

From Nehru to Modi: Understanding the History of Indian Television Through a Post-Development Lens

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Abstract: *Digital India, the government's flagship programme, at first glance is a radical departure from the past and a welcome step forward to digitise the country's faltering infrastructure. However, as this chapter argues, seen through a post-development lens, the launch of Digital India can also be seen as a continuation of past governmental policies that hark back to the era of India's first Prime Minister and the continuation of such programmes thereafter, policies which used the medium of mass media ostensibly as a tool for development but ultimately as a mechanism of control. From the beginnings of television history in India and tracing its growth, this chapter shows that the policies of the present government, has its echoes in the past and development is still the rhetoric used to control the country's increasing population.*

Keywords: *Television, India, Digitisation, Post-Development*

I. INTRODUCTION

The banner photographs on the Digital India website [1] runs several images of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. On one, he is seen with a mild, wry smile, concentrating on a tablet screen. In another, he is standing beside a robot, his right hand tentatively extended towards the yet non-sentient. Almost sage like, Mr Modi appears next staring full frontal at the viewer; beside the image are texts extolling the virtues of technology. The current Indian Prime Minister and his government have chosen to own the initiative of digitising India, a process which was started prior to when the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) first came to power. Perhaps less advertently, the images hark back to another, not-so-glorious aspect of a previous government. In the 1980s, Door darshan, the state-run India television channel, earned the moniker 'Rajivdarshan', a reference to the continuous onslaught of images of the then Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi, that the viewer was faced each time the television set with its limited programming was switched on. At first glance this might appear a forced comparison. But, as this chapter will argue, Prime Minister Modi's images on the Digital India website and the evoking of a past era of Indian television is consistent with how media, especially television, was introduced in the country – as a tool for development – and emerged and remains as a mechanism of control.

Using a post development critique, I argue that the story of Indian television - from the initial US aided broadcasts in New Delhi in 1960 to its mammoth digitisation programme today - should be viewed as a form of imperial control; first, by the United States and its agenda of development [2], and then, by New Delhi, which sought to maintain control of states, both near and peripheral. A brief period of anarchy and possibilities in the 1990s with the coming of cable television (see Batabyal, 2011 [3]) threatened to usurp New Delhi's grip on the airwaves but this rebellion was subdued by a global quest for technological harmonisation that culminates in the Digital India programme. Before making this seemingly acrobatic jump from India's television history to US led imperialism, the theoretical premise of the paper needs to be clarified. For this, I largely rely on post development thinkers, and in particular, an influential volume originally published in 1992 and reprinted in 2010, Sachs' *The Development Dictionary* [4]. Distilled, the argument is this: development, as it is understood today, was an invention by the United States government to establish a global political and ideological hegemony in the post war era. At the end of World War II, the United States was a formidable and incessant productive machine, unprecedented in history. It was undisputedly at the centre of the world. It was the master. All the institutions created in those years recognized that fact: even the United Nations Charter echoed the United States Constitution. But the Americans wanted something more. They needed to make entirely explicit their new position in the world. And they wanted to consolidate that hegemony and make it permanent. For these purposes, they conceived a political campaign on a global scale that clearly bore their seal. They even conceived an appropriate emblem to identify the campaign. And they carefully chose the opportunity to launch both – 20th January, 1949. That very day, the day on which President Truman took office, a new era was opened for the world – the era of development. (Esteva, 2010 p 1, in Sachs 2014 [4]) In his inaugural speech, delivered at the Capitol on January 20, 1949, President Truman said: "We must embark on a bold new program for making the benefits of our scientific advances and industrial progress available for the improvement and growth of underdeveloped areas. The old imperialism – exploitation for foreign profit – has no place in our plans. What we envisage is a program of development based on the concepts of democratic fair dealing." [5] The American idea of development was neither democratic nor fair but it has had an extraordinary hold over the intellectual and political landscape. "Like a towering lighthouse guiding sailors towards the coast," development stood as the idea "which oriented emerging nations in their journey through post-war history.

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No matter whether democracies or dictatorships, the countries of the South proclaimed development as their primary aspiration, after they had been freed from colonial subordination.” (Sachs, 2010, p xv [4])

How did the development paradigm take hold over the entire world? How did it come to have such an unshakeable grip over the intellectual landscape of the 20th century, and despite its many recorded failings – from bankrupt countries to augmenting climate change – why does it continue to dominate both the Global North and South?

An often under-appreciated partner to the edifice of development, both economic and political, was what we generally understand as mass media, radio and television being the two primary examples along with cinema and newspapers. In his 1964 work, *Mass Media and National Development*, Schramm, one of the principal missionaries of Truman’s Four Point doctrine, elaborates on its appeal: “One reason is that more people know about the problems. Vastly extended communication has made the situation clear. Roads have come to villages. Automobiles have taken people over the roads. Jet airplanes have connected nations and cities. Mass media have reached down from cities to the villages. In many ways, therefore, the men and women in the villages have been able to compare their standard with that of the economically developed states. It is hardly possible any longer to take refuge in the comforting idea that “everyone probably has the same problem we have.” The gap between the have and the have-not peoples is too wide to ignore.” (Schramm 1964, pg 86 [6])

Without the media, as Schramm states, there would have been no development; it certainly wouldn’t have become the ‘towering lighthouse guiding sailors towards the coast’, and the first generation of development communication was dominated by modernisation theories which assumed that the underlying problems of traditional societies could not be solved by economic assistance alone and needed to change beliefs and ideas. The only viable and cost-effective way to do this was employ mass media to the cause; soon it would become the high priest of development, becoming more successful than what the founding fathers might have ever envisaged. From the ruling elites to ordinary citizens, broadcast radio and later, television, carried the message of President Truman, wrapped up in shiny packages - educational programmes and documentaries, soap operas and documentary films – across the seas and entered, through airwaves, the centres and peripheries of the Global South. Viewed in this light, it is no coincidence, therefore, that in 1960, it was a Ford Foundation grant that gave the initial push to an emerging television scene in India. This linkage is important in our argument. Both the Ford and the Rockefeller Foundation has been long implicated in supporting US imperialist designs around the world. [7] The idea behind the Ford Foundation grant was not only to spread the use of fertilisers to Indian farmers but also to imbibe in viewers, over time, that India was an underdeveloped country. In the next two decades, as American and European soap operas and, sometimes, movies, would creep into the living rooms, Indian viewers were shown what the developed world looks like. Televised images allowed both for realisation of ‘underdevelopment’ and the aspiration to ‘develop’ with the West as the model. Writing a decade ago, I divided the

history of Indian television into three broad phases. ‘The first phase, from 1960 until the 1980s, saw the employment of television as a socio-economic educational project for villagers in India (Thomas 2005: 99 [8]), and later as a state propaganda tool for nation-building. In the second phase, through the 1980s, the state retained control of the airwaves but allowed commercial engagement with the private sector, legitimising entertainment as a viable ambition of television content. In the third era, post liberalisation, the state ceded control of the medium, which in the hands of the private sector saw an astonishing growth that has shown no signs of abating.’ (Batabyal 2012, Pg 34 [9]) The state, however, has fought back and the years of anarchy has ended with the harmonisation of digital services under a flagship programme termed Digital India. It was launched on July 1st, 2015, by the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, with a catchy slogan: ‘the power to empower.’ [10]

This continuation of the development paradigm is no accident; embedded into Digital India is the ability to centrally control and monitor the airwaves and the digital space and the programme has been mired in numerous legal challenges from human rights to privacy activists and organisations. The present Prime Minister and his party have been both blamed and applauded for the top-down approach to the digitisation programme but, whatever else their faults have been, the BJP and Mr Modi were by no means the primary architects of a centralised platform that sought to control the national airwaves. Nor were they the first to run into dissent.

II. POST-INDEPENDENCE INDIA: THE CONTEXT OF TELEVISION’S ENTRY

The point of entry to any story is significant. [11] A decontextualised entry into the early days of television in India would be a folly. The choices made by the nation’s leaders had long term consequences. However, it also needs acknowledging that they were made in response to a particular set of circumstances. India’s Independence from the British came at an enormous cost. “When the British quit India in 1947, they left behind an economy scarred by two centuries of policies that aimed to put the empire first.” (Corbridge, 2009 [12]) The country was partitioned into two unequal halves and a blood bath followed. Fifteen million people were uprooted and “between one and two million were dead.” [13] The economic situation was dire (see Dreze and Sen, 2013 [14]). From being one of the richest countries in the world pre-colonisation, India now was one of the poorest. Illiteracy, dogma and religious division were rife. In 1959, during the 32nd annual conference of the Indian Economic Association, Dr Rao, summed up the post-Independence situation thus: ‘And so, we have had during the last 27 months an Independent India, with her economy weakened by war, handicapped by partition, and sorely tired by the political and economic aftermath of partition; nevertheless we have found those in charge of this economy struggling to deal not only with these problems, but also to deal simultaneously with the more permanent problems of underdevelopment and economic injustice.’ [15]



The father of India's Constitution, Dr Ambedkar, and the country's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru had decided "that the social and economic modernisation of India would have to be secured by vigorous planned action emanating from New Delhi. Conservative politicians sitting in the states would be disciplined by wiser and more far-sighted men sitting in the country's capital. Modernisation was conceived as a diffusion process wherein great pulses of social and economic change-ultimately liberating and uplifting, if often disruptive of established ways of life in the short run- would push outwards from India's major cities to its smallest towns before reaching into the countryside." [16] (Corbridge, 2009 [12]) While acknowledging the circumstances the country's leaders were handed down, it is also worth noting that the route of centralised planning and heavy industries was not what India's most revered rebel would have wanted. M K Gandhi had expressly warned against the Western model of development and industrialisation which he forewarned would be both exploitative and extractive and would lead to the climate and ecological catastrophe we face today.

'It was in October 1926- that Mohandas Gandhi already sensed the impasse of development. In one of his columns for Young India, the mouthpiece of the Indian independence movement, he wrote: God forbid that India should ever take to industrialisation after the manner of the West. The economic imperialism of a single tiny island kingdom (England) is today keeping the world in chains. If an entire nation of 300 million took to similar economic exploitation, it would strip the world bare like locusts.' (Sachs, 2010 [4]) By the 1960s, the folly of large scale, top heavy industrialisation was becoming apparent. 'In a country where 75 per cent of the population lived in the countryside – agriculture's share of the GDP was as high as 58 per cent in 1950 and not much less than 50 per cent in the 1960s – it made little sense to waste capital on inefficient urban and industrial projects. (Corbridge, 2009 [12]). It had 'pitted rich against poor: logging companies against hill villagers, dam builders against forest tribal communities, multinationals deploying trawlers against traditional fisherfolk in small boats'. (Guha, R and Martinez-Alier, J., 1998 [17]) However, just as President Truman would find an ally in mass media, India's nascent press, too, was solidly behind Nehru. The reasons for this were not necessarily the grandiosity of the Nehruvian vision but more the historical process of India's independence struggle. By the beginnings of the 20th century, as the independence movement in the country took hold, a nascent but political vernacular press was already shaping mass opinion around the country. This press got behind the main opposition party, the Congress, as it rallied against colonial rule and, when in 1947, India got its freedom and the Congress took power, the press remained a loyal ally. The opposition had become the state, but the media's oppositional role was still a few years away. Nehru was a charismatic leader who, despite the turbulence of the post-independence period had managed to keep dissent largely under control. Soviet aided and Soviet style centralised development projects abounded in the first decade of Indian independence. Yet, because of a pliant press and centralised broadcasting, the havoc that was being caused throughout rural India was under recorded. Urban India remained oblivious to the deforestation, the flooding of villages, and the upending of

lives of hundreds of thousands of their country people. "Nehru died before the crisis...was fully exposed and before the suspension of planning in 1966-69." (Corbridge, 2009 [12]) With his death in 1964, that imperial control of Delhi started to be tested. The repercussions of industrialization and development became visible and a more experienced and rebellious press started to voice concern. It is in the above context that we need to understand the beginnings of television in India. Very much like the process of modernisation and industrialisation, from its inception, Nehru wanted centralised control over broadcasting, first radio and later television (Shitak, 2011 [18]). His daughter, and later, Prime Minister of India, adhered even more rigorously (and more coercively) to her father's policy. There were moments, in the first two decades of television history which, where more imaginative leaders might have led the country towards a more democratic broadcasting regime. But, even if she had considered it, political precariousness would prevent Mrs Gandhi's from experimenting with broadcasting and those tiny sputters would soon die out. Political happenings in Delhi and television policy would go closely hand in hand, which, as I will show, continues to be the case in the present day.

III. TELEVISION BEGINNINGS

It began in the capital. In 1959, after an exhibition in New Delhi, the multinational electronic company, Philips, had left behind some equipment and All India Radio (AIR) used this equipment to put together a broadcast for 'tele-clubs' in and around the Indian capital (Mehta 2008: 29 [19]). A year later, in January 1960, in collaboration with the Delhi Directorate of Education, AIR begun producing a one-hour educational programme meant for students in higher secondary schools. In that same month, the Ford Foundation sent a team of experts who granted the Government of India \$564,000 towards developing more such educational programmes.

'General television services were launched with one-hour daily transmissions from Delhi on the eighteenth anniversary of Indian independence, August 15, 1965. Although entertainment and informational programming was introduced as part of the 'General Service', the proclaimed goal of television broadcasting in India was educational, and programming emphasised issues such as adult literacy and rural development. General Service consisted of a ten-minute 'News Round Up' mostly read by an on-screen presenter in a format developed for All India Radio. (Kumar 2006: 27 [20])

"In its early years, apart from being used as an educational tool, television was also misused as a mouthpiece for the central government and the party in power. Programming was primarily in Hindi and much of the news and current affairs focussed on Delhi – the seat of political power (Shitak, 2011 [21]) Such misuse of the airwaves met with opposition from the states. The Chief Minister of West Bengal, Jyoti Basu, voiced his concerns regarding under-representation in television programming controlled by central bureaucrats in the 1970s, just as New Delhi had begun the process of building transmission towers in Bengal.

'The authorities seem to forget that India is a federal polity, with its multi-racial, multi-lingual and multi-cultural components,' he wrote, citing the disquiet that was also being felt in the South. (Page and Crawley 2001: 63 [22]). Also, the promotion of Hindi as the national language and promoted through television programming ran into problems, evoking political agitations in Chennai in the early 1970s (Kumar 2006: 29 [20]). In 1975 the Satellite Instructional Television Experiment (SITE) was launched to broadcast educational messages through satellite to 2400 villages in the six states of Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Bihar, Orissa, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh (the role of satellites in India's later television revolution will be taken up subsequently). And, in June of that year, the Allahabad High Court ruled that the Prime Minister had violated election laws and would have to forfeit her seat in Parliament. Mrs Gandhi's appeal in Supreme Court did not get her desired outcome and she responded by declaring Emergency in the country. Press freedoms were curtailed and broadcasting came further under the centre's control. "In the sphere of broadcasting, though SITE was successful in terms of hardware, the non-specificity of software (content) held back its usefulness which was to improve rural primary education, provide teacher training, improve agriculture, health and hygiene, and nutritional practices and contribute to family planning and national integration (Singhal and Rogers, 2001 [23]). 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." (Shitak, 2011 [24])

In response to this, the Kheda Communication Project (KCP) was launched in 1976 and was one of the early success stories of Indian television and had the political situation been more conducive, its effects might have been replicated further. Initially known as Pij TV, it used a one-kilowatt transmitter and could be received in a radius of about 30 km from Pij village (Agrawal and Raghaviah, 2006 [25]). Some 650 community television sets were provided to 400 villages and installed in public places. One of the reasons for the success of the KCP was its ability to tap into the existing development infrastructure of Kheda district. It collaborated with extension agencies working in dairying, agriculture and health services, with local banks, co-operatives and employment exchanges (Singhal and Rogers, 2001 [26]). The focus was on participatory programme making, the themes were often local, dared to deal with controversial subjects such as caste discrimination, alcoholism etc., and for the first time systemic audience research was carried out (Thomas, 2010 [27]). It was India's first effort at decentralised community television broadcasting and received the prestigious UNESCO-IPDC prize for rural communication effectiveness. KCP was a remarkable breakaway from India's state controlled media. And, perhaps because of this, perhaps because of the political situation – Emergency was still underway – the experiment remained just that – isolated from mainstream project of centralised controlled broadcasting. In 1977, when democracy was finally restored and Mrs Gandhi lost the general elections, the Janata government formed the Verghese Committee to free up the broadcast media, both television and radio, from governmental controls. However, its report "Akash Bharati" could not take off as the government lost majority soon after and Mrs Gandhi and her

party came back to power.[28] Politics and broadcast regulations, I reiterate, goes hand in hand in India. It was a more confident Mrs Gandhi that seized back control of Indian democracy and the early 80's of Indian history showcases confident nationalism, the hosting of the 1982 Asian Games in New Delhi being the showpiece.

IV. MODERNISING AND COLOUR: RAJIVDARSHAN

The often told story of the rise of television in India during the 1980s is this: the noble development goals are shunned and TV falls prey to commercial interests. In this particular narrative, a black and white world emerges to colour; the grainy footage of 16 mm documentaries transcribed for television is relegated to the status of reminisces by aging parents as children of a golden age are numbed by the idiot box or enlightened and entertained by it, depending on the narrator. The poor farmer and his family are relegated to obscurity and television is claimed by the surging middle class in metro cities. The numbers, too, reflect this narrative: from 41 TV sets in 1959, the 2 million mark was crossed in 1982 (Mehta, 2008, p 43 [29]). 'In 1983, potential coverage for Doordarshan grew from 23 percent to 70 percent of the population...' (Kumar 2006, pg 32 [20]) Most importantly, the development of two indigenous satellites, Insat-1A and Insat-IB 'allowed a massive expansion of television through a gradual build-up of low power transmitters that could pick up television signals bounced off satellites.' (Mehta pg 39 [30]) Alongside these technological advances, came the 1982 Asian Games. 'Thanks to Doordarshan's coverage of the Asian Games, the relatively small but significantly powerful middle class in India, which had little to associate with the early developmental agenda of television, had their first taste of continuous entertainment programming-that too in colour.' (Kumar 2006, pg 31 [20]) In December 1982, after the success of telecasting the Asian Games, the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting in India set up a Working Group "to prepare a software plan for Doordarshan, taking into consideration the main objectives of television and assisting in the process of social and economic development of the country and to act as an effective medium for providing information, education and entertainment." "...the recommendations of the Joshi committee emphasised the need for software planning in the creation of an "Indian" personality for television..." (Kumar 2006, p 31 [20]) Interestingly, the programme that heralded in 'entertainment' into television programming while creating this "Indian personality" was very much based on the development model of communication, a concept of programming developed in Latin America. The DD of Doordarshan, Bhaskar Ghose, in his autobiography writes: Early in the 1980s, David Poindexter, president of a US-based NGO called Population Communications International, brought to the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting the idea of using soap operas to communicate social messages subliminally. The then secretary, S. S. Gill, was interested and Poindexter was able to bring in Miguel Sabido, a pioneering producer of soap operas in Mexico who had used them successfully to carry out messages about family planning.



Why this started in Mexico isn't difficult to explain. In a predominantly Roman Catholic country like Mexico, family planning in any form is frowned upon; advocating it on television is out of the question. Nevertheless, concern over the high rate of population growth led to the idea of using soap operas to convey, very subtly, messages about the benefits of small families, the misery that afflicts large families living on a small income, the better quality of care received by children in small families and so on. Nothing overt, just ideas woven into the storylines of what were otherwise turgid family dramas. (Ghose 2005: 33 [31]) The first such 'turgid family drama' was Hum Log which 'signalled a new era of commercialisation on Indian television, as Doordarshan entered into a contract with Food Specialities Limited, the Indian subsidiary of Nestle. To sponsor the production of the serial. Under this arrangement, Food Specialities agreed to pay for the production costs of Hum Log in return for the rights to nationally advertise its product-Maggi Two-Minute Noodles-during, before and after each episode...The sales of Maggi noodles increased from none in 1982 to 1600 tons in 1983, 4,200 tons in 1985, 10,000 tons in 1990 and 15000 tons in 1998.' (Kumar 2006, pg 3 [20]) The success of Maggi noodles brings us to the second part of the mid-80s, where commercialisation starts paving the way for the 'invasion from the skies' that would mark the 90s. Here, two theoretical tropes must be kept in mind. One, following Benedict Anderson, is how the media shapes national consciousness and second, how, the development paradigm, especially its media component, used television to imagine nationhood in the post-colonial world. (see Anderson, 1996 [32]) Arjun Appadurai, building on the work of Anderson, has argued that a link can be found between the rise of electronic media and a post-national imaginary (1996: 22 [33]). In the mid-80's, India had a young, modernising Prime Minister in Rajiv Gandhi and Doordarshan was hooked on commercials. But television had to "balance a public discourse that repeatedly emphasised the need for programmes harnessed to the modernist project of national development." (Mehta, p 42 [34]) In his influential work that connected Doordarshan's national programming to the rise of the Hindu rightwing and the success of the BJP, Rajagopal refers to "an emergent category of software in Indian television drawing upon mythological and historical sources, and portraying an idealised past above and beyond latter day divisions." (Rajagopal, 2001, pg 1 [35]). Rajagopal's argument is that the emergence of Doordarshan's national programming as a pan-Indian genre was "crucial for the post colonial project of nation building." (Kumar 2006, pg 35 [20]) While this imagination of the nation has been quite rightly seen as harbinger to the rise of militant Hindu nationalism, the Rajiv Gandhi led Congress government continued to use Doordarshan as the "government's 'advertising agency.'" (Mehta, p 46 [36]) Mehta makes a distinction between "entertainment and current affairs programming. While both had to conform to state's objectives and were subject to bureaucratic control, news was seen to have a direct bearing on politics and control over it was overwhelming." (ibid [37]) With the constant telecasting of Rajiv Gandhi's face on television, Doordarshan, in the late eighties, earned the derogatory nickname, Rajivdarshan. In her recent book, Amrita Shah, writes on how carefully the state broadcaster

was used by the Prime Minister's team to craft and build his image. 'His foreign visits, where he impressed hosts and the media with his charm and easy manner, were awarded saturation coverage to score brownie points with the home audience. And special care was taken in the presentation of Rajiv's visits to the backward areas of the country. In 1985, the prime minister visited places such as Rajasthan and Silent Valley in Kerala to get a first-hand account of the problems faced by the underprivileged. In each case, eight hours of film was whittled down to create a half hour programme that showed Rajiv chatting with local people, sympathising with their problems and pulling up errant government officials. The films were edited, not by ham-fisted hacks at Doordarshan but by the minister's own secretariat. The unprecedented sight of a prime minister castigating his own officers combined with the scenic locations of his visits made these programmes primetime stuff.' (Shah, p 86 [38]) But, however carefully crafted Mr Gandhi's image was on news programming, the "entertainment" programmes had mass appeal and their nationalist overtones were appropriated "to promote its political ideology of Hindutva as the dharmic duty of every man, woman, and family in the national community." (Kumar 2006, p 42 [20]) In the General elections of 1989, despite "the use of state owned media like Doordarshan to promote Rajiv Gandhi's image, the Congress party was defeated..." (ibid [20]) and a fledgling Janata Party came to power.

V. THE 90S AND ECONOMIC LIBERALISATION

The explosion of content and the liberalisation of the media market in India and in much of Asia from the early 90s cannot be seen in isolation. "In the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet bloc, free trade and the free flow of information became the dominant philosophies of the late twentieth century, with the United States the chief protagonist of both. Economic barriers tumbled, state control of the public sector was rolled back and liberalisation opened up world trade on market terms." (Page and Crawley, pg 21 [39]) However, conditions within India for the unprecedented privatisation and explosion of television services was coincidentally contingent and, again, reflective of the political situation of that period. In the general elections of 1989, the incumbent Congress party lost power and a coalition of parties came together to form the Janata Dal (JD) and the next government. JD's efforts to rid the airwaves of state control, a key part of their manifesto, led to the passing of the Prasar Bharati Bill in 1990, but with their ouster, a new coalition of parties – the United Front (UF) - came to the centre. Propped up by the Congress, the UF made no effort to implement the provisions of the bill and it was quietly abandoned. (See Ganguly and Ganguly, 1990 [40]) With the assassination of former PM Rajiv Gandhi in 1991, the Congress, on the back of a huge wave of sympathy vote, came back to power. But it was no longer the near-uninterrupted dynastic rule that India had known since her independence and the new Prime Minister, P V Narasimha Rao, while a canny politician, did not have the political mandate of the Gandhis.



From Nehru to Modi: Understanding the History of Indian Television Through a Post-Development Lens

Not only this, India's dire dollar reserve situation meant that trade barriers had to be lifted and the IMF swooped in to make 'structural adjustments' that would open up a previously shuttered economy. "Economic reforms introduced at that time opened up a very large new market for foreign capital and consumer goods, which quickly attracted multinational interest. ... All this seemed highly improbable in the 1970s and 1980s, when India's close relationship with the Soviet Union set the tone for many of its foreign and economic policies." (Page and Crawley, pg 73 [41])

The loosening of trade barriers and India's commitment to structural reforms certainly helped the growth of satellite television but it needs reiterating here that it was done on the back of communication technology committed to an erstwhile ideology, that of development. In 1969, Vikram Sarabhai, the architect of India's satellite communication programme, had presented a paper entitled "Television for Development" at the Society for International Development Conference in New Delhi. That underdeveloped countries should tap the most advanced communication technologies including television for leapfrogging into rapid economic growth and social transformation was first presented here and as Page and Crawley note "India's earlier satellite programme makes it misleading to date the 'satellite revolution' in South Asia to the beginning of the 1990. Before the international satellite invasion hit India, over 90 per cent of the country was covered by satellite-fed terrestrial signals. This was a formidable infrastructure." (ibid, pg 75 [42]) The Gulf War of 1991 and CNN's broadcast of it into Indian homes 'heralded a new era of international television...but it took other agents to transform the broadcasting environment in South Asia. The first was the AsiaSat-1 satellite- the first Asia-specific satellite available for broadcasting in the region. Second, the entertainment oriented schedules proved to be a highly attractive contrast to programming on the national TV networks. The third key element was the cable system created to meet local demand for the new satellite service. (ibid, 76 [43]) AsiaSat-1 was owned by the Chinese entrepreneur Li Ka-Shing who operated out of Hong Kong and his company, Hutchison Whampoa 'provided the catalyst for the South Asian region in the form of Star TV. India had not been meant as a central target; the 'phenomenal success of Star in winning an audience in India was a surprise to Star's own managers' (Kumar, 2006, pg 77, [20]). Within six months, however, India was Star's biggest market, with soap operas like *The Bold and the Beautiful* and *Santa Barbara* becoming household names. At this stage, Star targeted only the English-speaking elite; there were still millions lying in wait beyond the language barrier. Star's success with English-language channels demonstrated the enormous potential for private television in India, and the possibilities that might exist for regional-language broadcasting. Private channels like Zee TV responded quickly: beamed through AsiaSat 1, Zee soon became an international player in its own right. Regional channels with language-specific audiences sprang up across the country. By the late 1990s, channels like Eenadu TV and Sun TV in south India had established dedicated audience bases. (Batabyal, p 42 [44]) For as long as was possible, the government at the Centre while being "invested in relaxing several government restrictions on private business operating in the television industry in order

to boost the sagging Indian economy, ...paid little attention to the question of providing autonomy to the electronic media." (Kumar 2006, pg 44 [20]) Again, it was more events that led to a landmark court judgement in 1995 than government policies on broadcasting. It happened over a cricket tournament, the Hero Cup for which the rights had been sold to a private company. The government held that Doordarshan had exclusive rights for broadcasting within in India and instructed the government-owned telecommunications provider to deny up-linking facilities to TWI. The government was taken to court and, while an interim order allowed Doordarshan to telecast the tournament, the Indian Supreme Court, which subsequently took the matter up ruled that the 'airwaves are public property that must be used in ways that ensure the expression of a plurality of views and diversity of opinions...' (ibid [20])

The Ministry of Information and Broadcasting's hands were forced with this ruling of the apex court and the Sengupta committee was tasked to suggest revisions to the dormant Prasar Bharati Act. It was again an unstable political situation with the government at the centre switching hands between various coalitions when the act was finally passed into law in 1997 that enshrined Doordarshan as an autonomous organisation, if not totally free of government oversight. The rise of private television channels in India after the 1990s, the flourishing of a several billion US dollar industry, the advertising and the content boom has been much recorded in books, newspapers and journal papers and does not need detailed entailing here. However, our point of concern, governmental control over airwaves, plays out interestingly after 1997 and shows that the much maligned (and rightly so) Congress government wasn't the only one who sought to keep an iron hand over broadcasting, albeit in the guise of development and social justice. 'By the end of the 1990s, it became amply clear that the nationalist ambivalence toward granting complete autonomy to broadcasting transcended political ideologies, as three successive governments, led by the centrist Congress Party, the left wing Janata Dal, and the right wing BJP, all chose to ignore the core recommendations of the Supreme Court's landmark decision.' (Kumar 2006, pg 49 [20]) But the play of private channels and the rise of vernacular television destabilised the carefully controlled domination of the central government. The late Jyoti Basu's lament of central domination had frayed, not owing to government policies, but technology and global happenings. From the north-east of India to the south, from east to west, hundreds of television news channels, each with their own models of propaganda and desire to garner high ratings served up content very far removed from the days of Rajiv Darshan and Doordarshan. Unable to control the media, pilloried for corruption, the Congress lost the elections and a BJP led coalition came to the Centre in 2014.

VI. THE ERA OF NARENDRA MODI

The new government at the centre had learnt lessons from the 'mistakes' of the earlier one. Within a year of his ascendancy, on July 1, 2015,



Prime Minister Narendra Modi launched Digital India, a flagship programme which, according to its website, aimed to ‘transform India into a digitally empowered society and knowledge economy.’ With a catchy slogan: “the power to empower”— the Digital India program focuses on three key vision areas: (1) the development of digital infrastructure as a public utility, (2) the electronic delivery of services and software on demand, and (3) the digital empowerment of citizens in all walks of life. (Kumar, 2019, pg 54 [20])

To achieve this, writes Kumar, “governments at the central and state levels along with corporate media industries are devoting considerable resources to digitize the nation’s aging media infrastructure...” (ibid [20]) There are two things of interest for us here; one is the continuation of the development rhetoric as key policy— development of digital infrastructure as a public utility, digital empowerment of citizens in all walks of life, and the second is the cooption of the corporate media by the government. The BJP led government understood both the necessity for control over the media and airwaves to win elections and remain in power and the impossibility of the government alone to secure it in the digital age where the movement of information is rhizomatic. It co-opted the private media into the ‘developmental rhetoric’. But, as always, the story behind Digital India lies elsewhere, in the policies of earlier governments and global forces that shape national politics. “...digitization must be understood in relation to the international politics and policies of “harmonization” being promoted by supranational organizations like the ITU and being aggressively implemented in television and other allied industries by member countries like India.” (Kumar, 2019, pg 59 [45]) What is ITU and what indeed is harmonisation? The ITU, today a part of the UN, carries with it the legacies of development politics though its history stretches much further back to 1865, making it one of the world’s oldest Intergovernmental organisations (IGO). “It has evolved with imperial, colonial and capitalist expansion of vital transborder communication networks. (Yeo S, 2022 [46])

Today, ITU is responsible for the future of the internet, including critical standard-setting and 5G regulatory activities. These activities have particular potential for impact in the developing world.[47] And because of its potential impact, the ITU is deeply embedded in global geo-politics and power wrangling with its own former policy chief calling it the “most failed body in the history of international telecommunications.” [48] But whatever its criticisms, its recommendations on spectrum allocation, because spectrum is a limited resource, matter. “Member states are held accountable for implementing the terms of the resolutions and reporting to the ITU on progress. They are also implemented through technical standards and practices of private industry. ITU regulations matter; they determine what type of access to information you have when you open an internet browser or how much you pay for Netflix.” [49] And, this is where harmonisation comes in. “Harmonization refers to an internationally coordinated process of digitizing a range of public and private infrastructures of life in order to maximize the benefits of broadcasting and new media technologies around the world. (Kumar, 2019, pg 60 [45]) According to the ITU, television is at the heart of a new global experiment of harmonization that is now under way

to reap the benefits of a “digital dividend” around the world. (ibid) ITU defines the concept of digital dividend “as the amount of spectrum made available by the transition of terrestrial television broadcasting from analogue to digital.”[50] This digital dividend, the report further states ‘may be used by broadcasting services (e.g. provision of more programmes, high definition, 3D or mobile television). It may also be used by other services, such as the mobile service, in a frequency band which could be shared with broadcasting (e.g. for short range mobile devices, such as wireless microphones used in theatres or during public events). It may also be used in a distinct, harmonized frequency band to enable ubiquitous service provision, universally compatible equipment and international roaming (e.g. for International Mobile Telecommunications, IMT).’ [45] So, how has this digital dividend been used in India as television transitioned from analog to digital? “While the tech-savvy Modi is being hailed by his supporters as a visionary for championing the cause of Digital India, the reality is that governmental agenda for digitization in India has a long history. It emerged in the 1990s through the discourse of e-governance on the Internet, and through the establishment of the National e-governance plan in 2006. There were 31 mission projects in the e-governance plan in areas ranging from agriculture, land records, health, education, passports, police, courts, municipal records, taxes, and so on. Many of these projects have been implemented in full or in part in the past decade, and others—such as e-Kranti 2.0—are being modified and translated to reflect the Modi government’s current priorities for Digital India. (Kumar, 2019, pg 61 [45]). Retaining control, regaining control, and extending control, all through the prism of that much used term: development. The goals of harmonization in Digital India are most prominently visible in the controversial government-sponsored project called India Stack. ‘Sometimes described as Aadhaar 2.0, India Stack builds on the unique identification number system called Aadhaar being implemented across the nation by the government of India... The Aadhaar numbers are stored in a centralized database and linked to demographic and biometric information such as photographs, ten fingerprints, and iris scans of every individual with a UID number.’ (ibid, 65 [45]). Aadhaar’s design and security has been criticised on privacy and security grounds, including the permanent and irrevocable consequences of having one’s fingerprints compromised in the event of a breach. India’s Supreme Court, quashing several petitions challenging the legality of Aadhaar, has now ruled affirmatively on its validity and made it mandatory for welfare recipients. Massive databases offer governments a tool for tracking and surveillance of their citizens. In India, the government can access Aadhaar records for ‘national security’ purposes – an undefined term under the law that is open to expansive interpretation and potential abuse. In the private sector, national identifiers like Aadhaar can facilitate linking databases together, generating a profile of a person’s financial, travel, employment and social media activities.

From Nehru to Modi: Understanding the History of Indian Television Through a Post-Development Lens

In addition to raising personal privacy concerns, such profiles can be used to make decisions about who gets credit or is hired, but without protections that would enable data subjects to access and correct their information. A critic of the Aadhar programme, Padmanabhan writes “Innovation and creative re-engineering are pivotal to the well-being of people and advancement of nation states. Developing nations, with fewer legacy systems in place, provide greater avenues for technology enabled change, and India is no exception. However, for innovation to achieve its intended outcome, important background conditions such as training and guidance to think up creative solutions, a wider ecosystem to finance and incentivize innovation, and a state willing to take chances, as well as promote private entrepreneurship, are required. Unfortunately, post-independent India subscribed to an economic philosophy where the state assumed central authority to decide the allocation of resources and the direction and scale of private sector activity.” (2016 [51])

VII. CONCLUSION

The generally understood story of Indian television is this: television begun as a model for development and nation building in the 1960s; it started losing its way somewhere in the mid 1980’s and, by the time the economy was opened a decade later, Indian television had completely abandoned its earlier lofty goals and become a medium solely for entertainment. Opening this narrative to a post-development critique helps in, first, taking out the ‘loftiness’ behind development and, second, look at Indian television history, not in an isolated manner, but as part of larger global politics. If the project of development was about imperial control and broadcast media was its closest ally, then it follows that television was used for similar purposes in India. The grand Nehruvian notion of nation building had, written into the script, a decisive, strong centre from where peripheries could be managed. Indian television history adheres, like an obedient student, to this script. The effects of development had a backlash the world over- bankrupt countries, ecological devastation and, of course, the spread of American hegemony; in India, too, the effects became visible through the 1970s and 1980s as protests from the peripheries (the Narmada Bachao Andolan, the Chipko movement), punctured the vision of a benevolent central leadership guiding the nation towards prosperity through industrial progress. Reality refused to bend to a state-controlled television narrative and, by the 90s, when a strangled economy was forced open by a IMF led restructuring, a weakened central government could no longer control the media narrative. From a lone government controlled television channel, a miraculous burst of innovation and creativity, with a backing of market forces, led to a proliferation of television channels; several hundreds, in every state and region of the nation. The original centre crumpled and multiple centres with their own peripheries sprang up. Critics of the present Indian government (I am one of them) have been vociferous and unanimous: the BJP and its allies, by methods foul, have taken over the media. Major television channels and media houses are owned by acolytes of the government, the state run nationalist ideology dominates most news narratives. As this chapter has shown,

it is not at all unlike how Doordarshan had performed in previous decades under a strong Congress government. Seen in this light, Mr Modi’s vision for Digital India, is a continuing model straight out of India’s first Prime Minister’s rulebook. What the development doctrine and the Ford Foundation once did for Indian television, the UN mandated ITU legalises for India. There is, however, one big difference between Mr Nehru’s India and the one that Mr Modi inhabits: digital technology. Digital technology gives the current government control of people’s lives unimaginable in democracies of the last century. We should be wary.

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understand the information and then interpret it for their fellow citizens to be able to cope with. Here, the 'disruption of the established ways of life' would be easier for cities to cope with before it can travel towards hinterlands.

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