LIBERALISATION AND THE FUTURE OF PUBLIC SERVICE BROADCASTING IN INDIA

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Introduction

In July 1995, CNN International began broadcasting into India using India's national satellite INSAT 2B and in partnership with the state owned television organisation Doordarshan. The Doordarshan-CNN alliance signalled a complete about face in India's policy toward international media organisations. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s India was in the vanguard of the call for a New World Information and Communication Order. Fears of cultural imperialism and the domination of western news organisations resulted in a closed broadcasting system. Radio and television were owned and operated exclusively by the government and private broadcasting, whether domestic or foreign, was prohibited. The closed broadcasting system was in consonance with a closed economic system. Based on a rhetoric of socialism, self-reliance and import substitution, successive Indian governments limited the access of foreign corporations to the Indian economy. International trade was closely monitored, imports of foreign goods severely restricted and foreign direct investment tightly regulated.

But in 1991, the newly elected Congress government under Prime Minster Narasimha Rao launched a sweeping economic restructuring program aimed at loosening trade restrictions, opening the door to foreign direct investment, and replacing state control of the economy with the operation of market forces. The opening up of the economic system provided the impetus for the opening up of the broadcasting system, resulting in the ironic spectacle of the former "cultural imperialists," like CNN, finding a privileged position on the govern-ment's satellite system.

But while the external liberalisation signals an im-

portant change in the government's attitude toward international media organisations, it is the internal changes taking place in the role, function and character of the Indian state that is triggering even more significant changes in the character of the country's media environment. Ostensibly committed for many years to the objectives and principles of public service broadcasting, the government is now not only looking benignly at the mushrooming of commercial radio and television, but has become an active participant in the commercialisation process.

What are the consequences of these changes for the public service mission of Indian broadcasting? State ownership and control was long justified on the grounds that radio and television are a public service. But it was the state itself, by virtue of its dominance of the country's political economy, that was the biggest threat to public broadcasting during the past 45 years. Today, as the role of the state changes, commercialism provides an even greater threat to public service broadcasting than government interference and control. The objective of broadcasting in the public interest, always under strain from the exigencies of political expediency, is now under even greater pressure from commercialism. In this period of transition from a state-dominated to a market-dominated economy, Indian television will have to struggle to establish and preserve, if not public broadcasting, then at least broadcasting in the public interest. This article reviews the changes taking place in India's broadcasting environment in the context of the transformation in the country's political economy and examines the consequences of these developments for the prospects of safeguarding and promoting the public interest within an increasingly commercialised broadcasting system.

Satellite Television and the Transformation of Indian Broadcasting

The commercialisation of Indian television began in 1976 when the government permitted Doordarshan to introduce advertiser supported programming. But it was the onslaught from the skies in the form of international satellite distributed television that radically transformed the country's broadcasting environment. International television was introduced into India by CNN through its coverage of the Gulf War in 1991. Three months later Hong Kong based Star-TV started broadcasting five channels into India using the ASIASAT-1 satellite. The pan-Asian network was started by Hong Kong based Li Ka-shing of Hutchison Whampoa, but was acquired by Rupert Murdock's News Corp. in 1993. By early 1992, nearly half-a-million Indian households were receiving Star-TV telecasts. A year later the figure was close to 2 million and by the end of 1995, an estimated 13 million households (a little less than one-fourth of all television households) were receiving satellite channels, making India the largest market for Star-TV.

A number of Indian satellite based television services were also launched between 1991 and 1995, prominent among them Zee TV, an all-Hindi service now partly owned by News Corp.. By the end of 1995 there were 12 satellite based channels available in India on a handful of foreign satellites. All of the services were up-linked from locations outside of India because the government had reserved the right to up-link from within the country for its own broadcasting organisations. The number of satellite services are expected to double in 1996, with a number of Indian would-be programmers lining up for transponder space in the 11 satellites expected to be launched dur-

ing the year. International media companies like Turner Broadcasting, Time-Warner, Discovery Channel, Disney, CANAL 5 and Pearsons PLC, are also seriously considering the introduction of new satellite television services for India. The Indian government has indicated that it will lease transponder space on its recently launched communications satellite INSAT 2C, to Indian and foreign broadcasters increasing the likelihood of a dramatic expansion of television offerings during 1996-97.

The government's response to the challenge of satellite broadcasting has taken three main forms: it has followed an open skies policy, doing little to stop the spread of satellite distributed service; it has attempted to formulate a competitive response by transforming Doordarshan; and, it has served as a gateway to commercial broadcasters by providing them with satellite platforms in partnership with Doordarshan.

Economic Liberalisation and the Open Skies Policy

The government's initial response to CNNI and STAR-TV took the form of an open skies policy. It took no action to restrict the transmission or reception of their signals, nor did it take any steps to regulate their content. One reason why the government could remain unconcerned about the onset of these broadcasters was the lack of terrestrial redistribution services, like cable television, which ensured that their viewership was small and limited to those who could afford to put up a fairly expensive reception dish. But an even more important reason why the government took no action to restrict the broadcasts can be found in the political and economic circumstances in which satellite broadcasting was introduced into the country.

The years 1990-91 were among the most difficult in India's recent history. After a decade of Congress rule, the opposition National Front party came to power in 1990 with high expectations of setting the country on a new path of social and economic development. But the National Front government collapsed within a year and a stop gap government formed in its wake also fell with a few months. Two successive governments in one year not only caused considerable political uncertainty but also pushed the economy into a downward spiral. The aftermath of the Gulf War further aggravated the country's economic crisis. Foreign exchange reserves dipped to levels below one month of imports, imports exceeded exports by over 50 per cent and inflation and the government's budget deficits soared.

When the Congress government under Narasimha Rao was elected 1991, it faced one of the country's most severe economic crises. Spearheaded by Finance Minister Manmohan Singh, the new government's response to the crisis was two-fold. It put into motion a series of steps to overcome the immediate balance-of-payments problem, and it initiated a sweeping set of measures aimed at restructuring the country's economic system by taking aim at those economic policies which it identified as responsible for the deeper economic malaise. According to the government, controls on production and licensing restrictions along with high protective walls had fostered monopolistic trends within Indian industry, making it import-intensive and inward-looking. The lack of competition provided little incentive to companies to engage in technical innovations. Most companies, including those in the public sector, imported more than they exported and, given the reliance on imports of petroleum and other bulk products, the country incurred increasingly large trade deficits.

Alongside the trade imbalance was the problem of a sustained rise in fiscal deficits over the years. The pumping of money into the economy created strong inflationary

trends which in turn pushed up interest rates. This increased the government's debt burden and, in turn, added to the budgetary deficit in a classic vicious cycle. Together with rising public sector losses, this limited the government's ability to spend on infrastructure, education, health and poverty removal programs.

The excessive protection offered to domestic industry through licensing and exorbitant import tariffs produced another major problem. In the absence of both domestic and international competition there was very little pressure on Indian industry to lower costs and Indian companies relied more on costly capital rather than cheap labour. Thus industrial growth did not generate as much employment as it should have and failed to attract the poor away from agriculture based employment. Thus, while on the one hand lack of labour-intensity in manufacturing stunted employment growth and depressed incomes, the fiscal crisis limited the government's ability to intervene through more spending on poverty alleviation and job generating programs.

The Narasimha Rao government used the immediate fiscal crisis to launch an attack on the entire structure of the economy. In the first instance it initiated steps to deal with the immediate crisis, avert the danger of defaulting on its debt repayments, raise the level of foreign exchange reserves and restore overall confidence in the economy. A massive loan from the IMF took care of the immediate fiscal crisis. But it also initiated a widespread new economic policy to restructure the economy and eliminate its basic problems. Clearly, part of the reform measures stemmed from the need to meet the conditions imposed by the IMF as part of the loan. But they also reflected the new government's belief that long-term growth was possible only through an overhaul of the entire economy.

The cornerstone of the government's new economic policy was globalisation. Globalisation in the Indian context involved the opening up of one of the most closed economies in the world to international trade and foreign investment. First, trade polices were revamped to lower or eliminate restrictions, quotas and tariffs on imported goods while providing significant incentives for exports. Second, the terms and conditions of foreign investment were restructured to attract greater volumes of investment into the country and to encourage foreign companies to relocate productive activities in India.

What was missing from the government's new economic policy were explicit goals or policies aimed at reducing income inequalities, fostering balanced economic growth, reducing concentration of the means of production or fostering the development of the public sector, which had been the cornerstone of the socialistic policies of the previous four decades. Gone also was the goal of economic self-reliance, at least in terms of manufacturing locally most, if not all, of the critical goods and services required by the economy. Self-reliance was re-cast as the ability to generate the foreign exchange required to pay for imports.

Perhaps the most dramatic change in the country's economic orientation was the move away from the import substitution policies of previous regimes and the opening up of the country's economy to direct foreign investment. The government maintained that it needed to use all the means available to realise its economic goals, including foreign direct investment (FDI). Finance Minister Manmohan Singh argued that the country needed the global links, foreign technology and marketing expertise of foreign companies in order to improve the international competitiveness of Indian

industry (Singh 1995). FDI, in addition to supplementing domestic savings, was also seen as offering advantages like technology transfer and job creation and could put competitive pressures on local manufacturers to improve productivity and growth.

But foreign investors were not easily convinced of the government's new found commitment to liberalisation. Despite the policy and legal actions taken to implement the new economic measures, foreign investors remained wary of investing in India during the first year and a half of the reforms. Foreign direct investment flowed in very slowly, much slower than the government needed to ensure the success of the reforms. By the middle of 1992 only $240 million had been committed by foreign investors, and a mere third of that had actually been invested. As foreign investors watched the economic developments unfolding in the country, the government's attitude toward the new satellite distributed television services became a barometer of its commitment to the reforms. Any attempt to restrict foreign broadcasters would have been construed as evidence of the government's lack of commitment to opening up the economy. Consequently, the government chose to ignore the foreign television services, despite complaints from a number of political and social organisations of the cultural threat posed by these services. The government clearly recognised what Pendakur has argued, that television is a highly visible cultural product that "functions as the best marketing tool for liberalisation of the Indian economy" (Pendakur 1995, 12).

But even more importantly, the government, once committed to utilising the market as the main engine of economic growth, had no intention of restricting the forces represented by STAR and other private broadcasters. Dallas Smythe (1981) focused attention on the importance of television within capitalist economies by recognising that its main task is not to deliver messages to the audience, but to deliver audiences to advertisers. Advertising, and the wider process of marketing of which it is an essential component, plays a vital role in the maintenance and growth of capitalist systems.

The economic problem facing capitalist societies can be said to have two components: there is a **production** task, that of producing goods and services and there is a **distribution** task, that of managing, organising, co-ordinating, and developing the marketing and distribution of goods and services. Clearly, the production task is critical and the economic crisis that had developed in India over the past forty years had, at its core, the poor performance of the productive sectors of the economy. But within the monopoly protections afforded to Indian capital during that period, the distribution task was completely neglected. Marketing, as a whole, and advertising in particular, was almost an afterthought for most corporations. But, as Schiller (1988) has argued, one of the characteristics of modern capitalist economies is the role played by marketing in the production and realisation of surplus value. The task of producing goods and services is not only dependent on the marketing and distribution functions, but is increasingly enhanced by it (Novek, Sinha, and Gandy 1990).

The economic reforms initiated by the Indian government were designed to reorganise and restructure the process of production in the Indian economy. But without the concomitant reorganisation of the process of distribution, the reforms could have been seriously jeopardised. The spread of commercial broadcasting represented by STAR and other private channels expands the marketing and advertising infrastructure of the Indian economy required for the success of the government's liberalisation program. Pendakur identifies two ways in which television functions as

a vehicle for the success of economic liberalisation:

> *First, by shifting its programming away from state-controlled propaganda and patronising educational programs it appears to offer the viewers choice where none existed before. It also promises a choice in a wider socio-economic sphere as well. The cue is buried in its programming and advertisements, which are at the outset* ***beamed to build a market for commodities****, both cultural and material* (Pendakur 1995, 12; emphasis added).

Restructuring Doordarshan: The Competitive Response

By the end of 1993, the success of STAR TV, Zee TV and CNN forced the government to respond to the threat of losing audiences and advertising revenues to the new services. Satellite channels had captured 15 per cent of the country's television audience of 45 million households and 20 per cent of all television advertising revenues. The nearly 60,000 small cable operators providing cable services across the country were largely responsible for the rapid spread of satellite television. The cost of a satellite reception dish was, and still is, just high enough to make it too expensive for individual households to install, but just low enough to make re-transmission services, like cable, very profitable. In short order cable systems have proliferated in the neighbourhoods and alleyways of Bombay, Delhi, Calcutta and Madras and are now spreading across the rest of the country at an estimated 5,000 new cable homes every day. Cable operators typically offer most of the satellite distributed channels and all of Doordarshan's channels, which they are now required to do by law.

The advent of satellite based television shook Doordarshan out of its complacency. It responded to the competition on two fronts: by increasing the number of channels; and, by changing the nature of its programming. The expansion of television in India can be traced back to 1972 when a second television station was opened in Bombay. Until then, television was a very modest enterprise with only one television station, in New Delhi, broadcasting for just four hours a day. Television services were operated by All India Radio, the government's radio service, and seen as a subordinate medium to radio. The opening of the Bombay station was followed by stations in Srinagar and Amritsar (1973), and Calcutta, Madras and Lucknow in 1975. Relay stations were also set up in a number of cities to extend the coverage of the regional stations.

By 1976, the government found itself running a television network of eight television stations covering a population of 45 million over 75,000 square kilometres. Administratively, it was no longer possible to manage television as part of All India Radio and the government constituted Doordarshan, the national television network, as a separate department under the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting. Though the administrative structure changed, television remained a government monopoly and Doordarshan was tightly controlled by the I&B Ministry. But it was in 1982 that television began to attain national coverage and develop as the government's pre-eminent media organisation. Two events triggered the rapid growth of television that year. INSAT-1A, the first of the country's domestic communications satellites became operational and made possible the networking of all of Doordarshan's regional stations. For the first time Doordarshan originated a nation wide feed dubbed the "National Programme" which was uplinked from Delhi to the other stations. In Novem-

ber of 1982, the country hosted the Asian Games and the government introduced colour broadcasts for the coverage of the games. In 1984, Doordarshan launched a second channel in Delhi and this was quickly followed by second channels in Bombay, Calcutta and Madras.

The introduction of colour and the development of a national network though INSAT 1A and its successor INSAT 1B changed the face of Indian television. To increase television's reach, the government launched a crash program to set up low and high power transmitters that would pick up the satellite distributed signals and retransmit them to surrounding areas. In 1983 television signals were available to just 28 per cent of the population, this had doubled by the end of 1985 and by 1990 over 90 per cent of the population had access to television signals.

Despite this growth, Doordarshan was unprepared to deal with the challenge of international broadcasting. Doordarshans programming line-up was still very limited, most of the programming of poor quality and of regional rather than national interest. The government began its competitive response to the new satellite channels by restructuring and expanding Doordarshan's channel offerings. In 1993 Doordarshan merged the four second channels that were being programmed by the Delhi, Bombay, Calcutta and Madras regional stations and networked them into a single national channel dubbed the Metro Channel or DD2. Programming for the new channel was taken over by Doordarshans national programming staff. Later that year the reach of the Metro Channel was further extended to cover 18 cities and Doordarshan revealed a plan to offer four additional satellite channels, DD3 through DD6. In March 1995 Doordarshan launched an International Channel to beam programs to West and South Asia and then in April of that year a 24 hour satellite distributed movie channel was launched.

The new channels reveal Doordarshan's changed programming strategy. While DD1 retains the remnants of the social, educational and developmental programs that were the staple of Doordarshan in the past, DD2 has been organised as a purely entertainment channel and now offers a variety of entertainment programming, including, soap-operas, sit-coms, game shows, film based programs and music video shows. Unable to buy or commission enough programs to fill all the air time on DD2, Doordarshan has started to lease portions of the channel to private programmers, though their programs require Doordarshans prior approval. Perhaps the most visible icon of the changing nature of Doordarshan's programming is MTV (to many Indians the symbol of Western cultural values) which since the end of 1994 has switched from Star-TV to DD2. Such a program would have been out of the question as recently as 1993 when Information and Broadcasting Minister K. P. Singh Deo announced a "befitting response" to the "cultural invasion" by satellite television, suggesting that Doordarshan would respond with an indigenous programming strategy. But commercial competition has threatened Doordarshan's audiences and self-preservation has spawned a new ideology in Doordarshan which is in the process of reinventing itself, co-opting Western television to recapture viewers and advertising rupees lost to Zee TV and Star-TV.

Of the remaining four channels, DD3, DD4, DD5 and DD6 the last three are regional language services catering to different parts of the country. In Doordarshan's original plan DD3 was to have been an up-market program channel carrying "serious" programming in the fields of dance, drama, music and current affairs. The revamping

of the current affairs programming was aimed at building credibility and competitive advantage for its news service by taking advantage of Doordarshan's monopoly over live-broadcasting from India. But the tension between the new commercial competitiveness and traditional political exigencies became manifest when Prime Minister P. V. Narasimha Rao scrapped DD3 just days before its debut in October 1994. The Prime Minister balked at the inclusion of live, privately produced current-affairs programs, even though this would have lent Doordarshan the news credibility it is perceived to lack.

Scuttling the channel denied Doordarshan the chance to build on a marketing advantage: live programming. Elections in several key States in November and December 1994 made DD3 too risky for the Congress Government which had suffered significant electoral defeats in two key Southern states earlier that year. The struggle over DD3 reveals the conflict between the new ideology of commercialism and the traditional political control the government has exercised over Doordarshan. In this conflict, what is increasingly being sidelined, is Doordarshan's commitment to any sense of broadcasting in the public interest or any commitment to democratic values. As one producer who used to work for Doordarshan put it: "TV exposes the lie of our democracy".[1] Similarly, implicating Doordarshan within the class structure of the Indian state, Pendakur argues that there is "no evidence...that the state television policy is either designed for, or even accidentally related to, social improvements for the vast majority of Indian people" (Pendakur 1990, 250).

DD3 was finally launched toward the end of 1995, without the live news programming that had scuttled its launch in 1994. The channel is seen as Doordarshan's reply to Zee TV and Murdock's Star Plus, which are seen as aiming at the high-income end of the television audience. As a senior Doordarshan official said without a trace of irony "this channel is for viewers like you and me."[2] The "you and me" are the four to five million households in India with average incomes of more than Rs. 12,000 ($400) a month. Long touted as Doordarshan's public service channel, DD3's programming reflects only the interests and tastes of India's elite. As Doordarshan Director General R. Basu himself admitted "it will be a niche channel with lots of colourful programs" (quoted in Nag 1995, 2).

That Doordarshan takes the competition from STAR, Zee and other channels extremely seriously, was underscored when it launched a 24 hour satellite distributed movie channel in April 1995. Utilising the country's own communication satellite INSAT 2B, the channel, dubbed the MovieClub, shows English and Hindi movies. The channel is being marketed by Times TV, the television arm of Benett-Coleman, one of India's largest publishing houses. The channel is designed to compete with STAR-TV's movie channel, STAR Movies (which shows only English movies), Zee Cinema, Zee TV's Hindi movie channel and the host of other satellite distributed channels expected to be launched in 1996 including the U.S. based Home Box Office and Ted Turner's TNT Network. Doordarshan's Director General R. Basu described the launch as "one of our moves to pre-empt foreign competition" (quoted in Nag 1995, 1).

But unlike STAR Movies or the other foreign services under consideration, which are pay channels, the MovieClub is a free channel. The decision to launch a free service betrays Doordarshan's continuing obsession with audience size along with revenues. But Doordarshan's definition of its audience is far from its stated commitment to the public. According to Times TV's Vice President G. Krishnan, "By offering it free, we hope to capture most **middle-class** TV watchers" (quoted in Nag 1995, 2; emphasis added).

The Commercialisation of Doordarshan

Doordarshan's response to satellite broadcasting has also signalled a new orientation in its functioning. Doordarshan is an attached office under the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting — a half-way house between a public corporation and a government department. It is not directly a part of the Ministry's administrative structure, as a Department would be, nor does it enjoy the financial and administrative independence of a public corporation. In practice, however, Doordarshan operates much like a government department, at least as far as critical issues of policy planning and financial decision-making are concerned. Doordarshan is headed by a Director General appointed by the I&B Ministry. The Ministry itself and sometimes the office of the Director General as well, is staffed by members of India's civil services.

The organisational structure and functional ideology of Doordarshan finds its roots in the colonial origins of broadcasting in India. All India Radio was established in 1936 under the Ministry of Communications and charged with assisting in the maintenance of British colonial rule. In the political turmoil after the independence in 1947, broadcasting, like many other colonial institutions, the civil service in particular, was harnessed for the task of consolidating the position of the nationalist state. National integration and the development of a "national consciousness" were among the early objectives of All India Radio. Broadcasting was organised as the sole preserve of the chief architect of the process of political integration — the state. Nandy argues that the Indian state emerged as a compromise between two political impulses. The traditional Indian notion of the state as a "**post facto** justification of a slowly emerging political order built on existing political practices [...] a projection of, and a means of dealing with, a chaotic political reality" (Nandy 1989, 3), that is, an overarching construction that retrospectively coped with the heterogeneity and contradictions of the Indian political process. And second, the relatively new idea of an Indian state to be modelled along the lines of the modern European nation-state. To the early architects of the Indian state, Jawaharlal Nehru, Vallabhai Patel and Babasaheb Ambedkar, the compromise was to be temporary, and in time India would develop a modern nation-state as the country's chaotic political diversity and heterogeneity disappeared. This expectation was not only part of the formal ideology of the new Indian state but was also written into the institutions of political socialisation that evolved in the post-independence era (Nandy 1989). Broadcasting was prominent among those institutions.

The task of broadcasting, therefore, was to help in overcoming the immediate crisis of political instability that followed independence and to foster the long-term process of political modernisation and nation building that was the dominant ideology of the newly formed state. Neither a commercial nor a private system of broadcasting could be relied upon to take on this role and, therefore, radio was organised as a government owned and government controlled monopoly. The expectation was that in time a modern broadcasting system would emerge that would mirror the development of the modern state. But over the years radio, and then television, remained government monopolies, the two media harnessed to the broader undertaking of the maintenance and strengthening of the Indian state as well as the narrower interests of serving the political party in power.

In principle, Doordarshan is answerable to Parliament. Parliament lays down the guidelines that Doordarshan is expected to adhere to in its programming and

Doordarshan's budget is debated and approved by Parliament. But the nature of Parliamentary democracy ensures that ultimately Parliament can do nothing more that rubber stamp the decisions taken by the executive. The guidelines established by Parliament to ensure Doordarshan's objectivity are largely ignored in the face of the brute majority ruling parties have held in Parliament, and Doordarshan is subject more to the will of the executive than the oversight of Parliament. In effect, therefore, Doordarshan is an arm of the government, a department of the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, subject to the same political and bureaucratic controls that any other department of the government is subject to.

In no area is the pattern of government control over Doordarshan more evident than in the organisation's financial structure. Until recently, Doordarshan's budget came out of the Consolidated Fund of India, the central fund into which most government revenues are combined. Under the government budgetary rules, all revenues collected by a government department are credited to the fund and are not retained by the department itself. Thus Doordarshan's advertising revenues went into the government's general coffers even though as a "commercial" department, it did maintain a profit and loss account. Doordarshan's budget is part of the I&B Ministry's budget which is in turn part of the government's overall annual budget as approved by Parliament. In 1977, the government introduced a separate fund into which Doordarshan's commercial revenues would be consolidated, but it continued to specify the activities for which the money from the fund could be used.

Until the advent of advertising on Doordarshan in 1976, television had been funded through a combination of television licenses and allocations from the annual budget (licenses were later abolished as advertising revenues began to increase substantially). Advertising began in a very small way with under one percent of Doordarshan's budget coming from advertising revenues in 1976-77. In 1980, Doordarshan permitted advertisers to sponsor entire programs in addition to buying 15- and 30-second spots. The commercialisation of Doordarshan saw the development of soap operas, situation comedies, dramas, musical programs, quiz shows and the like. By 1990 Doordarshan's revenues from advertising were about $100 million, meeting about 70 per cent of its annual expenditure. The possibility of reaching a nation wide audience made television look increasingly attractive to advertisers. In turn, Doordarshan began to shift the balance of its programming from educational and informational programs to entertainment programs.

By 1991, Doordarshan's earlier mandate to aid in the process of social and economic development has clearly been diluted. Entertainment and commercial programs had begun to take centre stage in the organisation's programming strategies and advertising had come to be Doordarshan's main source of funding. The tight control over Doordarshan's finances has been one of the instruments though which the government has controlled the growth and development of television in India. But with Doordarshan's commercial revenues growing, with Doordarshan facing increased competition from satellite services, and with the government in the midst of a major economic restructuring program, the issue of Doordarshan's control over its finances has become increasingly important. In 1994, the government ordered Doordarshan to raise its own revenues for future expansion. This new commercial mandate has gradually begun to change Doordarshan's perception of who are its primary constituents--from politicians to advertisers. Bardhan argues that the development role of the state

has been overtaken by its regulatory role (Bardhan 1984, 39). If Doordarshan's current programming strategies are any indication, the regulatory function has been expanded to include a commercially competitive role, as the state struggles to retain audiences and maximise revenues.

Competition, Co-operation and Control: Dordarshan's Gateway Services

The co-operative agreement between CNNI and Doordarshan and the lease of an INSAT 2B transponder to the international news organisation, reveals a new phase in the transformation of the Indian broadcasting system. Under the deal, U.S. based Turner International will pay $1.5 million a year for the lease of a 24-hour channel on the government's INSAT 2B satellite to beam CNN International and CNNI will be allowed to up-link live television feeds from within India. Turner International and CNNI are subsidiaries of the Atlanta based news and entertainment giant Turner Broadcasting Inc. (TBS). But the agreement does more than simply provide transponder capacity to CNNI. CNNI will also provide at least one hour of current affairs and entertainment daily on Doordarshan's terrestrial channels. In return, Doordarshan will have one and half hours of programming on CNNI from Monday to Saturday and two hours on Sunday. Revenues on those time slots will be shared equally between Doordarshan and CNNI. As part of the deal, CNN will train Doordarshan programming and technical staff at its headquarters in Atlanta. It will also help Doordarshan upgrade its broadcasting and transmission equipment.

For Doordarshan, this "co-operative" agreement, therefore, will also improve its "competitive" profile as it upgrades its technical and professional skills with help from CNN. By leasing transponders on the its own satellite system, the government also gets the foreign broadcasters to underwrite the cost of its satellite program. Faced with the inevitability of satellite distributed foreign channels entering the Indian television market and their importance in the overall success of the liberalisation process initiated five years ago, the government has evidently shifted from a passive to an active role in encouraging these services in the country. As Doordarshan's Director General announced after the tie-up with CNNI, "it is a turning point for television in Indian ... it is a landmark agreement" which will lead to Doordarshan offering channels to other television broadcasters by the end of 1996 on INSAT. Among those queuing up for the privilege are Discovery, TNT, BBC, HBO and a number of Indian programmers who want to start their own television services.

But the CNNI-Doordarshan deal should not suggest that the government has set aside all political considerations and that foreign networks will now be able to operate unfettered in the Indian television environment. In fact, by tying them into the government owned satellite system, by allowing them to up-link from within India and by forcing them to agree to program exchanges, the government has gained a tighter hold over them than it might if they were launched from private satellites and uplinked from countries outside of India. CNN, which launched its new service with much fanfare, created a furore in the country when Indian journalists covering the launch at a five-star hotel in New Delhi were horrified when the first images of India from the U.S. network showed cows ambling through the traffic in central Bombay. The footage, which to Indian eyes reinforced stereotypes about the country's poverty, was followed by a weather report in which the journalists maintained that Kashmir had

been shown as belonging to Pakistan. The uproar brought an apologetic statement from a senior CNN official who said the footage symbol "did not take into account the sensitivities of some Indians. There is little doubt that the organisation will be much more circumspect about its coverage of India in the future."

There have also been complaints about the cultural impact of satellite television programs. In 1995, an Indian court issued a warrant against media baron Rupert Murdoch after complaints that STAR TV had defamed Mahatma Gandhi. After a guest on a STAR TV talk show in May 1995 described Mahatma Gandhi as a "bastard bania (trader)," Gandhi's great-grandson, Tushar Gandhi, sued STAR TV, the show's producers TV 18, as well as the participants, for Rs. 500 million ($15 million). In his order, Bombay's Chief Metropolitan maintained that this was a prima facie case of insult and defamation and issued a bailable warrant against Murdoch, which means that Murdoch or his representative would have to post bail of Rs. 5,000 ($250) to guarantee his presence in court at a later time.

Recently, India's Censor Board has initiated legal proceedings against Star Movies for showing "indecency" in its movies. The Film Censor Board objected to the network's "overdosed explicit sex scenes" on more than 175 programs shown by the network's three channels — Star Movies, Star Plus and the Hindi-language channel Zee TV. Following a court order last year, the Censor Board has launched a campaign to provide "greater accountability" in satellite television programming.

While the warrant against Murdoch is unlikely to be put into effect, it comes on the heels of criticism of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and the furore surrounding the launch of CNN. The BBC had annoyed Indian government officials with a report that a shrine in the politically sensitive state of Kashmir had been destroyed by the Indian army. The government in return quickly seized on a BBC television item on Kashmir that had been spliced together with background footage from the conflict in Chechnya. Commentators on Doordarshan used the footage to try to undermine BBC's credibility. The error underlined a serious concern in India about the influence of foreign media on popular perceptions. "There is no harm in seeing CNN or BBC and learning about the world, but global events need to be interpreted to the Indian public from an Indian point of view," said an editorial in the highly respected Indian daily the ***Times of India***.

Public Interest Broadcasting and the Future of Indian Television

With the opening up of the country's television environment to commercial satellite broadcasting, and with Doordarshan aggressively competing with these new services for audiences and advertising revenues, the prospects of protecting or fostering broadcasting in the public interest look extremely bleak. The possibility of establishing alternative, non-commercial broadcasting channels was, until recently, limited by two problems. The cost of setting up a satellite based service is so highly prohibitive, that a non-commercial service would be extremely difficult to sustain and, second, the government had a monopoly on terrestrial broadcasting. But in February 1995, the Indian Supreme Court dramatically altered the playing field by setting aside the legal basis for the government's monopoly over terrestrial broadcasting. Until the Supreme Court's decision, the government drew its right to operate the country's broadcasting services from the Indian Telegraph Act of 1885 which empowers the government with

the exclusive right to "establish, maintain and work" wireless services. In addition, the Constitution lists broadcasting as the sole domain of Parliament, effectively shutting out the states from making any laws with regard to television. Within the ambit of these provisions it was assumed that media autonomy or liberalisation in any form was the prerogative of the government to grant. But since the mid-1980s, a number of legal and media scholars have been arguing that broadcasting should be subject to the same freedoms as the press. They have demanded that broadcasting be treated as a fundamental right and that the government's monopoly should be challenged in the courts (Chatterji 1991).

This is precisely what the Board for Cricket Control of India and Transworld International (TWI), a foreign sports television service, did when the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting and Doordarshan forbade them from first telecasting and then initiating a satellite up-link of a cricket tournament in Calcutta. In 1993, the Board signed a contract with TWI giving it the right to telecast the six nation Hero Cup Cricket tournament. The contract was signed after TWI put in the highest bid in a global tender that included Doordarshan. Doordarshan initiated a series of measures aimed first at preventing TWI from telecasting the tournament at all, and, when that failed, from preventing it from up-linking live to its satellite based platform. In the course of this process Doordarshan accused TWI of violating the country's foreign exchange rules and had its equipment seized by custom officials. It also accused the country's cricket administrators of selling the country's honour by accepting the Rs. 170 million ($5 million) offer of TWI over the Rs. 10 million ($300,000) offer made by Doordarshan.

In its judgement upholding the right of TWI to telecast the Tournament live, the Supreme Court held that Article 19 (1) (a) of the Indian Constitution which deals with "the fundamental right to freedom of speech and expression includes the right to communicate effectively and to as large a population not only in this country but also abroad, as is feasible" and that "there are no geographical barriers to communication. Hence every citizen has a right to use the best means available for the purpose" and "at present, electronic media, that is, TV and radio, is the most effective means available for the purpose" (quoted in ***The Hindu***, February 20, 1995). While the decision recognised that airways are public property and that the government has the right to regulate the broadcasting in the public interest, by including broadcasting as part of the fundamental right to freedom of speech and expression, the Court held that the Constitution forbids monopoly of either individuals or of the government of any media. It concluded that "air waves and frequencies were public property and hence in the public interest they should be protected from monopoly" (quoted in ***The Telegraph***, February 20, 1995).

The Court directed the government to establish an independent public authority (rather than a governmental or private agency) for "controlling and regulating" the use of airwaves for radio and TV. It said the public authority should be formed with representatives of various social interests but left it to the government to work out the constitution of the authority and its method of functioning. The Court's decision holds out the promise of significant structural changes in Indian broadcasting and the possibility that television may finally free itself from both commercial and governmental control.

Conclusions

Though the state's control over television has not been relinquished easily it has, for all purposes, relinquished almost all of television's early commitment to the development process. While television grew in India as an instrument of state expansion, the state's attempt to retain control over it failed because of its inability to develop programming that could retain audiences in the face of external competition. Sponsorship of private programs through Doordarshan became the mechanism through which the state attempted to retain control over the viewer-citizen. The result is that from a completely state-dominated medium television became a carrier of commercially sponsored, privately produced programs".

Over time the state's control over television will continue to diminish. Already there is talk of, if not privatising Doordarshan, then constituting its commercial channels as a separate network run by a public sector corporation. As its revenue structure begins to change and Doordarshan begins to respond to increasing commercial pressures, the character of its programming will begin to increasingly reflect the demands and pressures of the market place. Caught between the state and the market, the public interest finds itself increasingly squeezed out of the country's television agenda.

Despite DD1, Doordarshan's public interest programming and its agricultural, educational and cultural programming may come to represent little more than the vestigial remains of its original public service orientation. With the government having imposed on Doordarshan the burden of becoming financially self-sufficient and lacking any means of generating revenue other than advertising (for example license fees), Doordarshan will inevitably become vulnerable to the pressures of audience ratings and advertising revenues. The consequences for its programming are already becoming apparent, as Doordarshan begins to cater to those segments of the audience that are attractive to advertisers. Pendakur argues that Indian television policy "simultaneously serves its own propaganda needs as well as the demands of indigenous transnational capitalists, along with the entertainment prerogatives of the middle/upper middle classes" (Pendakur 1990, 242). Similarly Mankekar maintains that Doordarshan's discourses are directed at co-opting the upwardly mobile classes, who in turn are "captured" simultaneously as a market for consumer goods advertised by sponsors of programming and as an audience for nationalistic serials (Mankekar 1993, 543).

But the Supreme Court's recent decision ordering the government to establish an independent broadcasting authority to regulate television in the public interest, holds the promise of allowing Indian television to escape both the stifling political control of the state and the commercial pressures of the market. There are a number of other constituencies like educational institutions, non-governmental organisations and social service agencies who can develop and maintain independent television stations. The original goals of educational and developmental television need not be lost in the state-market conflict. The Supreme Court has provided an opportunity to develop a "public" alternative. How the country responds to this opportunity in the next few years will determine the future of public broadcasting in India.

Notes:

1. Sinha, field notes in New Delhi, July 21, 1995.

2. Sinha, field notes in New Delhi, November, 1995).

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