat shows shown on the numerous Hindi and English channels have stared dominating the scene. Language does not matter in pop and rock, in sports and fashion or in much of travel and adventure. Even people with a rudimentary knowledge of English can and do watch, and avidly at that, serials in any language. And, of course, dubbing can make more satellite programs accessible to Indians.

The cultural modes that are exclusive will remain exclusive. Indian classical dance and music, Chinese opera or Indonesian Wayang Kulit will not, indeed cannot, become the rage globally. They need a language, a base of traditional knowledge, and a special taste. They cannot be easily transmitted elsewhere o achieve wide popularity. This probably explains why DD Bharati, Doordarshan's channel on art and culture, has failed to find much of an acceptance in the market. Even news, in comparison to the entertainment programmes, fails to reach the top on the popularity charts. Except, of course, when there is some sensational or historic happening. Does this mean that quality programmes, 'minority programmes' as they are often called, have no future and will not be part of the cultural spectrum?

In this context, it would be useful to recall the worlds of Newton Minow, former chairman of the Federal Communications Commission of America. Talking of 'Public interest' with reference to television, he pointed out that there was a failure in using television for education and for children as well as in financing public television properly. He was talking of American television, but his questions – what can television do for our country? For the common good? Are equally applicable in the Indian situation.

The government of Indian and its Ministry of information and Broadcasting, however, have been reduced to taking a purely commercial view of the entire

television scene, bothered only about how much revenue Doordarshan's can make. Public interest television does not figure high on the priority list. It is money which is likely to rule programmes, money from sponsors, advertisers and the film world. Advertising on Door darshan started in a very small way with about 1 per cent of Doordarshan's budget being generated from advertising revenues in 1976-77. The introduction of "National Programme" on Door darshan in 1982 and the likelihood of reaching a nationwide audience made television look more and more attractive to advertisers. On finding immense opportunity to make more money, door darshan began shifting the balance of its programmes. The commercialization of Door darshan saw the growth of soap operas (Buniyad, Hum Log), situational comedies (Nukkad), dramas, musical programmes, quiz shows and the like. By 1990, Doordarshan's revenues from advertising had leapfrogged to staggering \$300 million that took care of about 70 per cent of its total annual expenditure. By 1991, Doordarshan's earlier promise and grand plans to assist in the acceleration of social and economic development process had been greatly watered down. Entertainment and commercial programmes had started to take the lion's share in the organization's programming strategies, and advertising had come to be Doordarshan's major source of funding. Will quantity, such circumstances? Will the enthusiastic surrender to the market place, the eagerness to give the public what it wants, the understanding of television as pure entertainment with a minor concession to News enable Indian Television to withstands the flood of satellite programmes or will it be vanquished?

Television must have programmes, and good programmes require sound business management and a competent grasp of technology. Both require correct policy measures to be successfully harnessed. With the arrogance of size and population, India's policy –makers in communications for long considered Indian broadcasting to have an automatic teaching and preaching role in culture. Unfortunately, going by past experience this role has not come India's way. To a large extent, it is the government that is to be blamed. Indian television has been used for the benefit of the government and the party. Propagandist, pedantic, conformist and dull, news as well programmes even now need to be revamped in content as well as style, if the official Indian channel is to even begin facing the challenge from the skies. Private players in the TV market have started doing a good job. TV channels such as NDTV, Zee Network, Star and Sony are displaying high standards and are not far behind their foreign counterparts.

Completely commercial concerns, however, will not do in a poor developing country like India. The educational role of television cannot be lost sight of. The audio-visual medium has the power of affecting the community through opinion building and slant of views. But excellence in broadcasting, influence and freedom emerge from the slow progress of history. However, they cannot emerge if the interest of the public is not kept in mind. There is no reason why the 'Enrichment'

channel put forward by Door darshan cannot be interesting and entertaining. Its 'entertainment' channel, similarly, need not eschew wholesome information or education. Door darshan's future success depends totally upon official willingness to accept unpalatable facts – crass nepotism, corruption, undue political interference and disgusting administrative subservience to political bullying, and a blissful neglect of quality in the selection of programmes and the handling of programmers- and correct these faults.

On the other hand, private channels. Need to realize that entertainment cannot rule in every sector. The concept of 'infotainment' should not degenerate into sensationalism masquerading as information or the serious being trivialized. There is a tendency in news channels to flog an event into tatters, or create an exaggerated impression of something or some event that does not quite deserve that much of importance. There is also tendency to 'break news' of a trivial kind, as if it were an earthshaking happening. The competition is great with the mushrooming of several channels; while healthy commotion ought to improve the quality of programming, what we see is a mindless imitation of one another in churning out more and more of the same kind of programmes. In the attempt to be the first channel to bring the news'. Haste works havoc with accuracy and sensitivity.

In-depth analysis of news, wide coverage of important events world over, a balance picture of what exists in India-these are aspects on which television channels in Indian need to work so that their image acquires credibility the media needs in order to be a true fourth pillar of Indian democracy.

Money, talent, official policy and opportunities have to be coordinated and made to work in cooperation if Indian television is to successfully counter the challenges facing it.