

Role of Indian television in national development : a critique

Sathya Prakash

Department of Journalism and Mass Communication

Kuvempu University, Shankaraghatta- 577451

Shimoga, Karnataka

Paper Received on: 05/05/2012

Paper Reviewed on: 15/05/2012

Paper Accepted on: 25/05/2012

Abstract

The Indian economy has been growing at a healthy rate in the recent past. In fact India and China are projected as Asian economic giants and emerging super powers of the new century. However, the economic growth story doesn't necessarily translate into inclusive growth of the country and its people as a whole. There is a huge divide between urban and rural class in India. Poverty, hunger, unemployment, human rights violations, atrocities committed on Dalits, minorities and women, farmer suicides, displacement, misplaced priorities in education and health sectors, are some of the burning issues troubling the country. Mass media, especially television channels are expected to act as a catalyst in the process of social development. The responsibility of bringing these issues to the centre stage doesn't rest solely on Doordarshan, but also on private channels. This article presents a critical analysis of the role played by the private television channels in the process of holistic development of the country.

Keywords : *Indian television , national development .*

Introduction: Evolution of Indian Television

Television in India has been in existence for more than four decades now. For the first few years, it spread haltingly and transmission was mainly in black & white. The thinkers and policy makers of the country, which had just been liberated from centuries of colonial rule, frowned upon television, looking on at it as a luxury Indians could do without. In 1955 a Cabinet decision was taken disallowing any foreign investments in print media which has since been followed religiously for nearly half a century. Sales of television sets, as reflected by licenses issued to buyers were just few thousands until 1977.

Television has come to the forefront only in the past two decades and more so in the recent past. There were initially two ignition points: the first in the eighties when colour television was introduced by state-owned broadcaster Doordarshan (DD) timed with the 1982 Asian Games which India hosted. It then proceeded to install transmitters nationwide rapidly for terrestrial broadcasting. In this period no private enterprise was allowed to set up television stations or to transmit television signals.

The second spark came in the early nineties with the broadcast of satellite television by foreign programmers like CNN followed by Star TV and a little later by domestic channels such as Zee TV and Sun TV into Indian homes. DD responded to this satellite television invasion by launching an entertainment and commercially driven channel and introduced entertainment programming on its terrestrial network. This again fuelled the purchase of sets in the hinterlands where cable TV was not available. The initial success of the channels had a snowball effect: more foreign programmers and Indian entrepreneurs flagged off their own versions. From two channels prior to 1991, Indian viewers were exposed to more than 50 channels by 1996.

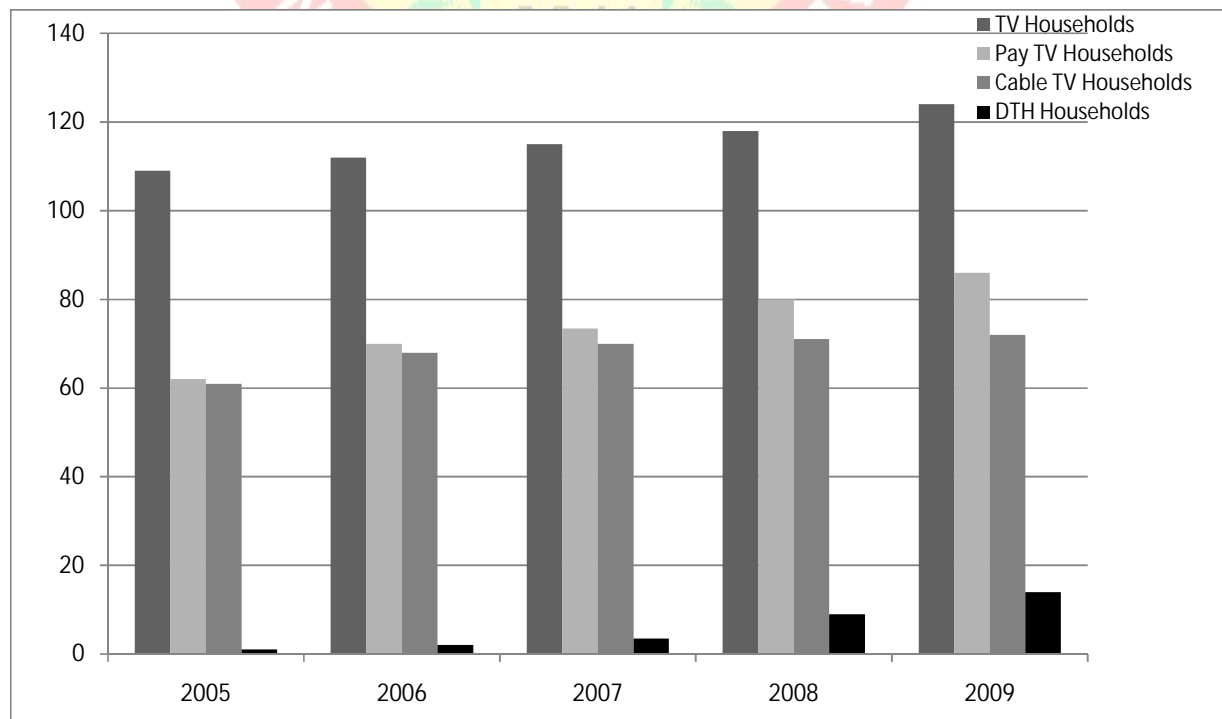
When STAR TV began broadcasting into India in 1992, it was at the vanguard of an influx of transnational television networks trying to tap into one of the world's largest consumer markets. Terrestrial television suddenly paved the way for new technology. STAR's Western programming, bold marketing, and its later ownership by one of the world's largest media conglomerates, Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation, saw the name inextricably linked with the debate surrounding cultural change in India in the 1990s. During this period number of global cable television and satellite television channels, entered the Indian television market, vying for audiences and consumers and bringing with them predominantly western values and aspirations in the cultural commodity form.

Television market has expanded in a much bigger way in the last few years. Television industry in India has gained new momentum due to liberalization and enhanced enthusiasm shown by the broadcasters to seize a huge share of the entertainment and media industry. The number of private satellite TV channels has grown astronomically over the years. At least 394 TV channels were operating by the end of 2009. The number of non-news & current affairs TV channels has grown to 183 and that of news & current affairs TV channels has grown to 211. A number of foreign broadcasters are down linking their channels into India. A total of 67 TV channels, uplinked from abroad, have been permitted registration to be down linked in India during the years 2006-2009.

Recent growth: According to PricewaterhouseCooper’s (PwC) data, the Indian television industry has grown at a rate of 17.4% over the period 2004-08. However, as compared to 2007 when the industry grew at 17.1%, in 2008 the industry has grown at a rate of only 9.3% owing to the economic slowdown. It stands at Rs. 245 billion in 2008.

In 2008, television distribution contributed 61% to the television industry’s revenues. The growth in the distribution industry over the period 2004-08 has been contributed by a 12.4% increase in the subscription (pay) TV homes in the last 4 years. Television advertising industry has grown by 15.1 % over the last four years. PwC observes that this high growth rate has been achieved by the television advertising industry primarily on account of growth of the overall advertising industry, which in turn has benefited significantly from the surging growth in the Indian economy. It stands at an estimated Rs. 84 billion in 2008, which is up from Rs. 78 billion in 2007. Television content segment has maintained a steady and healthy growth rate of 16.5% from 2004-08. Its share in the television industry too has not changed materially and stands at 4% in 2008. In 2008, it stands at an estimated Rs. 10.1 billion in 2007, which is up from Rs. 9.4 billion in 2007. Growth achieved by the television content industry is on account of significant increase in the number of television channels in India.

Growth of TV households in India (households’ figures are in millions)



Source: PwC Entertainment and media outlook- 2010

PwC has projected that the Indian television industry will grow by 12.9 percent over the period 2010-14 and is estimated to reach about Rs. 488 billion in 2014 from the present estimate of Rs. 265 billion in 2009. Driven by increase in subscription revenues, due to growth in DTH subscribers, and proliferation of televisions across households, television industry continued to grow at a healthy rate in 2009. Clearly television is becoming an indispensable part of Indian houses. From being a luxury just a few decades back, it is today considered a necessity.

Television and its social obligations: What does this growth mean to the ordinary readers and viewers of this country? Does this growth help in any way to bring the critical social issues to the public sphere? What does it mean to the poor underclass? Does the mass media which are termed as necessary instruments of development have made any difference to the lives of the neglected communities of the country? Is the mass media performing its duty or catering only to select sections of the public?

Development communication discourses; both top-down and participant theories have contested that the mass media should act as a catalyst in the process of development (Watson 2003: 103-104). The facilitator role of mass media in the process of holistic development is widely acknowledged everywhere. In fact the governments in the third world countries have used the tools of mass media to create awareness about their welfare policies. All said and done, does the media houses, which consider their journalistic practices as business enterprise, commit themselves to reporting the unreported and less reported?

Television and social development- few instances

Consider this example; in a highly popular Indian television soap opera, "Hum log" (We people), a police inspector loses his eyesight in a bomb explosion while attempting to save a child. At the end of the episode, an epilogue by yesteryear film star Ashok Kumar encourages audience members to sign eye donation cards. In the two weeks following the program, some 200,000 people signed eye and organ donation cards, including one youth club member who personally recruited more than 900 donors (Singhal and Rogers 1989). This example clearly brings home the point that television is indeed a powerful medium of social change. By bringing in entertainment and education media strategies, television can be effectively used for social change. In the following paragraphs few more instances are discussed.

Indian media, especially Indian press and Public Service Broadcasting units like *Doordarshan* and *All India Radio* (AIR) have been making important contributions towards social development. In fact some of the stated objectives of Prasar Bharati are as follows:

- Inform freely, truthfully and objectively the citizens of India on all matters of public interest, national and international.
- Provide adequate coverage to the diverse cultures and languages of the various regions of the country through appropriate programmes in the regional languages/dialects.
- Promote social justice, national consciousness, national integration, communal harmony, and the upliftment of women.
- Pay special attention to the fields of education, and spread of literacy, agriculture, rural development, environment, health and family welfare and science and technology.

In spite of troubles like funding and manpower issues bogging down Prasar Bharti, both *Doordarshan* and *AIR* continue to work towards the holistic social development of the country, albeit in a limited manner of their own.

Satellite Instructional Television Experiment (SITE): Both *Doordarshan* and *AIR* have made significant contributions to the cause of social development in India. SITE is one such initiative aimed at social development, which needs a special mention here. SITE is 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. With the help of NASA, UNDP, ITU and UNESCO the Indian Space Research Organisation succeeded in launching SITE on August 01, 1975.

Programs on topics generally considered development oriented like agricultural modernization through hybrid seeds, better farming methods and management, family planning, public health, social and educational improvement of women and children, better learning and teaching methods were transmitted through the satellite to community TV sets in 2,400 villages in 20 districts spread across the six Indian states of Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa and Rajasthan. The experiment ended on July 31, 1976. J V Vilanilam (2003) considers this experiment as one of the important factors contributing to the expansion of TV in India.

As recently as in 2009 NDTV has carried reports about the destruction caused by drought across India. Reports from places like Andhra Pradesh, Jharkand, Assam, and Maharashtra were covered substantially. In 2010, Journalist Ira Dugal has made a very important show on real problems affecting real people of India. Her show the 'Ground Realities' made originally for NDTV Profit, also carried in NDTV 24/7, was one of the most important shows made by television channels in recent times. Subjects like 'Stark reality of Vidharbha region,' 'National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme,' 'rural banking' were included in the show. The series focused on inclusive growth, especially on inclusive financial growth in India.

Television and development: a critical perspective

What do these instances indicate? It only brings home the point that it is possible to use mass media, especially the television, for bringing in social change and inclusive development. It is possible to use mass media for the betterment of the larger neglected communities of the country. It is possible to support people at large to help them gain the benefits of governmental initiatives meant for their welfare. But then why the mass media is not taking up this responsibility? What are the factors that are holding it back?

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 only remain loyal to them. As Chomsky and Herman (1994) puts it in their propaganda model, five filters- elite ownership, elite funding (advertising), elite information sources, elite flak and elite ideology (corporate ideology or consumerism)- 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 editors' attention. The mass media have constructed their own elite news frames and hardly go beyond them. "The education correspondent, for example, is largely looking at campuses, neglecting primary education. The labour correspondent has made way for the corporate affairs correspondent." (Sainath 2009).

In the market place of ideas, if a media organisation doesn't accord due respect to its audience and their sensibilities, there is every possibility of it getting drowned in the market. The laissez faire business model doesn't necessarily guarantee them a safe place in the market. Unfortunately the media have failed to understand this plain truth. If the mass media doesn't understand its social responsibility, it may lose its credibility as the Fourth Estate of democracy.

Instead of covering the issues of social importance, the mainstream media have been chronicling India's so called economic success story. The mass media, which is expected to act as a catalyst in the process of development, seems to have forgotten their role and looks contented with their vertical and horizontal growth, thereby ignoring the larger part of the population living in the countryside. The media organisations have been focusing mainly on increasing advertising revenues and showing little concern towards social problems. Television audience measurement (TAM) figures have been touted by these media organisations to attract advertisers. Profiteering by hook or crook has now become a well accepted model in the media business. Newer players have been entering the media business to grab their chunk from the advertisers. And this is leading to growth in the media industry.

It is not that the mass media is filled with people who believe only in profit making. The mainstream Indian media (mostly in print media) also possess a committed bunch of journalists, working tirelessly for the betterment of the people by covering issues like farmers' suicides, water crisis, famine, displacements etc., Although their number is lesser, they have been able to bring some of these neglected issues to the forefront. 2007 Magsaysay award recipient P Sainath from *The Hindu* for instance, has been writing extensively about the problems of rural India. There are other important journalists and writers like Kalpana Sharma, Ammu Joseph, Harsh Mander, Arundhati Roy, Mahasweta Devi, just to name a few, have been advocating and arguing for inclusive growth.

Conclusion

There is clearly a big gap between urban elites and rural masses in the country. Issues like lack of healthcare and education facilities, farming crisis, displacement, human rights violations, atrocities against women and children, increasing crimes against SCs and STs, and the like are crying for attention. The mainstream visual media is shying away from the big

responsibility of focusing on such real issues. Instead, they have been unabashedly praising of reforms and so called high growth rate of the economy.

For media to play its distinguished role as a catalyst in the process of development and social change, it needs to be free of the marketing forces and propaganda machinery Chomsky and Herman talks about. In a developing country like India, it's time that the mass media understands its responsibility and work towards the goal of inclusive growth. The onus is on the big and powerful news media houses to provide a sizeable media space for development issues and to motivate the affected people to participate and express their opinions on their own affairs; hitherto decided by the establishment.

Besides acting as a catalyst in the developmental process, the visual news media can always keep an eye on the implementation of welfare policies. There are a huge number of audiences for such initiatives too; Doordarshan's SITE experiment is a valid case in point. It would be rather naive of marketing strategists of television news channels to forego developmental stories. After all their number is quite huge than the elite class who feature in the stories of television channels. But unfortunately, so long as mainstream media remains in the grip of the advertisers, it will be difficult for even genuinely concerned media houses to venture into this 'hard' terrain.

Reference:

Herman, E S, and Noam Chomsky (1994): *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*, (London: Vintage).

McQuail, Denis (2000): *McQuails Mass Communication Theory (fourth edition)*, (London: Sage).

Ninan, S. (1995): *Through the magic window: television and change in India*, (New Delhi: Penguin).

PricewaterhouseCoopers (2009): Report on Indian entertainment and media industry 2008 (Mumbai: Pricewaterhousecoopers).

PricewaterhouseCoopers (2011): Report on Indian entertainment and media industry 2011 (Mumbai: Pricewaterhousecoopers).

Sainath P (2007): Three part article on farmers' suicides, *The Hindu*, 13, 14 and 15 November.

Sainath, P (2009): 'The medium, message and the money,' *The Hindu*, 26 October.

- Singhal, A., and E. M. Rogers** (1989). Prosocial television for development in India. In R. E. Rice and C. K. Atkin, eds., *Public Communication Campaigns*, 331-50. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Singhal, A, and E. M. Rogers** (1988). Television soap operas for development in India. *Gazette* 41:109-26.
- Singhal, A, and E. M. Rogers** (forthcoming). *Entertainment-education*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Singhal, A, E. M. Rogers and W. J. Brown** (1993). Harnessing the potential of entertainment education telenovelas. *Gazette* 51: 1-18.
- Suroor, Hasan** (2009): 'Stop marketing India as a brand, says historian,' *The Hindu*, 24 September.
- Vilanilam J V** (2003) Growth and development of mass communication in India, New Delhi: National Book Trust of India.
- Vilanilam J V** (2005): *Mass Communication in India: a sociological perspective*. (New Delhi: Sage).
- Watson, James, D** (2003): *Media Communication: An Introduction to Theory and Process* (second edition), (London: Palgrave Macmillan).

