Professions of faith: Hindu nationalism, television and the avatars of capital.

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Televising Identity, Framing Difference

Global mass culture is dominated by the modern means of cultural production, it is dominated by all the ways in which the visual and graphic arts have entered directly into the reconstitution of popular life, of entertainment and of leisure. It is dominated by television and film... its epitomy is in all of those forms of mass communication of which one might think of satellite television as the prime example.1

As elaborated earlier, television is framed here in the context of questions of control, ownership, and programming. The social function of mass media, television in particular, provides the conceptual link between the above three aspects. Choosing this particular perspective in analyzing developments in the field of television, besides reframing TV outside the textual analysis of specific programming, relates television to the field of politics and economy. Statecraft as the instrument for the realization of social development, and politics as the broader realm within which the former operates are inter-related spheres of practice which are mutually influenced by the shifts in television. Given this interested point of entry into writing the history of television, the provisos attached to the politics of historiography elaborated in the previous chapter obtain here with equal force.

At its inception in 1959, television in India was understood as a vital tool for the state’s efforts at development. An experimental TV station was set up in New Delhi broadcasting to 180 “teleclubs” to whom TV sets were donated from Phillips with financial backing from a UNESCO grant. This fore-runner to educational TV (ETV) was aimed primarily at school children in the Delhi area, but also targeted farmers in the surrounding rural hinterland. These twin objectives of India’s very first step into TV broadcasting – firstly, the education of farmers in improved techniques for agricultural production, and secondly, facilitating higher education, signaled the close connection envisaged between TV as a medium for social change and development and the role of the state in facilitating this process. The link between autonomy, the state and media is obvious. That is, just as some form of economic autonomy was an important part of economic planning, this same autonomy was to be boosted by improving the intellectual resources of the country (education being the starting point) and improving the level of agricultural productivity. This is just one point of overlap between the general priorities of economic planning and the development of television.

That the objectives of television at its inception have chequered histories has more to do with their faulty implementation and lack of broader support than any wrong-headedness in conceptualizing television as a public resource. Following the 1959 broadcasting programme, a greater emphasis on agriculture was implemented.

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through the inauguration of a new television service, Krishi Darshan in 1967, whose aims included the dissemination of advances in farming technology and agricultural inputs, cultural programming for rural audiences and health issues. The Krishi Darshan project for farmers was largely ineffective because some of the basic infrastructural support required for farmers to carry out the improvements in production they were informed of by TV were lacking. Secondly, the elitist nature of the programming, whose paternalist tone of "experts" educating the ignorant alienated its audience and undercut its effectiveness. This latter fault was a structural limitation of the fact that those who had access to, and the requisite cultural and symbolic capital to produce programming were beneficiaries of the stratified structure of Indian society, while their audience lacked the kind of bargaining power to influence the production of programming.

The failure of Krishi Darshan thus has clear links to the general distribution of power relations in society, and was not a narrowly "technical" issue. It emphasized that although the vision of television as resource of social development was appropriate, the kinds of social relations that existed at that point in time precluded its efficient implementation. The faulty execution of an otherwise laudable aim was also linked to the hegemony of a specific form of communications "science" that provided the theoretical basis for such programmes. The now-discredited work of theorists like Wilbur Schramm, Daniel Lerner and "development" theorists like Everett Rogers, is marked by the exclusion of broader relational understandings of the social environment in which "development" was to be effected, a holistic understanding of the different political, economic and cultural issues which affected both production, transmission and reception of programming to target audiences. Whether the failures of this model are accidental or related to the political economy of global media is a highly charged political issue.

It is worth signaling this here, since theorizing in communications science has had an important impact in terms of justifying or critiquing the global media environment. Herbert Schiller, for example, has strongly argued that the convergence between a particular model of communications, such as Schramm and Lerner, and the expansionist plans of the U.S. in terms of the capitalist road to development through mass media, were not entirely innocent. This form of "input" dissemination, where a target audience is selected, and the appropriate message produced and transmitted to them by "experts" formed the basis of early development communication. This model was largely ineffective in terms of changing audience behaviour for the reasons mentioned above. However, it did restrict what "development" and "modernization" would come to mean, and the Green Revolution is the most dramatic example of this model of high-external input development. The role of media in thus effecting a particular form of externally-dependent development is evident, and thus must modulate the supposed "social function" of TV. That is, it is not enough simply to laud TV when used for "development", but the form which this "development" takes must be interrogated within the broader social formation it seeks to transform.

To think of the field of economics as occupying a homologous relationship with that of television entails the following comparison: just as the policy of "national autonomy" was not necessarily misplaced, since the existing power-imbalance in

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3 Herbert Schiller, *Culture, Inc.*
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terms particularly of the bargaining power of the national bourgeoisie precluded any economic policies aimed at significantly reducing social inequality, in the field of television, the relatively weak position of the target audience of much “development television” vis-à-vis the intellectual and bureaucratic elite in the Information and Broadcasting (I&B) ministry disallowed an efficient implementation of the salutary vision of television as social resource. (The I&B ministry is just one site through which the state’s relationship with global capital is mediated, where U.S. pressure was translated through the kind of externally-dependent high-input development).

Reading the archive of television history in terms of its “field relationship” with the sphere of economics, and more importantly that of social power generally enables a reflexive sociology of cultural production to frame the effectiveness of television in terms of its internal and external relationships to other elements without reducing it to narrowly technocratic or professional factors of ineffective goal implementation on the one hand, or a reflectionist paradigm of unidirectional cause-effect relationships on the other. As already indicated above, there was a particular geo-political dimension to the social function envisaged for television. Read from a global, or specifically U.S. perspective, the post-war economic interests of the country depended very much on the creation of markets and the re-structuring of “developing” economies. For example, the domestic market for fertilizers and chemical pesticides produced by U.S. companies had been almost saturated and “developing” countries, particularly largely agricultural ones were an attractive potential income-generating resource for multinationals. In this context, the development programme aimed at Indian national autonomy through television broadcasting acquires a specific geo-political dimension which interrogates and undercuts what autonomy itself signifies. The high-input externally oriented model of agricultural modernization thus is the site where the aim of national autonomy cannot be disentangled from the global political economy of mass-mediated “development.” This theoretical (and political) framing of the politics of the latter acquires its clearest articulation in the field of satellite broadcasting in the 1960s, and would come to animate debates around global media into the 90s.

The aim of social change through the use of modern technology in media received a further boost through the Indo-US agreement for the use of the U.S. satellite AT-6 in the Satellite Instructional Television Experiment (SITE) in 1969. Operationalized in mid-1975, SITE’s goals included agricultural modernization, family planning, public health, women’s social development and children’s development. Besides the technological reliance on U.S. satellite technology, transnational involvement included the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the International Telecommunications Union (ITU), and UNESCO. Once again, the limited success of this experiment has much to do with the illiteracy and the enormous linguistic and cultural diversity of its target audience and the limitations of software formulated by elites. Part of the SITE programme included the Kheda project, which provided groundbreaking insights into some of the failures of the larger programme. These included the necessity for a participatory relationship between audience and programmers which brought to the fore uncomfortable questions around the structural power-relations in communication and development, involving inadequate land reform, vested interests of the rural bourgeoisie and local wage structures.

A number of conclusions are worth drawing from the above example. It instantiates the already-mentioned point about the limitations in the model of “development”

communication. Further, it illustrates the presence of foreign organisations, both commercial and governmental, in TV programming. This presence is justified on the basis of the aim of “partnership in development”. That is, the India/West relationship here not only pre-exists the 1990 western “satellite invasion”, but its aim is quite clearly that of development and social justice. That these laudable aims were ineffectively implemented is a consequence of both the model of “development communication” and the broader socio-economic and political structures whose unequal power-relations hindered substantial reductions in inequality. (Interestingly, as will be seen later, with the collapse of the ideology of state autonomy, secularism and “Nehruvian socialism” in the 1990s, these same goals of development, it was to be argued, would best be served through the free-market, government deregulation, the retreat of the state and the use of MNCs in spurring “development” through mass consumption and its facilitation through private television).

SWITCHING CHANNELS

Ten years on, the accumulating contradictions of effecting development through television triggered protest in many circles.

1) Doordarshan has succumbed to the ‘role of the handmaiden of the vested commercial/consumerist interest.’

2) ‘The nature, direction, and pattern of the Communication Revolution [is] determined by the emerging elites in urban and rural India which are vigorously trying to divert the immense possibilities of the communication technology into narrow channels, directed by their narrow interests and their ambition of apeing the lifestyle of the elite in western affluent societies.’

3) ‘The greed of the new middle class [gets] precedence over the basic needs of the masses.’

4) Many development programmes ‘are produced within the studio, often with urban men in rural garb,’ thus promoting an urban view of rural problems.  

What changes precipitated this depressing picture of the state of Indian television? Some of the criticisms are familiar. The elitist programming aimed at rural audiences has already been signaled above. What is striking is the criticism aimed at the middle class, the role of television in promoting consumerism and the influence of affluent Western countries in lifestyle programming. A consideration of the control and ownership aspects of television are particularly pertinent to this shift.

Doordarshan (DD), the name given to the state television broadcasting network, came into being as a separate branch of the Information and Broadcasting Ministry (I&B), in 1976. Prior to that, television and radio broadcasting were subsumed under All India Radio (AIR) under the jurisdiction of the I&B ministry. Programming guidelines for DD are laid down by parliament to whom it is answerable, and government control of DD’s financial structure is the clearest mechanism through which it is regulated. DD’s representativeness is thus actually compromised by the power of the ruling parties which form the executive although on paper it is answerable to the entire parliament.

Till 1997, DD was financed by the Consolidated Fund of India, in which all government revenues are combined. The implications are obvious. Shifts in the state’s dif-

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Different revenue items have an impact on the volume of funding available for broadcasting, and thus broader economic shifts in the country register themselves through a series of mediations in the field of television. After 1977, a separate government fund was created for the consolidation of DD’s revenues, although the same relationship with the state’s revenue pool obtained. Hence, debates around programming policy cannot be separated from the political economy of the state. Till 1976, funding for DD came from the sale of television licenses and the annual budget. In the same year, DD went commercial in a small way (licenses were later abolished as advertising revenue skyrocketed), allowing advertisers to buy 15 to 30 second spots, and through sponsoring entire programs.

What are the implications of the above relationship between the state, economic solvency and DD’s operations? Firstly, it is clear that under state control, DD’s programming guidelines were directly influenced by the central government. Secondly, the financial dependence of DD on the state proved both an effective mechanism for control (reward and punishment), and further, linked the effectiveness of DD to both the political machinations of the ruling party and the economic solvency of the state exchequer. The political economy of TV as a state institution thus cannot be emphasized enough. The turn to advertising revenue in 1976, thirdly, was both the upshot of financial scarcity at the state level, and the coincident relative rise in power of the bourgeois elite in government whose bargaining power in favour of commercialization was boosted by financial scarcity.

The first limnings of the particular class inflection of the state/media relationship become visible in this relationship between economic trouble and broadcasting policy over funding. The decision to go commercial was not without its critics. The lessons learned from the largely unsuccessful attempts of translating the state’s stated goal of autonomous development through TV broadcasting had been studied by the government-appointed Joshi Committee working group which warned that “[F]or a poor country determined on building a self-reliant and growing economy there is no alternative to the path of underplaying conspicuous consumption and emphasizing austerity or ‘voluntary poverty’ by the elite. The software planner has to play an important role in preventing the identification of development with the pursuit of affluence. The Communication Revolution can either be promoter of the elite-oriented path of development or the ally of the mass-oriented path. Indeed in fundamental terms the elite-oriented path is not at all a path of national self-reliance and integration; it is a path of developing enclaves of affluence in a poverty-stricken society.”

The prescience of the report in foreseeing what has now become an accurate description of TV’s social function is appreciable. Whatever one’s hesitations in subscribing to an elite/mass dichotomy, the fact remains that the turn toward commercialization has led precisely to the sequestration of the aim of social justice to a discourse of the now-discredited policy of state control of media (itself dependent on an interested refusal to interrogate the class composition of the state). The opposition posed between elite-oriented and mass-oriented development is particularly telling, given that in the present climate of the hegemony of the discourse of capitalist globalization, this opposition is inverted so that “mass-oriented” development, it is argued, can best be effected by elite-oriented growth, through the ideology of consumerism. Parenthetically, it is worth remarking on the coincidence between this inversion of the

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model of facilitating development through the social function of television, and that of economic development elaborated on in the preceding chapter. The trickle-down theory of economics is now expanded to the field of television, with the matching argument that this is best effected through the retreat of the state and the dominance of private interests.

The role of entertainment acquires particular importance in this discourse of elite-influenced development in the sphere of television. “Development” was translated in the field of television from the genre of staid, official pedagogic documentary programming (e.g. SITE) to that of “light entertainment” such as soap opera. It was argued (with some truth to it) that government programming alienated audiences with its elitist and boring format, while entertainment genres like soap opera were a more suitable medium for translating high audience involvement into attitudinal change through embedding “public service” messages in the entertainment format. Following the experience of Brazilian soap operas in effecting attitudinal change, DD began broadcasting Hum Log in 1984 for seventeen months in 1984-5. This saga of a middle-class joint family was originally formulated as the vehicle for promoting family planning, though after 13 episodes, following audience research the message was toned down and the status of women, family harmony (!) and national integration were emphasized.

A study by Everett Rogers and Arvind Singhal concluded that the audience had absorbed the message of the soap opera (like women’s equality) to a high degree. The significance of such a finding is questionable on many counts, including the problems of translating this message in actual practice given the sedimented patriarchal social relations (which ironically often get translated in terms of “family harmony”). Further, they also found that the targeting of particular characters in the family to particular audience segments often failed which might confirm the “active audience” school of media studies but further complicates justifications of soap opera as a pedagogic tool for social change wrapped in attractive garb. On the other hand, the Family Planning Commission whose idea the soap opera was in the first place complained at how diffused and diluted the central message of the programme had become.

What is indisputable is the marketing success of Maggi Noodles (a subsidiary of Nestlé) whose launch coincided with their sponsorship of Hum Log, and was hailed as a phenomenal success by the Indian Market Research group (IMRB), a subsidiary of Hindustan Thompson Associates, a multinational ad agency, whose research showed the highest ratings for the show in Bombay and Delhi, particularly among the lower and middle-rungs of the urban middle-classes. Ironically, while the effectiveness of the “public service” function of the soap was questionable at best, the use of television for commercial advertising of consumer goods proved a phenomenal success with advertisers having to wait up to 10 months at times for commercial slots, and advertising agencies themselves taking up production of serials. Arvind Rajagopal argues that “The most dramatic result of Hum Log was not the promotion of women’s status, or of family harmony, but the sale of FSl’s Maggi two-minute noodles, a novel food item in most Indian homes...”

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9 Quoted in Keval Kumar, Mass Communication in India, Bombay: Jaico 1995, pp.100-102.
10 The Lintas advertising agency produced detective serial “Karamchand”, for example. See Keval Kumar, Mass Communication, p.102.
The experience of *Hum Log* has at least two effects, cautioning against the optimistic justification for the shift from “information” to “entertainment”, and signaling the rising power of commercial and middle class interests in TV broadcasting. The democratic potential of popular culture in enriching citizenship participation through “low culture” art forms like televised soap operas is being argued for lately. While these investigations are at an early stage, and worth signaling as potential interventions in the study of TV’s social function, the experience of Indian television till now clearly illustrates that the commercial pressure on TV has eroded its social function and boosted consumerism among the middle class in urban areas. The inversion of the state-(social justice) development-TV model into commercialization- (consumerism) development – TV can be signaled by the above example, where through the genre of soap opera on TV, the supposed greater effectiveness of entertainment formats are used by private interests as justification for commercialization to an increasingly financially-insolvent state. It was this trend which led to the criticism of DD in the long quote above.

In this regard Praful Bidwai’s observation is partly pertinent. Writing in the year *Hum Log* completed its successful run (at least for Nestlé in marketing terms), he argued TV is fast becoming...the mainspring or transmission belt of a new form of commercial culture spanning several different activities and areas-from theatre, music, dance and films to quizzes, sports, political commentary, wild life and tourism. It is indisputable that TV is today at the centre of organized production of culture in this country...it is increasingly defining what culture is, certainly what its commercially viable or saleable forms are...A new kind of culture has emerged... a commodity culture... based on a blurring if not obliteration, of the distinction between ‘high culture’ and ‘mass or bazaar culture’, the profound and the profane... The temptation to dismiss Bidwai’s observation as a remnant of Frankfurt School mass culture theory (TV as the pre-eminent shaper of mass consciousness) must be modulated by a recognition of two insights: the inescapable fact that commercial viability translates what constitutes “culture” in terms of market considerations; the “obliteration” (hybridization might be more accurate) of the high/low culture distinction is a function of how “culture” gets defined within a complex network of socio-economic and political relationships, sited at the level of the state, DD, commercial interests (producers and advertisers) and audiences.

The increasing influence of commercial interests in television broadcasting must be situated within the expansion and technological developments in the field, which...
provided both the condition of possibility for its marketing potential and the limitations which had to be overcome through greater reliance on private funding. In a period of merely ten years (1976-86), the number of transmitters rose from a mere 8 to 179, expanding audience access from 2.9 to 52.5 million. By 1996, the number of transmitters approximately numbers 700 with access to 85 per cent of the population and a geographical footprint of 67 per cent of the country. One of the signal achievements in this period of two decades was the introduction of colour, in a hurriedly set up exercise prior to the holding of the Asian Games in 1982. Besides this, the use of satellite and video technology to facilitate live broadcasting and daily highlights to an estimated 100 million strong global audience marked a significant leap in the technological capabilities of DD. As many commentators have noted, this remarkable feat was predominantly spurred by the desire to project an image of India as a modern, technologically-sophisticated country which could host a major world sporting event. The PR dimension of global broadcasting was thus central to the technological leap managed by DD.

During this period of expansion, the structure of broadcasting diversified to coalesce around a three-tier system of national, regional and local programming. This structure instantiates the need for using television to harness the widely differing audience demographics of the country by catering to both local interests and promoting a composite national culture. This pedagogic function of TV and its stratification through the broadcasting structure will be approached below. The national programme began transmission in 1982, "in order to present, what DD claimed, a correct national picture and perspective of India's cultural heritage and diverse thinking." Its twin-language reliance (Hindi and English) proved to be one of its major limitations, and this problem and others were sought to be addressed by the expansion to the regions, through state-level broadcasting, which linked all the transmitters in each state to the transmitter in the state capital, itself linked to the national network. The regional broadcasting system was the vital node through which both local programming in the regional language and the national programme could be aired. At the local level, the metropolitan centres like Bombay, Delhi, Madras and Calcutta, particularly the urban elites were targeted by the Local Service, which through satellite uplinking is now called Channel II, the Metro or Entertainment Channel. It is worth remarking here, of the coincidence between genre/function (entertainment) and audience (urban elites) at the local broadcasting tier.

The focus on entertainment, as has been indicated above, was clearly linked to the growing power of private interests (both in the state and media) and the financial crunch (on the state exchequer). The turn to sponsorship in 1984 inaugurated the growing presence of not just private capital but shifts in programming towards soap operas, prime-time serials, telefilms, documentaries, sports programmes, 'hi-entertainment' and the like. Under this system producers covered the production costs of programmes and received air-time for advertising their clients. Between 1984-5 and 1992-3, DD's annual advertising revenues rose from Rs 60 crores to 360 crores, and began tapering off in the following two years with the gradual ascendance of satellite broadcasting. The repercussions in terms of funding, control, programming and their translation in the sphere of cultural politics were to be momentous. What this

15 Audience Research Unit, 1986, quoted in Keval Kumar, Mass Communication in India, p.88.
17 Ibid, p.49.
18 Sevanti Ninan, Through the Magic Window, p.147.
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Synopsis of DD's expansion reveals, is not just the extraordinary expansion of its broadcasting function, but its de-centralization into a three-tier system catering to both local and national concerns, the meteoric rise of commercial interests in broadcasting, a consequent dilution of its social function and its redirection toward light entertainment.19

THE CULTURE OF TELEVISION

The social developmental and educational functions of TV were part of a broader statist vision of television's role in the fabrication of a national identity and culture after independence. Television provided precisely the institution where material practices produced "symbolic forms" in the pedagogy of "national culture."20 Nehru's doubts about TV's necessity for India are one indication of the ways in which concern over its social function marked TV history since its inception. As argued in the preceding chapter, what "development" and "autonomy" designate are highly political issues which continue to animate debates in the spheres of statecraft, economic planning and cultural politics. Within this web of relations, it is worth briefly signaling here the dilemma of the Indian state with regard to TV's social function. The existence of the state is legitimated on the basis of its representativeness and protective relationship to a pre-existing social formation. In India's case however, the very formation of the modern Indian state was roughly coincident with the process of binding this heterogeneous geographical and politico-economic space into an imagined community of the Indian nation. Thus, the state-sponsored pedagogic function of TV involved not so much the representation of a pre-existing national community of different elements but the actual fabrication of the nation-form that could posit a singular "national culture" which simultaneously recognized its internal heterogeneity. This state-media-culture relationship was thus hardly uncomplicated, and involved a high degree of fluidity. Recognizing this fraught relationship is important in precluding the assumption that the pedagogic role of TV in promoting a "national culture" was merely an act of "representation."

The role of television in this process was summed up thus by the Joshi Committee report on Software for DD: "The challenge before the communicator in India...is...to grasp the gap between Nehru's vision and the Indian social reality so as to assist in converting people's urge for change into the collective national will and capacity for accelerated change in the desired direction." The "collective national will" is posited here as the aim of broadcasting which then directs it toward a "desired direction."21 This direction was developmental then, not just in terms of economic development, but education in the scholastic as well as cultural sense, that would provide the practical affective glue which could bind the diverse audiences of TV into a sense of national belonging.

This process of national integration received a substantial boost with the introduction of the national programme in 1982. As Saksena argues "it was an attempt to present...through television, a composite national picture and perspective of India's rich...

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19 This period saw numerous developments, debates and controversies which cannot be elaborated on here, although where relevant they will be signaled when relevant to a particular theme.

20 The catachretic dimension of fabricating a national culture is eloquently formulated in Homi Bhabha's characterization of the relationship between the pedagogic and the performative in Location of Culture, London: Routledge 1994, p.145.

cultural heritage and diverse thinking." This balancing act of simultaneously recognizing difference and emphasizing commonality was an instantiation of the 1956 adoption by parliament of the Science Policy resolution (under the leadership of Nehru) which stressed the importance of propagating a scientific attitude, promoting secularism and fostering respect for difference. DD's "parent" organisation, AIR attempted to operationalize these ideas and some of the debates around its implementation are worth recalling here as they render visible not just the politics of cultural pedagogy but the ways in which this triple linking of broadcasting's priorities were to be reformulated by the Hindu Right.

Religious programming was not aimed at as such although the transmission of public festivals of different communities necessarily implied a strong religious element. Criticisms soon emerged that this was one way of propagating Hinduism through the backdoor since its devotional songs comprised the majority of musical programming. Among other things, it indicated the diversity in the volume of cultural resources available for programmers to access (if bias as a concern is ruled out) and thus points to the very different positions of power that diverse communities occupied in the social formation, in terms of cultural resources translatable into media programming, audience size, bargaining power with the state etc. The propagation of a scientific temperament was aimed at both children and adults and involved an attack on what were seen as superstition and dogma. The emerging contradictions of recognizing different communities with their own religious beliefs, and the latter are not hard to imagine. Former Director-General of AIR and DD, P.C. Chatterji remarked that while the negative side of secularism (refraining from criticism of particular religions) was implemented by broadcasters, its positive side in promoting the "'common civil code', and the duty to 'develop the scientific temper, humanism, and the spirit of inquiry and reform,' have found no place in broadcasting."

These criticisms signal the inevitable contradictions and struggles foreseen in the above discussion of the peculiar character of the modern Indian state which sought to fabricate its own distinctive national identity while proleptically assuming that such a thing already existed. More importantly, in terms of the attack on secularism by the Hindu Right, and its criticisms of satellite television, the triple aim of science-secularism-difference provided one of the most compelling and politically-valuable discourses for its attack on television, the media and secularism. As pointed out earlier, promoting the scientific temper implied attacking superstition which to the 'faithful' could only be seen as disrespect if not outright "attacks on religion." The broadcasting of public festivals as seen above triggered protests of backdoor religious proselytism, which while articulated against Hinduism could easily be turned against other communities, as will be seen later. The "respect for difference" accorded by broadcasters to other communities mirrors what has become one of the most emotive discursive tools of the Hindu Right, "the appeasement of minorities." These relationships are being signaled here since the shifts in TV post-1990 are discursively framed by the Hindu Right within a structure of feeling whose history predates this period and has in fact framed the cultural pedagogy of both radio and television since its inception in independent India.

As seen above, the particular pedagogic role of state television in promoting both

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22 Saksena, Television in India: Changes and Challenges, p.12-13. As already indicated above, this attention to "unity in diversity" was managed besides shifts in programming, to the technical diversification of broadcasting into the three-tier system.

23 P. C. Chatterji, Broadcasting in India, New Delhi: Sage 1991, p.137
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development, autonomy and secularism coincided with the financial solvency of the state. Despite the numerous limitations of TV's assigned pedagogic role, a clear relationship obtained between the state, television and its cultural brief. Further, the turn to commercialization in terms of sponsorship, programme genres and the rise of religious programming (such as the Mahabharata and the Ramayana) dis-articulated this triple relationship in complex ways. The state's predominant role in the control of television broadcasting was diluted, the objectives of programming became less educative and more entertainment-oriented and programming aimed at promoting the "richness of Indian culture" fought for space and audiences among the proliferation of other highly popular programming that eschewed the elitist veneer of this cultural programming. In this regard, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata mark a particular landmark shift in conceptualizing culture, both from its secular intentions to a potently religious one, and from a high-cultural paternalist attitude to a highly populist genre which borrowed from the language of popular cinema.

The telecasts of the Ramayana began in early 1987 originally slated for 50 weekly episodes but ran for more than twice that number followed by the Mahabharata from October 1988 to June 1990. Both, especially the former chalked up impressive viewing figures and their popularity triggered a serious reconsideration of the state's role in promoting secularism. Philip Lutzendorf suggests that the popularity of the Ramayana points to "the enduring power of sacred narrative to galvanize the Indian masses", which when combined with the tremendous power of television, it could be suggested tapped into an already-existing religious ethos which came to be translated into the spheres of everyday life, the political machinations of several parties and seemed to transform the stated goal of television in promoting secularism. While the ambit of this paper is less concerned with the role of television in directly impacting on the religious ethos of Hindutva as articulated by the Hindu Right, it is worth noting here the importance of religious Hindu programming on state television in laying the groundwork for the popular resurgence of the importance of Hindu epics in the Indian body politic. The specific debates around these epics with regard to the reformulation of what being a Hindu meant will be more directly approached in the following chapter.

It is worth signaling here, that whatever the policy debates around whether the state was abdicating its commitment to secularism or not, the Hindu Right was triumphalist in its reading of the new developments. The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) enthused "[N]ow the new communication technologies such as television and broadcasting have made it possible to once again bring the two epics within the reach of the teeming millions...and repair and restructure the Indian psyche on the basis of the universal appeal of the humanistic values which alone serves as a sole vent of divisive forces and influences generated by the western techno-economic and political model of development."

This quote telegraphically addresses all the issues that make up the problematic of this dissertation. New technologies harnessed to the cultural and "psychic" needs of India, the equation of the "Indian psyche" with Hinduism, the resistance to western culture and economic development (read "Nehruvian socialism" here) and the counterfactual argument that religious sentiment heals all socio-economic and political divisions, the latter coming to play an increasingly important part in the ongoing fabrication of "Indian culture" by the Hindu Right.


25 The Organiser, the mouthpiece of the RSS, quoted in Chatterji, Broadcasting in India, pp. 216-217.
CHAPTER 3

What the writer of the above article might well have been unaware of is the looming presence of new communication technologies in television broadcasting which were to change forever the landscape of Indian broadcasting and popular culture: global satellite television.

INVASION FROM THE SKIES

"television [the] most efficient and spectacularly effective of all mass media, will soon be available to serve as global marketing's instrument of consumer access."

An inquiry into the particular shifts in the field of television in India need to be framed within an ongoing reflection of globalization as more than just the narrow "inclusion" of Third World markets into capitalism. The precise relationship between UNESCO's "culture industries" and the transnationalization of cultural production can be grasped schematically by attending to the inner dynamic of the culture industries as precisely profit-motivated engines designed to maximize surpluses. Analysts of corporate media industries point out that the globalization of especially U.S. culture is inextricably linked to the internal regimes of loss and profit which calibrate expansion decisions. The increasing costs of hi-tech TV productions and equipment oblige producers in the west to seek revenues elsewhere. The Third World constitutes a huge untapped market for the libraries of programming media corporations possess and thus becomes both a profitable dumping ground as well as "global marketing's instrument of consumer access."

As Patrick Leahy, chairman of the U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee's Subcommittee on technology and law observed, "While other economic sectors show steady deficits, the makers of American books, computer software, recordings, movies and other copyrighted materials... generated a 1.5 billion dollar trade surplus." In other words, the falling profitability of the manufacturing sector in the west as well as the increasing costs of programming new TV material provides the impetus for the globalization of western media products. This, of course, bears a significant relationship with the economic deregulation of many Third World countries as they are the vehicles for the transnational marketing of goods and services. Even a peremptory survey of investment profiles for India, for example, persistently call attention to the importance of satellite and cable TV for tapping the consumer market, as the case of GE/Godrej showed in the preceding chapter. This global dynamic of media expansion must thus be situated within the profit-motivation of these industries in order to situate the discourses of "democracy" and "freedom".

In this regard, advances in technology are particularly fortuitous for tapping into markets and media systems that have been hitherto sequestered by national broadcasting systems. Satellite technology enables the circumvention of state controls while improvements in directing satellite beams and miniaturization makes possible the simultaneous telecasting of numerous programmes to specific regions from one broadcasting platform. There is inevitably a politics to this technological development as Benno Signitzer has tracked in his study of direct broadcasting via satellite. Western countries have consistently favoured the "free market" ideal in satellite broadcasting and downplayed the demands for greater autonomy and protection by developing

26 Quoted in Schiller, Culture, Inc, p.133.  
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countries.\(^{28}\) It is in the context of this global dynamic, advances in technology, the profit-motivation of media industries and the deregulation of the Indian economy that the advent of global media in India needs to be situated.

The Gulf War which precipitated the debt crisis in the country was also the mass media spectacle that inaugurated a change in the television scene. Satellite transmissions via CNN and BBC were beamed all over the world, and Indian viewers, primarily in big cities and with sizable disposable incomes, were exposed for the first time to extensive foreign programming. At that time, the Hong-Kong based conglomerate, Hutchison Whampoa Ltd. began broadcasting STAR TV, which served as the platform for BBC, MTV, Star Plus (specializing in U.S. shows such as *Santa Barbara*, the most widely-watched show on satellite TV then) and *The Bold and the Beautiful*, and Prime, a Dallas-based sports network. STAR was later bought by Australian media mogul Rupert Murdoch, who went on to acquire substantial control in the highly popular Zee TV, which featured exclusively Hindi programming. At present (early 1999), the TV scene in India can be divided into three categories: state-run Doordarshan which comprises DD1 to DD6, including DD3, the metro channel; satellite television, which comprises STAR TV (Satellite Television Asian region), including Star Plus and Star Movies, and the Turner Broadcasting Service (TBS) which leases Doordarshan satellite INSAT 2B transponder for beaming CNN; cable channels which comprise Asian Television Network (ATN) – Hindi movies and film songs, BBC World, Channel V, the international music video channel, EL TV, Indian programmes owned by ZEE TV, JAIN TV, the entertainment and Finance channel, MTV, Prime Sports, PTV (Pakistan TV), RAJ TV, for South Indian programmes, SONY Entertainment Television (SET), which includes SUN TV, for South Indian programming, STAR Plus, syndicated UK/US shows and the most popular channel Zee TV which beams Indian movies and TV shows. There has been a further increase in new entrants scheduled including the Sony Corporation’s Sony TV, HBO, ESPN, TNT, Discovery, Disney and Time-Warner.\(^{29}\)

In early 1995, the government signed an agreement with CNN to allow the latter use of DD’s satellite platform, INSAT 2B for beaming into the country. The government recently announced that it will be severing all links between the state and electronic media, including Doordarshan television and All India Radio. Plans are underway to open broadcasting to private firms, who will be able to own television stations, as opposed to the previous arrangement of buying time on the state-owned media. All government funding for the media is to be withdrawn, and resources raised through advertising. The cooperative agreement between Doordarshan and CNN marks one of the most significant manoeuvres of the state in dealing with the challenge of satellite television.

In relation to satellite TV broadcasting, it is important to recognize that it should not be cast in terms of foreign networks encroaching on Indian space. The picture is much more complex than that. Firstly, we have state-controlled TV, partly funded by advertisers. This state TV is both internally - differentiated, at national, regional and local levels, while also transmitting programming to neighbouring countries such as Pakistan and to diasporic Indian communities, particularly in the Middle-East. Secondly, we have global TV networks which are also internally - differentiated. At one level, channels on offer from the STAR bouquet are controlled by multinational media corporations like News Corp. In addition, the Zee bouquet, which is owned by non-


resident Indians, who thus have a different sort of relationship to the Indian state. Most importantly, these networks broadcast both to India, as well as to other countries where substantial Indian audiences are located, such as in the U.S., U.K., Egypt, and other countries in the Middle-East and south-east Asia. Besides these major networks with their numerous channels, we also have channels like Om TV, UTV etc. which are owned and controlled by Indians based in India, and targeting local audiences at state and city levels. Thus, the range of complex temporalities and spaces through which programming, in the dimensions of broadcasting sources, kinds of address, private/public address, is much more fragmented and complex at present.

By end 1993, satellite channels had captured 15% of TV audiences comprising 45 million households and 20% of all advertising revenue. DD's response was to diversify programming and offer more channels. The new satellite channels, with their large reserves of liquid capital, superior programming choices and access to huge video and film libraries proved daunting competitors to Doordarshan, which has registered a corresponding shift in its strategies. By 1990, through a series of intensive expansion programs technologically aided by the INSAT IA and IB satellites, DD had covered 90% of the population. In 1993, the four metro channels (Bombay, Delhi, Madras and Calcutta) were merged into a national channel DD2. This revamped national metro channel, now expanded to cover 18 cities focuses primarily on entertainment programming including soap operas, sit-coms, game shows, film based programmes and music videos. In this regard it is worth noting that the I&B minister in 1993 had characterized satellite television as constituting a “cultural invasion” which DD would respond to with indigenous programming, yet one year later MTV was being beamed via DD2 rather than its earlier platform on STAR! The commercial pressures on DD were telling and despite the increasingly hysterical talk of cultural contamination from the west, the programming and the partnership deals (CNN-DD) render visible the growing clout of the free market and the general trend towards globalization in most spheres of everyday life. In an effort to attract more advertising revenue, “DD is now the platform for the fare it had so far considered too “elitist” and “five-starish”…such as fashion and lifestyle.” In terms of total viewership, DD far outstrips STAR TV and ZEE TV, since its terrestrial network is cheaper and does not require additional expenditure such as monthly cable or satellite charges.

The DD channels 4 to 6, comprised regional programming for the latter three, while DD3 was characterized as the “up-market” channel providing serious programming in the fields of dance, drama, music and current affairs. Its launch in October 1994 was scuttled by the then PM P.V.Narasimha Rao who balked at the idea of private producers providing current affairs programming, especially given the key state elections coming up in November and December that year. This act signals the conflict between the increasing commercialization of TV and the desire for political control of the media by parties, as Sinha notes, who goes onto argue that its launch at the end of 1995 signaled the state's need to take on the growing drain on revenue from satellite channels like STAR Plus and ZEE TV. Aimed at the country's urban elite, which comprise approximately 5 million households with average incomes of more than $400 per month, DD3 is best characterized by then Director General R. Basu as “a niche chan-

31 “Both All India Radio and Doordarshan have become channels for commercial advertisements, with their educative role pushed to the background. “Economic Reforms”, The Hindu, October 31, 1995.
32 Amit Agarwal, “Opening Up At last”, India Today, April 15, 1994
nel with lots of colourful programs.”

Using the INSAT 2B satellite, DD launched the MovieClub in April 1995 as a direct competitor to STAR Movies and Zee Cinema, and as part of a long-term plan to pre-empt the prospective threats from Home box Office (HBO) and Ted Turner’s TNT. In this move, the state broadcaster also showed up its main advantage in that this channel can be received for free unlike its competitors which are pay channels. It is worth precluding the temptation to view this as DD’s commitment to the ‘public’, given that Times TV (which markets MovieClub) VP states “[B]y offering it for free, we hope to capture most middleclass TV watchers.”

The above examples attest to the change in the strategy of DD with regard to its earlier brief, in the wake of increasing competition, commercialization and the globalization of the media scene. Without the comfort of a regulated economy and strict restrictions on broadcasting, as one commentator put it, “compared to the past, when every programme on the national network had to drip with a message, DD is now paying attention to the commercial viability of the programme.”

Sanjiv Gupta of Hindustan Lever, the subsidiary of multinational Unilever, and the largest TV advertiser in 1993 stated “We have no doubt that the National Channel is poised for revival, and we will support it all the way, because all of our products are meant for the mass market.”

The commercialization of state TV began in 1972 in a faltering manner, and now private finance and programming provides the bedrock of its longevity and increasing competitiveness.

One of the clearest signals of the significance of commercialization on TV and its relationship to economic liberalization comes from the importance of market research groups in identifying prospective audiences and the targeting of the same by TV channels with specific programming. STAR TV for example, has detailed “Top Ten” charts of its programmes for specific audience profiles based on age, location, income and other demographic features. A study commissioned by DD in 1992 showed that a striking 80 per cent of urban viewers of cable and satellite channels were affluent and well-educated, with disposable incomes much prized by the emerging international players on the consumer market. The increasing dependency on advertising has redirected programming priorities, and documentary films dealing with contemporary problems are being squeezed out of broadcasting avenues. Vinod Ganatra of the Indian Documentary Producers Association complains that despite the boom in TV channels, “[B]oth private channels and Doordarshan are commercially inclined. Doordarshan has now become a four-letter word.”

A STAR TV-sponsored survey has identified that more than a third of its household audience has a monthly income of Rs. 4000-plus, and advertisers are targeting this audience with its top-of-the-line products. US soft-drink manufacturer, Pepsi, upmarket retailer Weekender, and watch manufacturer, Titan are major advertisers on MTV. MNCs like De Beers and electronics giant Sony depended heavily on prime time exposure to advertise their products to a middle class that hitherto had been denied access to them under India’s regulated economy. Sevanti Ninan points out that between 1993 and 1994, with more and more urban middle class residents turning into investors and consumers, advertising in the categories of consumer goods and investment services skyrocketed.

American TV shows including Dynasty and Santa Barbara, which had the highest ratings among satellite programs

34 ibid, p. 88.
35 Agarwal, “Opening Up At last”.
36 Agarwal, “Doordarshan: Battling for Big Bucks.”
38 Sevanti Ninan, Through the Magic Window.
have become very popular throughout the country, especially among the urban mid­dle-classes. Prime slots for advertisers generally are found within such programs, and the most popular satellite network, Zee TV channel defines its objectives as: “to pro­vide a focused medium with a target audience having good purchasing power to adver­tisers, thus ensuring a cost-effective viewership... Zee TV’s target audience is not just Indians [within the country] but the 20 million NRIs [non-resident Indians] living in 23 Asian countries under its footprint...A large chunk of advertising is expected from multinationals looking for Indian markets under a high dose of liberalization.”

Hence, non-governmental private programming originating outside India provides crucial media exposure and advertising possibilities for multinational and Indian companies to advertise their consumer goods and services. The annual advertising spending figure is 350 million dollars and is expected to rise to 1 billion dollars by 2000.

To point out the role of advertising in television programming is to emphasize the obvious, but what is crucial in this context is the need to resituate an understanding of television outside its traditional role as the state-run medium for development and education purposes, to an institution that is now beyond the control of the govern­ment in many respects, and beholden to advertisers within a rapidly globalizing econ­omy. The attempts by the government to capitalize on its own advantage in live pro­gramming and cheaper, broader coverage has led to a greater emphasis on entertainment-based programming targeted at the middle-class, an intensification of the commercial input in broadcasting in terms of revenue-gathering through adver­tising and a dilution in its commitment to public service broadcasting. To the extent that secularism as a national ideal constituted an important goal, DD’s involvement with the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* telecasts undermined the broad secular ethos of the nation while programming from its competitors came to play an increasingly important part in the fabrication of Hinduism as the ideal of the modern religious nationalism. The series of controversies around programming provided a valuable resource for the religious nationalists who defined themselves as the indigenous pro­tectors of what being “Indian” meant beyond the modern notion of the citizen, in the process re-defining some of the central concepts of the modern Indian state and its presumption of social, economic and political equality.

The particular shifts in ownership and programming which result in the present tenuous TV situation are part of a complex set of negotiations involving political pres­sures, the logic of globalization and the increasing vociferousness of the Hindu Right. In a later chapter, these developments will be tracked in their inter-relationships with the broader socio-political scene in order to instantiate how the fabrication of Hindutva is inextricably linked to the politicization of culture and the financialization of formerly state-owned media.

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40 Simon Cameron-Moore, "News Corp’s STAR TV stalks Hindi market", Reuters, Bombay, September 8, 1996.