



## Mapping the rise of Indian television from early to contemporary times

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### ABSTRACT

*Television has remarkably affected our daily lives and is considered as the most versatile, influential and persuasive medium. Television continues to be used the world over as a source of endless entertainment and information and India is no exception. Prior to cable and satellite channels, television in India was represented by Doordarshan. Even today Doordarshan enjoys highest viewership in the country. The paper traces the rise of Indian television from early times when it was started in India for promoting development and the cause of marginalized to the contemporary times.*

**KEYWORDS :** Television, social development, education, growth

### Television in India:

In 1964, Canadian media commentator and theorist Marshall McLuhan, realizing the importance of television, wrote in *Understanding Media*: 'When the three year old sits watching the President's press conference with Dad and Grandad, it illustrates the serious role that television can perform. If we ask what is the role of television in the process of learning, the answer is surely that the TV image, by its stress on participation, participatory dialogue, and depth has brought immense change and information to the changing contemporary society. Television today occupies the central space in every family and television programmes are talked about in every social gathering. Television, therefore, is the most pervasive and most powerful medium available today and can be effectively used for the purpose of education and information.

### Usha Rani (2006) categorized the history of Indian Television in five distinct stages:

"The first stage from 1959 to 1975 covers the introduction, growth and development of television in the initial years. The second stage covers Satellite Instructional Television Experiment (SITE), considered the world's biggest ever Indian experiment with television. The third stage describes TV as a political weapon of the government during emergency, as a result of which the advantage of SITE could not be formulated. The fourth stage, termed as Video Revolution hovers around nineteen eighties, when India moved from black and white to color, cable and new technologies, like video cassette recorders/players, arrived and live telecast of Asian games was done from Delhi with great success. The fifth stage from 1991 onwards, includes the war from the skies and the onslaught of satellite channels. While the live coverage of gulf war by CNN led to a revolution in broadcast journalism, the launch of Star TV in 1991 resulted in the spread of satellite television in Indian cities and towns. This stage also saw the spread of cable in cities, towns and even rural areas adjoining the suburbs". (Rani: 2006, pp. 2-11).

### The First Stage:

People in India saw television for the first time in the International Industries Fair in Delhi in 1955. At the conclusion of the fair, All India Radio purchased the television equipment on concessional rates, from Philips Company. With the UNESCO providing some 70 television sets, the first experimental television service in India began on 15<sup>th</sup> September, 1959 in Delhi. Initially 66 teleclubs were set up for community viewing, some of them located in schools. By 1965 Delhi Doordarshan started its general service; the number of teleclubs by now had grown to 182.

The second television station in India was established at Bombay in 1972 which went on air on 2<sup>nd</sup> October with a documentary titled, "Gandhiji in Bombay". A few months from the launch of Bombay TV station, the third station was also launched on 26<sup>th</sup> January, 1973, at Srinagar in the Kashmir valley. Doordarshan Srinagar also transmitted

two weekly educational programmes on general science for the primary schools. Prior to the launch of communication satellites, which connected various Kendras of Doordarshan across the country, educational programmes of varying nature and duration, were telecast from various stations of Doordarshan in an unorganized manner.

### The Second Stage Krishidarshan:

In 1966 Doordarshan Delhi started agriculture based programme, Krishidarshan at the behest of Dr. Vikram Sarabhai and Prof. R.S.Swaminathan to promote agriculture and rural development by introducing new and scientific methods of farming, besides imparting social and adult education through television. The pilot project was initiated by the Department of Atomic Energy in collaboration with the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting. All India Radio, The Indian Agricultural Research Institute and Delhi Administration. Community sets were installed for group viewing in 80 selected villages. The evaluation report by the NCERT in 1968, indicated significant knowledge gains in farm technology on account of exposure to Krishi Darshan Programme. Vikram Sarabhai, the architect of India's satellite communication experiment, in 1969 presented a paper entitled "Television for Development" at the Society for International Development Conference in New Delhi. The idea that the backward countries can and should tap the most advanced communication technologies including television for leapfrogging into rapid economic growth and social transformation was first presented here.

### SITE:

India was one of the first developing countries to experiment with satellite television, when in 1975-76 it launched Satellite Instructional Television Experiment aimed at social development. Evaluations of SITE showed its operational management, spear headed by officials of the Space Application Centre was commendable. SITE was one of the most extensive educational and social research project ever conducted in mass mediated communication. The effectiveness of TV as a medium for educating the masses in rural areas was emphasized by this experiment. SITE was launched with the help of NASA, UNDP, ITU and UNESCO and Indian Space Research Organization on August 01, 1975 to July 31<sup>st</sup> 1976. Its objectives were to improve rural primary education, provide teacher training, improve agriculture, health and hygiene and nutritional practices and contribute to family planning and national integration. Programs on topics generally considered development oriented like agricultural modernization through hybrid seeds, better farming methods and management, family planning, health, social and educational improvement of women and children, better teaching and learning methods were transmitted through satellite to community TV sets in 2400 villages in 20 districts spread across six Indian states of Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa and Rajasthan. The selected villages prior to this experiment had no access to television. For the programme production three centres were set up at Delhi, Hyderabad and Cuttack which

produced the majority of the programmes. The science programmes, however, were produced by the Developmental Educational Communication Unit (DECU) at Space Application Centre (SAC), Ahmedabad.

The programmes for the rural community covered areas like agriculture, health hygiene, nutrition and family planning. Special instruction programmes for children in the age group of 5-12 were telecast in the morning. Special programmes were also designed and telecast for the in-service teachers for the teaching of science and to help them upgrade their skills to adopt new techniques of teaching. The experiment also provided an opportunity to the social scientists to closely monitor and critically analyze the strengths and weaknesses of television as a tool of social and economic development. SITE was "an unqualified success in terms of hardware but the software wasn't specific enough to the area and the audience in content or language, and therefore was not so useful and comprehensible" (Joshi, 1985, p.32). The important lesson learnt was that the software has to be area specific, relevant to the needs and aspirations of the audience and has to be in the local language (Page and Crawley, 2001; Singhal and Rogers, 2001).

### **Kheda Communication Project:**

Another pioneering experiment in using television for education purposes in India was the Kheda Communication Project (KCP). KCP remains to-date the most innovative experiment in using television for empowerment and participatory rural development. Inspired by the lessons learned from SITE, KCP was a decentralized experiment in community-based television (Kalwachawla & Joshi, 1990). The site chosen for the experiment was Kheda district, an area near the SAC headquarters in Ahmedabad. Kheda district comprises some 1000 villages with over three million inhabitants. In recent decades, it has become a major center for milk production in India, as part of the so-called "White Revolution". The KCP collaborated with extension agencies working in dairying, agriculture, and health services, and with local banks, cooperatives, and employment exchanges. Thus, the development infrastructure in Kheda district was tapped to facilitate the use of information transmitted by the television broadcasts. The project relied heavily on audience research by conducting need assessments of village audiences and by carrying out formative and summative evaluations of Kheda television programs. It promoted rural development and social change at the local level. Audience participation was aggressively encouraged at all levels. Villagers were involved at all levels as actors, writers and visualizers in the production of television programs dealing with such issues as exploitation, caste discrimination, minimum wages, alcoholism, cooperatives and local and national elections. Television serials, puppet shows, folk drama and other popular local formats were used to address issues such as family planning, gender equality, and village sanitation. Chatur Mota (Wise Elder), and Nari Tu Narayani (Woman You Are Powerful), for instance were two popular entertainment-education serials produced by KCP with the active participation of its audience members (Mody, 1991). A campaign approach was followed, synchronizing television programs with local efforts by development agencies. The Kheda Project represented a model of community level decentralized television broadcasting in India. It received the prestigious UNESCO Prize in 1984 for rural communication effectiveness. SAC Ahmedabad produced programmes mostly in local language involving the local people, on agriculture, animal husbandry, poultry, rural development, sanitation, population control, health and hygiene, etc. Agarwal and Malik (1986) concluded, "that TV programmes on agriculture, animal husbandry and poultry raised the viewers level of awareness, created a desire to do new things and made them conscious of the availability of infrastructure, which they could use for their development". The Kheda project, which was successfully run for 10 years, demonstrated that television can be effectively used for development and educational communication. The establishment of Kheda station was a milestone in the history of Indian broadcasting as it was the first full-fledged rural television station devoted exclusively for development and education. Evaluation of Kheda project revealed that women in particular gained knowledge from TV viewing.

### **The Third Stage**

Television broadcasting in India got a fillip in the country once it started launching spree of broadcast satellites in the early 1980's. The launch of INSAT-1A made it possible to link all the Doordarshan stations in national network and allowed people to get direct reception

from satellite through specially designed antenna. This paved the way for the national telecast of programmes from Delhi Doordarshan from 15<sup>th</sup> August 1982. The day also marked the beginning of color television transmission.

### **The Fourth Stage:**

#### **The Rise of Entertainment**

Highly popular television soap operas, beginning with Hum Log (We People) in 1984-85, sparked a programming revolution at Doordarshan. The main lesson learned from this experience was that an indigenous television program could attract and build a large loyal audience over the duration of the serial, generating big profits (Singhal and Rogers, 2001). The advertising carried by Hum Log promoted a new consumer product in India, Maggi 2 -Minute Noodles. The public radically accepted this new consumer product, suggesting the power of television commercials (Singhal and Rogers, 2001).

Hum Log was quickly followed by Buniyaad, a historical soap opera about the partition of British India into India and Pakistan in 1947. In 1987, Ramayana, a Hindu religious epic, attracted smash ratings to be then eclipsed by the phenomenally successfully Mahabharata in 1988-89 (Bhargava, 1987; Bhatia, 1988; Anand Mitra, 1993). In the 1990's, it was serials galore on Doordarshan: big hits included serials such as Shri Krishna, Jai Hanuman, The Sword of Tipu Sultan, The Great Maratha, Shanti, Hum Rahi and Udaan. Advertisers quickly understood the advantages of advertising their products on a medium that reached a huge national audience (Singhal and Rogers, 2001).

### **The Fifth Stage :**

The Gulf war of 1991 (which popularized CNN), and the launching of STAR-TV in the same year by the Whampoa Hutchison Group of Hong Kong, signaled the arrival of private satellite channels in India. In 1992, Zee-TV, a Hindi based satellite entertainment, also began beaming programs to cable television systems in India. When, urban Indians learnt that it was possible to watch the Gulf War on television, they rushed out and bought dishes for their homes. Others turned entrepreneurs and started offering the signal to their neighbours by flinging cable over treetops and verandahs. From the large metros satellite TV delivered via cable moved into smaller towns, spurring the purchase of TV sets and even the up gradation from black & white to colour TVs.

Many cable operators installed large satellite dishes to receive these private satellite channels, and offered them to cable subscribers, greatly multiplying the entertainment options. By 1995, over 12 million households were watching cable and satellite channels; by 2000 the number had risen to over 35 million. Over 200 cable and satellite are available to Indian audiences, including that focuses exclusively on regional language broadcasting like Sun-TV, Eenadu-TV, Udaya-TV, Raj-TV and Asianet (Singhal and Rogers, 2001). Doordarshan a monopoly until the early 1990's had to respond to this challenge from private television networks (S.Rao, 2001). Beginning in 1993, Doordarshan launched a second metro entertainment channel, a sports channel, and a 24 hour news-channel. Faced with audience's growing appetite for entertainment programs and increased competition from private channels, its public service mandate took a back seat, and revenue maximization became the mantra.

### **Contemporary television in India**

The journey of television in India which started for promoting development and serving the cause of the poor and the underprivileged. While some efforts were made to fulfill these brave goals, television also earned the unholly reputation of being a vehicle for government propaganda. Doordarshan – the public service broadcaster was the only available terrestrial network till 1991 when transnational satellite television channels began to make forays into the country. Soon Indian players entered the television industry thereby leading to enormous expansion. Since then, the very nature of Indian broadcasting has changed. Television has transformed from a medium devoted to development communication and the cause of the marginalized, to a true middle-class medium. Contemporary Indian television is divorced from the realities of the 'other half of India that lives in abject poverty and deprivation, thus presenting a distorted view of social reality. P Sainath (2007) says, "The fundamental characteristic of our media is the growing disconnect between mass media and mass reality". That is why India's majority of the population doesn't make

news. The mass media which are funded and controlled by advertisers would remain only to them. As Chomsky and Herman (1994) puts in their propaganda model, five filters-elite ownership, elite funding, (Advertising), elite information sources, elite flak and elite ideology-always control mass media. As a result the media effectively serves elite interests in terms of selection and distribution of topics, framing of issues, disparity in emphasizing, and the filtering of information. Development oriented issues hardly make news. Even the success stories have failed to grab the interests of television channels. There have been some positive developments too with the coming of the private satellite channels with the availability of less biased news and current affairs programming than in the days of Doordarshan monopoly. This led to an improvement in the quality of the televised public sphere though it still leaves much to be desired (Herman and Mc Chesney, 2001; Thomas 2010). The greater concern remains that the public service broadcaster committed to the role of educating and empowering the masses has been done away. Rural India is no longer visible with the onslaught of private television channels. Development is priority issue in the national agenda because millions of people suffer from poverty, corruption, malnutrition, rural underdevelopment etc. Such issues are rarely covered in comparison to sensational and amusement news. Fashion, lifestyle, cricket, celebrity news have become more newsworthy whereas news of rural India and urban poor have been relegated to the background.(Thomas,2010).

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