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Doordarshan And Development:  
Need For A New Paradigm  

By  

Shafey Kidwai
DOORDARSHAN AND DEVELOPMENT: Need For A New Paradigm

Shafey Kidwai

Notwithstanding the phenomenal growth and ever-increasing expansion of Doordarshan Network covering more than 80% of population of the country and the titanic adoration of some of its spicy sponsored programmes and soap operas, a close study of its variegated programmes clearly indicates that Doordarshan, contrary to official claims, has moved away from its professed goal i.e. to act an agent of propelling the process of development set out by the National Planning Committee. Even a cursory look at its software will make it clear that Doordarshan at present, has not been pursuing a value-orientated communication policy aimed at making significant advances in education, health and general welfare and modifying attitudes and behaviour to promote progress.

It may be recalled that India had realised the paramount importance of modern communication technology long ago and communication planning started with the national planning. The National Planning Committee, appointed by the Indian National Congress, under the chairmanship of Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru envisaged the role of communication in the modern world and appointed a sub-committee which, in its report, described broadcasting as a necessity for modern development (since TV was yet to emerge). It also delineated the principal functions of broadcasting. After independence, especially in 70s, the government of India insisted that television be used for development. In this regard, Mrs. Gandhi, the then prime minister, took the lead and sought the guidance of eminent scientists and thinkers such as Homi Bhabha and Vikram Sarabhai to prepare a blue print for using modern communication technology effectively. Dr. Vikram Sarabhai in his engaging paper "Television for development" in which, he argued that modern communication technology had a time-saving and distance-
reducing role and this was enormously significant for late comers in the race for development for whom time was the scarcest resource (Vikram Sarabhai and Chaudhary, "Scientific policy and National Development; 1974, South Asian Books). This extensive study revealed how communication potential could be used as a resource for development. Soon, Sarabhai's seminal paper translated into a reality and SITE was launched. SITE (Satellite instruction television experiment) -- an extremely ambitious programme aimed at eradicating illiteracy, superstitions and other social evils, lasted one year from August 75 to July 76. Although SITE got a tremendous success in technical terms, its development objectives were not realised fully. B.N. Agarwal opines, "None of the objectives of SITE was fully realised, though evaluation did show that for example, the teacher training has been useful and that women benefitted most from the information on health, nutrition and family planning. However, it was observed that television viewing did not increase the adoption of use of family planning. In line with Agarwal, Professor Eappen concluded, "SITE made no apparent changes in the decision making structures of the villages (K.E. Eappen "The cultural component of SITE," Journal of communication, Volume 24; Autumn, 1979).

Besides SITE experience, the government of India in early 80s used television to ameliorate the economic conditions of masses and also took advantage of it in getting rid society of age-old problems such as illiteracy, unemployment, disease, superstitions, fatalism, poverty, caste system, population and dowry. The Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, has reiterated the following objectives of Doordarshan in its reports published in 1989: (a) Act as an catalyst for social change (b) promote national integration (c) Stimulate scientific temper among the people (d) Disseminate the message of family planning as a means of population control and family
welfare (e) stimulate agricultural production by providing essential information and knowledge (f) promote and help preservation of environmental ecological balance (g) Highlight the need for social welfare of women, children and less privileged (h) promote interest in games and sports (i) stimulate appreciation of our artistic and cultural heritage (Annual Report: Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 1984-85).

Too much should not be read into above-mentioned objectives and its application exercises as Doordarshan, at present, has been concentrating on getting itself more and more associated with entertainment than anything else in order to retain its viewership and put satellite networks at bay. J.S. Yadav in his candid appraisal of television programmes observes, "the television programmes in India at present give a greater boost to consumerism than to education and development." He further adds that the soap operas and sponsored programmes are popular with audience all over the country including the rural areas. But the themes are those of the urban middle and upper class -- along with message of the serials, there are messages relating to different kinds of essential consumer goods, how are the life styles and consumer patterns.

Yadav's observation apart, this is not to deny that Doordarshan telecasts some development -- oriented programmes but their unimaginative and wearisome presentation defeats its purpose. The advent of satellite television networks and their frequent forays has impelled Doordarshan to take refuge in entertainment and through its entertainment -- centred programmes which are nothing but superficial imitations of film culture, has been trying to grab the attention of the middle and high class population. Amidst much fanfare and public accolade Doordarshan has become a medium of cheap entertainment and political
manoeuvring. A marked increase in the telecast of film-based programmes both on national network and metro channel bears an eloquent testimony to the fact. Its serial have not been catering to the needs of people living in 5,75,000 villages across the country in whose interest they are commissioned. Further, a blitz on consumer advertising has converted some luxury or non-essential items into essential goods. This has also taken its toll on lower middle class since they don't have enough means to buy the goods advertised on TV.

According to Mr P.C. Chatterjee, "commercial television's urban bias, critics argue, widens rather than reduces the gap between the rich and the poor (PC Chatterjee, Broadcasting in India; 1978, Sage publications).

One must realise that entertainment does not have a deleterious effect on development and it can subtly be used for accelerating the growth. For the instance Hum-Log - (which was frequently repeated) is the first pro-development soap opera and according to Singh and Rogers "is a melodramatic serial that is broadcast in order to entertain and convey subtly an educational theme to promote development. Hum-Log -- the mega serial addressed the mores of social and cultural life of the country. Sudden boom of TV has changed the situation and Doordarshan has become more and more commercial. The telecast of some religious serials have prompted people to make allegation against Doordarshan for propagating religiosity, superstitions and fatalism instead of cultivating scientific temper and strengthening secular outlook. It is deplorable to realise that Doordarshan has given too much room to religion-related programmes which is being misused by the fascist forces.

In the midst of growing popularity of some of its sponsored programmes, Doordarshan has also came in for scathing criticism
both on subject matter and presentation levels. Some studies reveal a sharp departure from the professed social goal of Doordarshan and it is pointed out that Doordarshan through its various programmes, instead of reducing the gap between the rich and poor, elite and masses, urban and rural areas and the centre and the periphery, is in fact, widening it which indicates a clear deviation from the Bhabha-Sarabhai approach to communication planning and the earlier approach of the communication panel set up by the National planning committee. It is distressing to note that the task of designing the software is left to those who are ill-informed about the possibilities of this powerful medium. Doordarshan programmes have been dispassionately analysed by Kiran Karnik and Chitinis in their extensive study "Communication Concerns: An Indian Perspective." Their spell-binding appraisal indicates that our communication system reflects the powerful pressure of the new rich class and that communication has played an important role in promoting a value-system corresponding to the style of life of the most aggressive sections of this new rich class. Sexist and sadist violence, glorification of ruthless gogetter are almost idealised by the emerging software linked with commercial agencies (Kiran Karnik, and Chitinis: "Communication Concerns: An Indian Perspectives;" 1984; Space Application Centre). They also observed that TV programmes are based on imitation of commercial cinema that are shown during prime time. Karnik and Chitinis' criticism revolves around following points:

(a) Important artistic programmes such as national programme of music and dance are a casualty as they are relegated to the night shows when children are asleep and even working adults who have to work the next day have to skip them.
(b) Many of the serials portraying violence, adultery and infidelity which should not be seen by children are shown before 9.30 PM when children are exposed.

(c) Songs and dance sequences selected from films glorify evergreen, misbehaviour with women and general rowdism.

(d) Dependence on commercials has led to the neglect of building software capability within Doordarshan for good, relevant and interesting programmes.

Besides above mentioned well-founded remarks, it is abundantly clear that the alarming blemishes in Doordarshan programmes have emanated from its spilt up from the ideals envisioned by Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru, Vikram Sarabhai and other communication planners. Further, no serious attempt has been made to expound an integrated communication policy through national consensus by initiating a free and open dialogues. The present ill-conceived communication policy draws its sustenance from the outmoded models of development put forward by Wilbur Schramm & Lerner. The task of designing communication policy should not be left to priggish bureaucrats, namby-pamby politicians and insensitive technocrats who collectively reduced it to a tasteless technocratic exercise. It has failed to take the notice of India's vast geographical size, diversity, and distinct features of its ancient civilisation. One must realise that the communication is not a goal alone but it is also an end aimed at paving the way for a meaningful dialogue.

Doordarshan's recent yearning for satellites needs to be examined carefully. Nevile Jayweera, in his riveting paper "Communication Satellites: A Third World Perspective," argues that the third world governments and development agencies' fascination with supposed benefits of satellite technology more
than not stem from the erroneous assumption that developing
country's poverty caused by a lack of communication so that can
be alleviated by supplying more information. In his
assessment, the root causes of poverty are structural
inequalities of wealth and power both at national and
international levels.

The rapid flow of information does not necessarily result in
achieving the cherished goal of rural development. Strong
fascination for satellites apart, it must be noted that sudden
spurt in installing relay transmitters, by no way, indicates an
increase in overall growth in economic and social spheres but
on the contrary, shows vote hungry politicians' penchant for
drawing political mileage.

If one concludes that Doordarshan, no longer serves an agent of
nation building and it only satiate to leisure needs of the
people and that too in a tatty manner then the question arises
what has prompted Doordarshan to turn a deaf ear to rural
development? Why its assorted programmes, except some
worthwhile productions, such as national programme of dance and
music, World This Week, Turning Point and Parakh are seriously
flawed on several counts? What ails Doordarshan and what is to
be done to put it back on the right track? What will be the
constituent features of a new paradigm? One can not get a handy
answer as it requires deep rumination. It must be noted that
the process of social change is highly complicated one which
involves the complex interplay of many factors and its causes
are more often unpredictable. Hence, it is necessary to
generate relevant software which should cover every aspect of
Indian life including the vexed problems plaguing the country.

A new paradigm for preparing suitable software should not only
pour in information but should also pave the way for structural
changes at decision making level. It is further suggested that
an alternative communication strategy i.e. participatory people's television be evolved on the pattern of people's radio movement which had paved the way for grass root mobilization of the people for their own development in Brazil etc. While analysing the process of development it must be realised that the development is an integral, multi-dimensional and dialectical process according to Hedebro it can differ from society to society. The society must attempt to define its own strategy for development.

Literature has enormous possibilities to drag even a reluctant reader into the middle of action. Doordarshan can tap literature and folk lore to create some identifiable omnificent characters which may be used in TV films, serials and documentaries. These characters will certainly propagate activism rather than fatalism. Further, they will have enormous aesthetic and social appeal. Omnificent -- character -- centred serials will also thwart the cultural invasian of the western media. Similarly, in almost every Indian language, there is a plenty of absorbing short stories, plays and other narrative forms which eloquently depict the real problems and contradiction of the fast emerging life. It is suggested that professional and creative media experts be assigned to generate relevent software. Doordarshan programmes must focus on identifying the constraints and factors hampering the growth. Production should be a collective work in which academician, subject experts and professional producer should have a major role. Self-criticism or introspection should be encouraged among producers to reformulate programmes. Policy oriented research should also be encouraged in the context of changing social milieu. Cardinal concepts enshrined in our constitution such as secularism and Freedom of expression etc should be evaluated on the basis of experience.
It is hoped that above mentioned paradigm of software will go a long way in promoting unity in diversity, continuity and change and modernisation and tradition. Otherwise it will remain "Distant vision" for the majority of people.

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