

**Video Use In Distance Education :
A South Asian Perspective**

By

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VIDEO USE IN DISTANCE EDUCATION: A SOUTH ASIAN PERSPECTIVE

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In a small town of Andhra Pradesh (one of the larger states in India), the Andhra Pradesh Open University has created a study centre where a student, desiring to obtain a degree, is expected to come and watch video lessons, or listen to an audio cassette designed by a group of instructors sitting several hundred kilometres away in Hyderabad. Although it follows a multimedia approach most of the learning packages continue to be of print material. The Andhra Pradesh Open University in less than five years has grown manifold. From a modest enrolment of 7500 students in 1982, there are more than 55000 students studying in this university - a more than seven times expansion in less than five years. Same kind of expansion has been witnessed at the national level today. Uses of video in distance education must be analysed keeping such a perspective in view.

India is agog with the possibilities of distance education. Technological advances in video technology has further enhanced the South Asian hopes to use mass media on a cost-effective basis for distance education. In the wake of video glare, the educators seem to be blinded to use other means of mass communication like radio and television. It is fairly evident from the way the University Grants Commission (India's highest body for university education) has decided

to invest money in video technology for what is now popularly known as 'country-wide classroom' programme. Of course, it has a history of more than 10 years, when the Government of India, Ministry of Education and Welfare thought of investing more than 20 million Indian rupees for educational technology for the "spread of formal as well as non-formal education, making education relevant to the aspirations and needs of the community and reducing existing disparities between different regions of the country and different sections of the population" (Report of the Task Force on Mass Communication and Educational Technology, 1983: 1).

At present the climate is such that everybody and anybody who matters in the field of communications technology, education and mass media are busy propagating, advocating, recommending, insisting and supporting the use of video technology for solving most of the ills of education at various levels. What does it mean to an average teacher or student? In this race of video introduction for education, nobody seems to be questioning or worrying about the validity and utility of this assumption. What has emerged is, increasing use of video in distance education at various levels within India and in other countries of South Asia in which both hardware and software are largely imported.

In this paper my effort is to document some of the current thinking and uses of video in distance education, within the Indian sub-continent and its future implications. My focus is primarily country specific, because of the limited data availability of other South Asian countries. While doing so I shall try to examine the concept of distance education within the socio-economic and cultural milieu of South Asia. This analysis will focus on the method of video uses highlighting the multiple possibilities of uses of video due to variations in economic and technological developments even within a single country like India. Also built-in structural inequalities will be highlighted to emphasize the capital intensive nature of video use, thereby restricting mass use.

Distance Education : A South Asian Perspective

In November 1986 the Association of Indian Universities and the newly founded Indira Gandhi National Open University organised a National Conference on Distance Education(1) at Gujarat University, Ahmedabad. It was one of the largest congregations of intellectuals and academicians to discuss the 'state of art', 'concept', 'form' and growing need of distance education in India. A large section in the conference was devoted to the 'Role of Media in Distance Education'. In more than one way, this was an earnest effort to bring together a group of professionals to discuss how distance education could be made meaningful, cost-effective, with the help of mass media, especially television both in transmission and non-transmission modes. The use of tele

vision in the non-transmission mode was identified as 'video use' in distance education. Even before I touch the use of video in distance education, it would be worthwhile to discuss the very concept of distance education and its social ramifications in South Asia in general and in India in particular.

It was self-evident from papers and discussions of the November 1986 conference that, the concept of distance education in its contemporary context is a borrowed idea from the Euro-American educational system by the Indian educationists. A review of more than 60 articles presented in the conference and over 130 articles written earlier on distance education reflect the high degree to which the concept of distance education has been borrowed from the Euro-American educational system. It would not be out of place to indicate that the concept of distance education is in opposition to the ancient South Asian and Indian tradition of learning. "Conceptually the learning process is the result of the interaction of the teacher and the taught. In this sense, education is a 1:1 relationship. Should this relationship be physically a near close one? That was the ancient Indian tradition - the Guru-Shishya relationship. And that is also the basis on which all systems of education have been developed." (Adiseshiah 1986: 7). The present education system in South Asia approximates this method of teaching and learning. In spite of formal educational systems imposed during the colonial period, the ancient educational

system continues to play an important role in education.

Distance education has been associated with and has been thought to be 'correspondence education', in which course material is posted to the students who are expected to work and return the answers to the university and are expected to get further guidance if so desired. They are also expected to attend certain number of contact classes. They appear in an examination to obtain a degree. "The popularity of the course is such that the universities which run them make large sums of money (around Rs. 3-4 crores(2) a year) from it. (Adisesiah 1986:8). The additional support provided through radio and television has taken the shape of open university education, consciously borrowed from the model of the Open University, United Kingdom.

The Indian distance education as of today falls between these two forms of distance education though there are some efforts to break away from these two forms, and experiment with innovative methods specially in the area of adult education. In this respect distance education has been thought of "as a pragmatic approach of extending education to the millions of people for whom the word 'school' would remain a distant dream for years to come" (Shah 1986:12). The exponents of distance education have strongly argued that educational needs of the growing population cannot be met through the existing educational system. Hence, there is a need for distance education. This argument is coupled with the view that learning is a life long process and there is a

need for continuous education due to high rate of knowledge obsolescence.

Socio-Cultural Milieu of Distance Education

In the socio-cultural context of South Asia, distance education has turned into a 'class based' education for the 'elite' who are either aspiring to move upwards in the social hierarchy, or have missed the opportunity of acquiring appropriate degrees in the initial attempt. It would be desirable to elaborate this assertion in detail, to support a view which as conceived by the education planners and policy makers is in contrast with the very notion of distance education. According to the existing statistics about two thirds of India's population is illiterate. Little over one third of the population which is literate, not even 5 percent of them can claim to have a degree of any kind (India 1985 1986: 67).

Observations indicate that a large majority of students attending 'correspondence courses' or enrolled in the open university system in India belong to a social class who have already achieved a certain level of economic independence of one kind or the other and are trying for prosperity in which additional educational qualifications would act as a ladder for upward economic climbing. The fruits of distance education are being devoured by this class who are a minority. The open university system which is multiplying very fast in South Asia is also going to be no different from the corres-

pendence courses in spite of the professed policy of providing education to the under-privileged. It is for this reason that there is a very strong argument that, "distance education is not to be seen as a poor relation or a distant cousin of the formal system If the formal system has served the society fruitfully, so does the system of distance education hope to do" (Editor 1986: 2).

In a nation wide study on the video penetration and its socio-cultural implication, some interesting results^{- surfaced} regarding the other uses of video apart from "commercial film" viewing on video(3). A series of questions were asked to video viewers regarding the potentials of video for education and development. These were mostly attitudinal questions to gauge the potentiality to video use in the non-formal, adult, class room and distance education. More than two third of the video viewers considered it to be both as a means of education and entertainment. Similarly about three fourth of the respondents thought that video has high educational potentiality. The respondents also feel that the use of video in educational process will effect teacher-student relationship though there is no hint about direction of this change.

It must be mentioned that none of the respondents had reported that they were students or teachers of distance education nor did the video libraries report having educational video tapes for rental. So while the viewers thought of positive use of video in education, the video libraries did not find

it profitable to rent educational tapes. No doubt there are not many educational programmes on video available for general circulation in South Asia. Its absence in more than one way tells the gap that exists between the belief and reality, though educational programmes were preferred to be viewed on video than in cinema or TV in transmission mode by the respondents. Video has been thought of as a "boon" for Asian and African countries by more than three fourth of the respondents, thereby reflecting a very high degree of acceptability of video as an educational tool.

Use of Video in Distance Education

The theoretical discussion in South Asia centering around the use of video, is no different than what one would have expected in countries like Japan, Canada, United Kingdom, the United States and several other countries of this kind. Video use provides flexibility, learning at convenience, at a pace desired by the learner, and control over the medium. "Not only can the student watch when she wants but as often and with as many pauses or partial replays as necessary" (Brown 1984: 44). The basic assumption in this kind of video use is an inherently individualistic learning approach, emanating from a cultural tradition and a techno-social development of a consumer economy. All these conditions can be fulfilled by a very small elite minority in South Asia, whose transnational connections will help bridge technological gaps, although it puts them on indefinite psychological inferiority and technological dependency.

In a "collective" culture such a technology whether in education or entertainment has a limited role to play until it goes through 'social indigenization' apart from 'technological indigenization'. Adaptation of video as a means for domestic and community entertainment reflects this process. The moot question is whether video would get indigenised for distance education.

The other question is as to who can afford to use video for individual learning in South Asia? The obvious answer is a very small minority. It is precisely this reason that has forced distance educators to think of restrictive uses of video in distance education. The initial example described earlier of Andhra Pradesh Open University indicated that the video has been a multiplier of good teachers for a larger reach. Typically a contact class is like a regular class in which students watch a video programme collectively (Narayana Reddy 1986: 17). In exceptional cases students are able to take video tapes at home for viewing. Efforts have been made to minimise such possibilities by choosing a technical system like U-matic three-quarter video cassette recorder so as the half inch VHS tapes cannot be viewed on this system. Several such methods are being evolved in other institutions of distance education to minimize "misuse" of video cassette recorders.

A little over a million video cassette recorders that are available within India are being used for viewing commercial films on video. Once in a while an educational programme of

foreign origin is also viewed by young children. In several training centres, video viewing is becoming popular among trainees for demonstration purposes. There are reports that some of the private institutions are in the process of acquiring video software from other countries to supplement their technical education programmes. Given the size and number of students, video use in distance education is still negligible.

There are several plans to produce video software in India for distance education. Under the 'country-wide classroom' programme, initially six centres were selected within the university system for the production of video programmes aimed for undergraduate students, in the English language. Since August 1985, twice a day, for an hour, these programmes are telecast through the Indian National Satellite (INSAT) system. The programmes are basically aimed at enriching the students. In the absence of any evaluative study it is difficult to assess the programme effects on the undergraduate students. From the data available of the existing receiving system in the 5000 odd colleges it is clear that the reach is still very limited. The content analysis reflects that a good deal of the programmes telecast so far have been produced outside India, in English speaking countries like England. The analysis of letters received from viewers, show that these programmes are being viewed by unintended target groups like housewives, high school students and working people.

The University Grants Commission is in the process of expanding the country-wide classroom project both in reach and scope by providing to the colleges and by setting up new production centres to stimulate culture specific programme production. In addition the University Grants Commission is initiating the video production 15 course packages. In the production of these programmes there is a great deal of discussion regarding cultural compatibility, reflection of social reality, and value oriented education. Other important projects being initiated by the University Grants Commission are educational television series for preschool children. In all these efforts emphasis is layed on community viewing of video instead of individual viewing.

There are two important issues that must be discussed here relating to the uses of video in distance education. These are mode of transmission of video programmes and the scope of these programmes. The production grammar of these programmes is such that it seems there is no conscious effort on the part of producers to keep in view, whether these programmes would be used in the transmission mode or would they be meant for the individual learners in non-transmission mode. In most cases, it is considered that the same can be used both in the transmission and non-transmission mode. Some serious thinking is required regarding this point. If it is to be used for individual learning then the distribution aspect must be taken into consideration. The existing video libraries may help quick distribution of educational programmes within the

country, which already has a large marketing network. Also, distance education institutions can create systems for individual distribution on the pattern of the circulating library system.

At the moment under the broad heading of enrichment, programmes are telecast without seriously defining the target group or the educational aim of the programme. This has helped throwing a broad net of educational programmes for distance education. But then it is difficult to assess who is really getting the advantage of this effort: are they college students or students enrolled in the distance education programmes or non-students? Only after defining the target group can the scope of the potential user be visualised in order to decide whether a programme should be transmitted or could be used in non-transmission mode.

At the primary education level, efforts are also being made to transmit enrichment programmes for children in the age group of 5-12 years. Also, the teacher training programmes are being carried out in the same way. These programmes are currently transmitted in several Indian languages during the morning hours on school days for classroom viewing. All these programmes are pre-recorded video tapes telecast from a central location on time sharing basis. There is no effort at present to use video programmes in the non-transmission mode for individual children to view these programmes.

In other South Asian countries like Pakistan efforts are

being made through the Open University system for video use in distance education. At the school level use of video seems to be very limited in South Asia. The issue which is hotly discussed in this regard is that until infrastructure facilities are provided, how can higher economic investments be made for video use in distance education.

The Future

A future scenario of the uses of video in distance education is spelt out in the 'Programme of Action, National Policy on Education, 1986' in India. In addition to the on going uses, this action plan envisages to use video in the schools. For this purpose, "The Electronics Trade and Technology Development Corporation (ET&T) has formulated a 'TELETEACH' project to prepare educational software on videotape. VCR's and viewing equipment would be provided in about 600 viewing centres to be established in schools this year. The Ministry has also identified certain subject areas in which educational software would be developed by ET&T" (Programme of Action 1986:181). The action plan also envisages to "provide a dedicated educational TV channel by 1991-92; create a dedicated satellite system for educational needs in the long term; expansion of in-house programme-production facilities curricular support material using non-broadcast methods" (Programme of Action 1986: 181). What it means is that there will be a manifold expansion of video use for education in India in both broadcast and non-

broadcast modes. In the absence of any detailed information about other countries in South Asia, it is not possible to provide similar future scenarios. Moreover, the formation of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) might open up the possibility of similar uses of video for distance education in other South Asian countries. What it seems is that the technological thrust in education is increasing to equalise opportunities for education. My own hunch is that this will increase the gulf of educational opportunities between "educational haves" and "educational have-nots". A conclusion to some is very obvious, but is hidden under the carpet in official discussions among educationists and educational planners. My humble suggestion would be that we must evolve means and methods to ensure that video use in education helps equalise opportunities rather than increase the existing gulf (Agrawal 1986).

Footnotes

(1) For details see the Proceedings of the National Conference on Distance Education, November 9 & 10, 1986 held at Gujarat University, Ahmedabad.

(2) A crore is equivalent to 10 million.

(3) For details, see Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) sponsored study in collaboration with five social scientists entitled "Communication Revolution: Socio-cultural Implications of Video Technology in India." This study was initiated in 1985-86 and is in the process of completion. For this study, samples were drawn from five regions of the country and within each region, respondents were selected from urban and rural areas. The total sample was approximately 750 respondents. Similarly, more than 200 video shopkeepers, librarians and video parlour owners were also interviewed. Some of the trends indicated here are based on the preliminary findings of the study.

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