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Social And Cultural Impact Of Satellite Broadcasting In India

by

R V Rajan
SOCIAL AND CULTURAL IMPACT OF SATELLITE BROADCASTING IN INDIA

By R.V. Rajan - India

(A Paper presented at the Seminar held in Singapore on 1.2.93)

INTRODUCTION:

For developing countries like India, only Satellite Communication can provide a cost effective solution for information gathering and dissemination, business communication, sending telegram to remote areas, mobile communication, battling disasters such as floods, oil slicks etc. Space is the only medium which can transform the Indian Society because it touches every facet of human development. Space science alone can ensure that progress occurs all over, especially in rural areas. According to Prof. U.R. Rao, Chairman, Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) only Satellite Communication can change the face of large scale illiteracy in the country and not the large number of Universities and Colleges functioning in the country.

Realising this, ISRO started off with the SITE (Satellite Instructional Television Experiment). This largest sociological experience in India in 1975-76, made a demonstrable impact by providing audio-visual education through community TV sets in villages in Gujarat (in Western India), on Health and Agriculture. There was feedback from the villagers as well. Similarly with the aid of French - German "Symphonee" space craft, a series of innovative communication experiments were conducted under STEP (Satellite Telecommunication Experiment Project).

ISRO achieved the next milestone when the indigenously built "APPLE" an experimental telecommunication satellite was used for dissemination of News and Telecasting important national events!

In essence APPLE became the stepping stone for conception and design of INSAT Systems for the country.

The INSAT Spacecrafts IA, IB IC, & ID were unique because they were multi purpose satellites that could bear telephone calls, help in TV & Radio broadcasting and also provide imageries for predicting weather.

Before the advent of INSAT, there were only 12 television stations in India, with 10% of the population having access to television programmes. Now, there are 520 T.V. stations covering 75% of India's population.
While all these developments were going on within the country, the world was not keeping quiet. Big business houses were exploring the possibilities of exploiting this powerful technology to open up new markets for ideas and services.

The result has been the invasion of the Indian sky by foreign networks.

**STAR TV & OTHER CHANNELS**

The concept of Cable TV and the availability of foreign TV channels via satellite in India are a recent phenomena. The Gulf war coverage by CNN showed the potential of dish antenna for receiving foreign broadcasts. With the start of STAR TV (Satellite Television Asia Region) by a Hong Kong based consortium of companies, the number of households getting hooked to Cable TV has increased tremendously.

According to a recent estimate, Cable networks grew from 100 in 1985 to 25,000 in 1992 in this country with an estimated investment of Rs.375/- crore in hardware only. Cable TV in India reaches, as per estimates, 2.7 million households and covers 14 million viewers.

An estimate for Delhi indicates that Cable TV is growing at the rate of 250 connections per day and nearly 45,000 households in the Rs.1500/- plus income group have got hooked to Cable TV in six months.

From October 14, 1991, STAR TV added another channel namely BBC World Service Television. The BBC (WST) beams live coverage of major news events involving spot reporting and interviews with personalities involved in events.

Star TV in India, claims the following in its promotional brochures:

* No. of Star TV Homes has risen from 12,82,500 (June 1992) to 20,00,000 (2 million). The penetration is 11% among all TV Homes.

* The bulk of these (approx 60%) are in the top 12 cities.

* Income Profile - STAR TV Viewers (Urban)

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<td>Rs.4001+</td>
<td>46</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rs.2001 - Rs.4000</td>
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Over 50% of the STAR TV viewing population earns more than Rs.2000 per month.

In addition to Star TV with its four channels of Starplus, MTV, Prime Time Sports and BBC, Indians are also able to see CNN, PTV (Pakistan TV), ATN & Zee TV. Channels from Sky TV (U.K.) & TV—Asia (a venture of the Indian Super Star Amitabh Bachhan) are also expected to hit the scene soon.

Come February and Keralites (in South India) are in for a treat as the long-awaited PTI-TV Malayalam channel is expected to hit the airwaves. To be beamed from the Russian satellite EKRAN, the channel is not only expected to cater to Indian Keralites but also to expats working in the Middle East.

Moreover, PTI TV is not stopping there. A few months later, the company expects to launch a Bengali channel. That both these channels are potential winners is indicated by the fact that an executive of Media Assets, Hong Kong — a subsidiary of Hutchvision Company, the broadcasters of STAR TV — was recently in the country trying to negotiate an equity stake for itself in the new venture. PTI TV’s answer to the proposition was a flat NO.

GOVT. POLICY

How is the Government of India, which controls the Electronic Media and has a monopoly on T.V. & Radio broadcasts, responding to the invasion from the sky? Thanks to the liberalisation programme launched by the new Congress government, it is not thinking on the lines of Singapore or Malaysia, which have banned the viewing of Satellite TV. On the other hand, it is considering the making of licensing of Dish Antennae mandatory.

The Ministry of Communications which administers the Indian Telegraph Act of 1885 and the Indian Wireless Telegraphy Act of 1933, will remain the authority for issuing the licences, if the proposal comes through. It was under the Wireless Act that the Governments in the past had collected licence fees for radios and televisions.

The Ministry of Communications has suggested that licence be made mandatory for installing dish antennae, and that there be a multi-rate fee to distinguish between those who instal them for private viewing of satellite television programmes and those who do so for commercial purposes.
This is the major recommendation of a report on how to deal with the rapid growth of dish antennae and counter the information "war" launched by CNN, Star Television and Asia Television Network, the BBC and others. As for blocking satellite signals, the answer is that it is neither feasible nor practical.

The Ministry of Information and Broadcasting is also awaiting the early approval of its proposal to amend the Prasar Bharati Act to enable it to implement the Act and perhaps breathe some life into Doordarshan.

While Government of India is still to sort out its policy for licensing the Dish Antennae the Tamilnadu Government (one of the Southern States) had passed a Tamilnadu Exhibition of Film and Television Screen through VCR's (Registration Act) 1984 and got it amended in 1991. The original Act was passed mainly to contain the video piracy menace. This act has now been extended to make it mandatory for Cable TV operations exploiting Satellite TV for commercial purposes to obtain a licence.

When a case was registered by the Tamilnadu Police against a leading Cable Operator, he challenged the same in the court.

In a landmark judgement, Mr. Justice K S. Bakthavatsalam, in his order on the petition filed by Mr. Eknaath, said a conjoint reading of the provisions of Tamilnadu Exhibition of Films on Televisions Screens through Video Cassette Recorders (Regulation Act), 1984, as amended in 1991 and the Indian Telegraph Act, would clearly show that the contention of the petitioner, that the Act would not apply to the system started by the petitioner, could not hold good.

The word "cinematograph" used in the Regulation Act should take in satellite transmission through cable television, the Judge pointed out and said the system envisaged by the petitioner would come within the purview of the Act and it could not be said that the City Police Commissioner had no jurisdiction to control the activities of the petitioner.

The petitioner said he envisaged a scheme for the city and the neighbouring districts providing cable television networks of STAR TV, ATN, CNN and other available satellite TV programmes. There was no prohibition by any law in India preventing satellite transmission through cable television. He said he had to suspend the enrolment of members for the said network as the City Police Commissioner had questioned it saying that the enrolment of members could not be done without obtaining a licence.
The respondents contended that the petitioner's scheme would fall within the ambit of Sec.2 (1A) of the Act. The enrolment of members by the petitioner for the scheme without obtaining a licence would lead to substantial revenue loss.

This case will certainly help the Government of India in formulating its licensing policy for Cable operators.

SOCIAL & CULTURAL IMPACT

The rapidly growing penetration of the Satellite TV, raises the obvious question. How is this powerful audio visual media affecting or influencing our society at different levels? What will be its Socio-cultural impact on the society in the long run and more specifically on the growing generation?

Interesting seminars on the subject were conducted by Indian Institute of Mass Communication Delhi in March 1992 & Nov.92 attended by Media experts and practitioners from India and abroad. At the seminar, findings of a research study conducted by IIMC in Delhi, Calcutta, Bombay, Hyderabad and Cannanore were presented, which showed the following trends:

1. An overwhelming majority of those having satellite cable television facilities watch STAR TV (86%). Only one third (33%) watch CNN and ATN is watched by only 13 per cent.

2. Though exposure is high, regular viewing is not that high. The BBC News and STAR Plus are comparatively more popular with adults and MTV and Prime Sports with the young viewers.

3. Nearly 2/3rd of the viewers perceived that the STAR TV will influence the young in favour of western culture and lifestyle. The availability of 24 hrs. television will adversely affect children's health and their studies.

4. There is a decline in viewership of Doordarshan programmes, after availability of CTV. The decline is to the tune of 10%. About 15% of the CTV owners have stopped viewing Doordarshan serials and about 12 per cent have even stopped watching Doordarshan news completely.

5. The upper middle class in India is increasingly getting hooked to the CTV. Their appetite for more variety of television programmes for information and entertainment has been activated. The viewers in India are impressed by the variety of programmes offered; their production and
packaging qualities. They are shifting from Doordarshan to CTV as audience. But at the same time they are conscious of its undesirable effects on Indian life style and culture.

An earlier study conducted by IJMC in Delhi, probing into the socio-cultural impact of Western Music programmes of MTV found that such programmes have substantial impact on the youth.

It was feared that the younger generation will adapt to Western life style and be more inclined to westernisation, their glamour and emphasis on sex.

The study also showed that a large number, of children watching the programme were being adversely affected. Their reading and other creative activities are being affected. Children also tend to sleep late, affecting their health. They are not able to do their homework. They are less attentive in the class. Besides they have now lost interest in sports activities or picnics as they do not want to miss cable programmes.

Another major impact of Cable TV is that not only Cinema Houses are losing their clientele and are closing down, but the sale of home viewing video cassette is down by 25% to 40%. Many video libraries are closing. Infact, according to a study conducted in Bombay by MARG, a leading research agency, the number of video libraries is expected to be halved in the next nine months. According to the study the number of regular borrowers has declined by 42% the average borrowing frequency has dropped by 50%. And it is the English cassette borrowing which has taken a bigger beating than language cassette borrowings.

As an ironic corollary to the communication revolution, what video pirates once did to cinema, cable and satellite are doing to them. The Cable and video rights holders and distributors are the worst affected. The ongoing controversy, coupled with the chaos on cables, has caused rights prices to plummet.

Another survey by a marketing agency in Bombay and Madras showed that Satellite TV is eating into sleep and work of people.

The survey shows that people in Madras and Bombay with satellite television at home are sleeping less every day. A Madrasi goes to bed 15 minutes later than he used to, and a Bombayite half an hour. A housewife not necessarily in
either of these cities has given up her siesta or 44 minutes of sleep. She has set aside 24 minutes of her cooking-washing-sweeping-swatting time for tele-viewing. Her husband, a lawyer, has given up 24 minutes of sleep, and nine minutes of the time he would have otherwise spent with his wife helping her keep home. Children spend a lesser part of the day with books, 54 minutes to be precise. They have also sacrificed 24 minutes of sleep.

The findings of the survey are more than merely alarming. They point to a trend which set in with the advent of television in this country, which became pronounced when satellites began beaming programmes from across the seas. Men, women and children have been taking very little interest in going out and meeting people. And, when visitors do drop in, they find themselves relegated to the background with the television set enjoying the most favoured status in the drawing room. Conversation stammers, thoughts stutter, and screen images become larger than life. Gone, it seems, are the days when the living room encouraged a healthy exchange of ideas. The ideas still do come, but from the television set, on what is apparently a one-way street.

Sports and reading are the other casualties. Children burdened with an enormous and unimaginative syllabus had very little time to play. Satellite television has taken away even this. The humour of Laurel and Hardy or the excitement of cricket on the small screen has made children keen spectators, not participants. They have forgotten what it is to be out of doors, kicking a ball or handling a bat.

As for reading, there is hardly any time for what is much more than an absorbing pastime. Magazine articles have become shorter, for an average man's attention span has shrunk. He feels restless when he has to wade through the printed word. On the other hand, the flash of visuals is an effortless proposition for him. He need not exercise his mind at all.

This is, in fact, the greatest curse of television and particularly of Satellite-TV in India. It has systematically cut out our thought process. We no longer think about what we see. We do not have to: it is all there in front of us -- the problems, the solutions... Worse, television has robbed us of our ability to imagine, to daydream.

STAR & THE ZEE TV

To help widen its audience base, Star introduced ZEE TV, with entertainment programmes in Hindi aimed at directly attacking Doordarshan, the monolithic National Network.
Just four months into its existence, Zee — which claims to be a totally “fun-oriented” channel — seems to have outpaced even STAR Plus. According to a December survey by Frank Small/IMRB conducted in Bombay, 58 per cent of those who have cable and satellite TV watch Zee, 70 per cent the local cable channel and only 16 per cent tune into STAR Plus (which is not unduly perturbed by these figures since Zee offers competition to Doordarshan). Significantly, over 55 per cent of Zee fans watch it for its Hindi films (and their derivatives). This has been the secret of its success: viewership of Doordarshan’s films and Chitrahaar (film songs) has declined by 8 – 10 per cent because viewers prefer Zee’s films and programmes like Sa Re Ga Ma, Gaane Anjaane.

Zee TV has, in fact, done for fringe stars and small-time directors what Doordarshan had done about six years ago.

Indian advertising is having a difficult time keeping up with recent developments. With companies, especially the bigger ones, reportedly increasing their advertising budgets and the print media trying every editorial and design innovation to hold on to its share in the face of the satellite invasion (with mixed results), fragmented slotting is becoming increasingly popular. Doordarshan, STAR Plus, Prime Sports, Zee TV and even MTV now all fall into the advertiser’s footsteps?

Over the last six months, advertising on the satellite channels has increased quite appreciably: between 50 and 70 Indian companies are now advertising on STAR Channels. What everyone is now looking at is cost efficiency, who delivers the right audience for the least amount.

This is, of course, a little misleading. Guesstimates put Indian advertising revenue on STAR at not more than Rs.6 crore, last year. Contrasted with Doordarshan’s reported Rs.350 crore (1991–92), this is peanuts. Also there are only a few popular programmes — like the soap operas — which enjoy any Indian commercial support. The sudden upswing in Zee’s fortunes is also making agencies rethink their strategies.

DOORDARSHAN RESPONSE

If India has changed the face of satellite TV, STAR TV is transforming Indian television. A year ago they said it didn’t matter, it was no competition — and Doordarshan sat back. Today it is slouching towards change.
With 36 films a month, seven film song programmes and many repeat serials, planned for each week, Doordarshan has clearly taken aim at ZEE TV, perceived as its main rival. And with such English serials as Tandoori Nights and Ossin on the air in prime time slots (9 pm) it is also trying to improve its credentials with the urban Anglophile market and thus, revenge itself upon STAR Plus. And also to increase its revenue from the Rs.350 crore last year. Advertisers, however are not too enthused by the thought of paying good money for re-runs.

Apart from winning back friends and influencing advertisers, this package, introduced recently by Doordarshan, has been necessitated by the lack of goodies in its cupboard. The Doordarshan staffers strike which has plagued the network intermittently since the end of 1992, not only disrupted normal transmission services but also stalled programme production. In spite of the All India Joint Action Council of the Doordarshan Programme Production Staff Associations' promise to return to work, as per their assurance to the Calcutta High Courts, it will still be sometime before production work is fully resumed. With its Central Production Centre going into the entertainment business, we are likely to see more in-house productions by the end of the next three months.

Doordarshan has also decided to allot one hour of its telecast time on Channel II in all the four metros to private parties. The time set aside for this purpose will be from 8 pm to 9 pm daily, in two half-an-hour slots.

The challenge from STAR channels is difficult for Doordarshan, for other considerations as well. The Government has cut budgetary support to Doordarshan by almost half - "So we do have financial constraints, which is why we are trying to generate our own internal resources", says a Ministry of Information and Broadcasting spokesperson —which means advertising — which means going against the spirit of public service broadcasting. And while there are ostensibly no controls on content other than the Central Board of Film Certification guidelines, few people within or without Doordarshan would agree that while STAR TV can show any "fun" programme it can buy, Doordarshan has to ensure everything (almost) is socially meaningful. For instance, sex and violence — STAR attractions — are definitely out, tears and tragedy, are in.

In spite of such handicaps, the lack of credibility and professionalism, as well as charges of corruption, Doordarshan is still far ahead of the competitors. Its nationwide reach and a viewership of over 120 million have
assured it the number one position. With its new get-up and more treats in the offering for the afternoons, Doordarshan hopes to win back a lot of the advertising it feels it has lost to STAR or Zee—and, of course, its recalcitrant viewers.

A NEW BROADCASTING POLICY FOR MEETING THE CHALLENGES

The sudden invasion of the sky by the Satellite TV has certainly jolted the government especially in relation to the Broadcasting policies. A special committee under the chairmanship of Vardan (Varadan Committee) was set up to submit a report on how to face the challenge of foreign Broadcasts via Satellite TV.

The report of the Committee, while stating that no country can afford to sit back passively and let some foreign agency decide what kind of programmes should be broadcast to the people of the country, it also realises that it is neither desirable nor feasible to stop their transmissions or ban their receptions. At the same time it has to guard against the dangers of these channels, in particular situations, falling into the hands of unscrupulous and anti-national elements. The Committee after a careful study of various broadcasting systems, in the world and also based on its discussion with many specialists in the field, have recommended the following set of guidelines:

1. The licence will fully conform to the advertisement codes which are now applicable to All India Radio and Doordarshan and to future modifications therein.

2. News, current affairs and other programmes on this channel will not be such as to offend the religious sentiments of any group.

3. The programmes, including news and current affairs, should not in any way be prejudicial to the sovereignty and integrity of India; security of the state; friendly relations with foreign states; public order; decency or morality or of such nature as will be likely to involve defamation or contempt of court or incite the commission of any offence.

4. The programmes shall conform to the same principles in relation to programme content as may be specified by the Central Government from time to time, in exercise of powers under the provisions of sub-section (2) of section 5R of the Cinematograph Act, 1952.
The Prasar Bharati Act, 1990 contains a provision (sections 14 & 15) regarding the setting up and functioning of the Broadcasting Council. This council shall consider complaints against any particular programme broadcast by the Prasar Bharati Corporation and give its recommendation. The Prasar Bharati Board is to consider these recommendations and take appropriate action.

The Prasar Bharati can also be directed by the Broadcasting Council to broadcast its recommendations with respect to a complaint. These provisions are intended to ensure that a forum for redressal is available to an individual or institution in respect of programmes broadcast by the new channels.

The committee also realises the importance of creating more regional networks. Accordingly it prefers setting up new TV/Radio channels in different parts of the country for regional broadcast. These transmitters, over a period of time, can link up suitably either by forming a consortium or by entering into suitable arrangements amongst themselves. Such a link up would provide an inter-regional network.

The Committee has recommended that a new legislation be enacted to govern the setting up new broadcast channels.

CONCLUSION

Satellite Communication has come to stay in India. With the efforts of the foreign networks to penetrate deeper into the Indian market, the implications are serious. It is also clear that it will not be economical for the foreign networks to telecast programmes specifically catering to the regional and multilingual audiences of the country. It is in this context, that the Govt. of India should try to push many of its new ideas to encourage private channels especially new regional networks and also restructure its programming. It should be done without wasting any more time. If this is done, we can hope to some extent blunt the impact of foreign network on the social and cultural values of the country.

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