

# Indian Television in the Era of Globalisation: Unity, Diversity or Disparity?

Mira Kapil Desai

- *With globalisation, privatisation and liberalisation, transnational media flow and content have increased enormously, especially in the third world countries leading to the threat to local communication-media industry.*

*With the GAT/WTO agreements, the issue of "cultural exception"/protection of the audio-visual sector is a main concern to many governments including India. This paper elaborates about the Government response to developments of transnational-transborder-satellite television in the country and examines the issues of diversity in the Indian television scene. The paper examines the role of the Indian state in the times of cultural homogenisation and assesses whether Indian television in the era of globalisation projects cultural unity, diversity or disparity. The paper discusses unity, diversity or disparity in terms of language, religion, access and division in Indian media environment in the era of globalisation.*

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## Background

Last decade refers to global connectivity, compression of time and space and market ruling over the State. All over the world remarkable changes and challenges marked the end of the twentieth century. The changes mainly in technology of communication and transportation, deregulation of capital, liberalisation and desire of cultural exchanges and challenges to regulate for the reluctant State, global competition, market driven economy and increasing interdependence of global economy are realities of the nineties. Globalisation increasingly brought the realisation that the State is losing power and freedom of action and an unprecedented movement of cultural homogenisation is taking place across the globe.

UNESCO comments that as the globalisation of markets, technology and information sweeps the world, growing homogenisation is countered by accelerating fragmentation: people are brought increasingly together at the same time they are driven apart. The twentieth century has been the most disastrous in human history in social and political terms. 'Emergence of culture is an important factor in determining the status of an individual in society or of a nation in the world is a matter of great significance' Singh (1998).

Audiovisual landscapes encompassing television, radio, cinema, video game and multimedia sectors in respect of both production and distribution/broadcasting (including cable and satellite) and other areas of culture (publishing, the arts, cultural institutes and heritage) have a special role to play in any society. These sectors often referred to as 'cultural industry' face the threat of 'imperialism' all the more in the era of globalisation. Public policies of legislative, regulatory or financial measures put in place by the State in co-operation with other parties are of special importance in

such a circumstance. These cultural goods are different from other goods and services, and deserve different and/or exceptional treatment. This differential treatment has to reflect even in the international trade agreements and in the demands for effective and strong regulatory frameworks to redefine cultural policies focusing on the promotion and development of cultural industries.

As tariffs, quotas, import licensing, and other long visible trade barriers come down, other concerns become more obvious. The "cultural exception" is just one of the possible means for achieving this objective of promoting cultural diversity ([http://www.unesco.org/culture/industries/trade/html\\_eng/question18.shtml#18](http://www.unesco.org/culture/industries/trade/html_eng/question18.shtml#18)). Government regulations, quotas, exemption and concessions, subsidies, supply restrictions, and intellectual property protections are few of the responses for cultural protection-exception to counter fears of cultural homogenisation.

Sinclair (1997) comments that the STAR's strategy of 'going local' shows how much language and culture have emerged as 'tangible markets'. Hamelink (1994: 111) commented, "A basic ingredient is missing for global culture. Culture provides people with a sense of identity, a past, destiny and dignity. Culture is bound to time and space. Global culture is inherently weak as it has no historical and spatial location...but there undoubtedly is a process of cultural globalisation". The trends of localisation, cultural adaptation of global products and the role of language in regionalisation support Hamelink's comment.

From the audience perspective, younger generations are growing up watching the western content values and understand little of their indigenous media (Varma, 2000). Commercialisation, the diminishing role of the State, the threats to public service broadcasters and the impact of western contents on domestic productions in form of 'genres, formats or production values' (Sereberny-Mohammadi 1991, Richards, 2000) are all facts indicating that protection measures are required. Canada, China, Australia and France are few examples where parameters exist to ensure local content on television to restrict different types of foreign programmes. Against this trend, India, Philippines, Thailand, Hong Kong and Japan are few of the countries that have opted for an 'open sky' policy.

This paper examines the post-1990 developments in India on the television front. It elaborates on the Government res-

ponse to the development of transnational-transborder-satellite television in the country and examines the issues of unity, diversity and disparities in the Indian television scene.

## India - A case in Point

India has a pluralistic character in terms of ideas, languages, forms of worship, architecture, agricultural practices, dress, handicrafts, medicine, industry, science and instruments of production and consumption. Apart from more than six religious orientations, the language scenario in India is very complex. There are 1562 mother tongues, 10 writing systems, 76 languages in the school system out of 2000 codified languages. The Indian constitution recognises 18 languages in its schedule eighth spoken by 98% population. Vijayanunni (1999) reports that nearly 20 per cent of the population in India is bilingual while just over seven percent is trilingual.

The Indian media mosaic is diverse yet unified. Folk forms of dance, music, oral traditions, story telling and Government control from newsprint to telecommunication unite Indian media. Another common factor is the Indian film industry that started in the country almost at the same time as it did in the world. Since 1912, India has indigenously developed a culturally rooted film industry, which makes the largest number of films in the world. Indian film industry has been a strong influence on the rest of the media. Radio, television and music industry rely heavily on Indian film industry. The American hegemony of Hollywood has never bothered the Indian audio-visual market. Interestingly enough, Indian film industry is further divided into two broad categories- a northern one (mainly Hindi, the Indian national language) and a southern (languages of the southern states).

India is one of the few nations with capabilities in satellite technology having influenced developments on the television front. Table-1 in the Annexes notes the satellite launches by the Government of India. Post-1990 satellite television in India has become transnational in nature. It coincided with the entry of multinational companies in the Indian markets under the Government policy of privatisation. The implications were private ownership in disguised forms, absence of censorship or any such controls, autonomy and

commercialisation of the medium and economic, political and cultural implications of transnational messages. The concept of television as an intimate and family medium is being utilized to its fullest to influence the rapidly expanding middle class in India (estimated to be 222-250 million of the 535 million people with access to television). Today 535.4 million people have access to television in a country of 100 million people.

Nowadays Indian television means regional television networks, language channels, country/language approach by commercial broadcasters and preference for public service broadcaster due to economic and other considerations by Indian audiences. Indian television also means confusion for national identity, lack of language representation, division of urban-rural areas, co-existence of private and public systems, dilemmas of prioritisation of education upon entertainment, development over market and so on. India is in this context a very interesting case in point for cultural diversity debate as the diversity inherently brings complexities.

## Television in India

Television was initiated in most developing countries including India mainly due to a 'political will' (UNESCO 1953 and 1964, Katz & Wedell 1977). It accomplished technical efficiency over the years (from black and white to colour, portable television sets, television broadcasting by satellites, development of cable television), establishing itself in the society due to private investment in television sets and finally strengthening its presence because of advertisers' interest in the medium since 1976, when the first advertisement was aired on Indian television.

History of television in India dates back to 15<sup>th</sup> September 1959, when experimental telecasts from radio stations began due to a grant from UNESCO (UNESCO 1953, Bhatt 1994). A one-hour transmission service became regular exactly after six years with a daily news bulletin in 1965. SITE was the first step in the direction of satellite television in India. Little happened in Indian television prior to Satellite Instructional Television Experiment (SITE), an experimental six-state initiative in television-based communication for social and development communication. Indian television

was separated from Indian radio in 1976.

**Television sets:** In 1962 there were only 41 sets in the country that rose to 2,75,424 in 1974 and boomed to 4,76,026 (173%) in the next two years. The last official figure of television sets in the country by 1984 was 36,32,328 since the policy of licensing of television sets was called off in 1985. Table-2 in the Annexes notes the developments thereafter with a total of 74.71 million sets in the country today, 57.72 million of which are black & white and 16.99 million are colour sets. Prior to 1983, 28 per cent of the Indian population mainly in metropolis (except SITE areas) had access to television. The proportion increased to 53 per cent in 1985, 62 per cent by 1988 and today it covers almost 90 per cent of the country's population.

**Video & Cable boom:** Video boom, cable television and dish antennas in five-star hotels were few of the factors facilitating the change of face of satellite television in India in the early eighties. In less than five years, from 1984 to 1989, the penetration of video moved from the capital down to the districts and villages (Shah 1997, Agrawal 1991). Enterprising individuals in apartment blocks placed a video in their homes or their garages and started offering a cable TV service to people in their vicinity. Cable television appeared in the United States in late 1940's and grew by 1967 for a different purpose, to deliver over-the-air television signals to areas where reception was inadequate because of topography or distance. Even in most western European countries it was limited to relay transmission of broadcast signals in the eighties. In India it appears in the early eighties for altogether different purpose, to deliver mass entertainment needs of audiences who can afford cable connection (Jehoram, 1983). The growth of cable television homes in urban India indicates a rise from 0.41 million in 1992 to 40 million in 2002 as noted in the Table-3.

Cable operators are an important link in Indian television distribution. A cable operator using dish antennas receives programmes and redistributes them to individual household subscribers through a cable network. The costs are distributed to such a great extent that the subscriber can receive an average of 40 channels for a monthly subscription fee of about 1.25 Euros to 8.50 Euros after paying some installation charges.

India opted for the British model of broadcasting. Parallel to the entertainment-driven market model of television, India

has also a number of ongoing educational and social communication experiments mainly through the Development and Educational Communication Unit, Indian Space Research Association. The notable ones are GRAMSAT (Gramin Satellite- Accelerating the pace of Rural Development), Jhabua Development Communication Project, Training and Development Communication Channel, GyanVani- educational radio and television services.

## Response of the Indian Government

Up to 1991 the television broadcasting in India meant that the Indian State controlled the nation-wide network, *DoorDarshan*. By 1991 satellite television took the form of 'transnational television' with telecast of Gulf war by CNN. McDowell (1997: 168) notes that more channels, cable television distribution regulation, together with some programming changes highlight the Government of India's response and policy choices in 1990s. According to *India Today* dated 31<sup>st</sup> March 1992, an internal report of the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting had predicated as early as February 1991 that 'Programmes specifically targeted at Indian audiences are likely to be beamed from foreign satellites in the near future'. The reactions of the Government of India in the print media during that time were that 'there is no threat' (*Indian Express* 1992, *The Times of India* 1992). As Reddi (1996: 243) notes, 'inaction is the best condition for private enterprises to flourish, and they are now unstoppable'.

*DoorDarshan* underwent major changes in the period from 1993 to 1998. Tracey (1998) notes, "...the shift of emphasis on *DoorDarshan*...within the overall context of growing commercialisation of media in India (and even many other developing countries across globe)". The historic judgement of the Indian Supreme Court on airwaves in 1995 stated: "air waves or frequencies are public property. Their use had to be controlled and regulated by a public authority in the interest of the public and to prevent invasion of their rights".

Laws, rules and regulations do exist in India, but on the whole they facilitate the reception of foreign satellite programmes; the Indian state actually 'actively mediated the process' (McDowell, 1997: 155). Prasar Bharati Act of 1990

provided 'for the establishment of a Broadcasting Corporation for India, to be known as Prasar Bharati, to define its composition, functions and powers and to provide for matters connected therewith or incidental thereto'. In 1991, the government of the Congress (political party then in power) re-examined the Prasar Bharati Act of 1990 to fight the fear of competition from private television channels.

After the initial licensing of dish antennas to restrict satellite television, the Government came up with distribution regulation in form of Cable Television Network Regulation Bill (1994) and the Act was passed in 1995. The Government started taxing cable operators in a bid to generate revenues. The rates rose by 35 percent in 26 states of India. The Act made is mandatory for the Cable operators, who must register their companies in the Post Office and pay entertainment taxes. More significantly, the Act made transmission of at least two *DoorDarshan* channels obligatory, and drew up a programming and advertising code, the adherence to which would be the responsibility of the operator.

Indian government's stand to technological developments is clear from the New Telecom Policy 1999 of BJP Government which reads, 'The Indian telecommunications system continues to be governed by the provisions of the Indian Telegraph Act, 1885 (ITA 1885) and the Indian Wireless Act, 1933. Substantial changes have taken place in the telecommunications sector since 1992. ITA 1885 needs to be replaced with a more forward looking Act'. In 2001 the Communication Convergence bill was introduced by the Department of Telecommunications *to promote, facilitate and develop in an orderly manner the carriage and content of communications (including broadcasting, telecommutonication, and multimedia), for the establishment of an autonomous Commission to regulate all forms of communications, and for the establishment of an Appellate Tribunal and to provide for matters connected therewith or incidental thereto*. On December 1, 2002, the Communications Minister reported that the Government is not in a hurry and the decision will be taken by May 2003.

## Unity, Disparity or Diversity? The Complexities

**Language:** The language landscape in India is very

complex. There is a large number of population, which knows English. At the same time, the southern part of India was always marginalized in the process to promote national language 'Hindi-centric, Delhi-centric' programming (Singhal & Rogers, 2001: 98). With their great success, private satellite channels created history in southern India due to 'a preference for the language, quality of programme content, availability of preferred programming types or through identification with the socio-cultural context' (Muppiddi, 1999). DoorDarshan has regional language channels in 15 languages but they are available through cable. Only nine languages are represented through private satellite channels. Many satellite channels in India today are bilingual. Thus, taking a case of '*Hinglish*' (Hindi + English) comments that its use 'has been the contributory factor in the expansion of Indian television outside the borders of the country' and expresses his concern because an 'increasing emphasis on entertainment-led **Hinglish** television may be cause of celebration for post-modern view of a culturally hybrid, globalised world resulting in a linguistic and intellectual confusion that may trivialise the vital public concerns' (2000: 308).

**Religion:** Culture in Indian television is still framed under the mainstream of 'Hindu' identity with a high rate of mythological features. Mostly Hindu, highly urbanized-upper middle class representations and stereotyping of religious identity is the core content of the television programming. Myths like *Ramayana* and *Mahabharat* played a significant role in promoting Hindu-centric national identity (Mitra 1993, Rajagopal 2000). *DoorDarshan* as per the programming code never named any community but international broadcasters do not follow that code. Shield & Muppiddi (1996: 19) conclude, "The plurality of representations (post-1990)...would render ineffective any attempts at propagating a highly selective version of national identity and culture".

**Access:** The television landscape of four Asian countries (Senstrup & Goonasekera, 1994) revealed that of the four countries under study compared to Korea and Australia where 99.9 and 99 percent households have television sets, India has only 20 per cent households with one television. Seventy percent of the television sets in India are black & white and the disparity across and within the states range from 86 per cent B&W (in Bihar) to 32 percent B&W (in

Kerala). The issue of B&W is crucial in the sense that the set has limited capability to tune in channels and so inherent limitation to access 100+ private satellite channels. Krishnan (2001: 48) rightly remarks, "a lot of time and energy in television channels is spent on the programming aspect without sufficient emphasis being placed on the distribution aspect". Besides, many Indian households who cannot afford other things, own a television set and at times cable connection. This leads to a lot of pressure to conform to the norms projected on television without having resources to do so. And with the social development-education agenda displaced with the marketing messages, the disparity and diversity in the scenario can lead to social unrest and conflicts.

**Divisions:** After 1992, Indian television advertising invariably targets to urban upper middle class, Satellite Hindi channels are 'unabashedly urban north Indian' (Bajpai, 1999: 54). *Salwar Kameez* (Indian female clothing) is a sign of liberated woman in the southern language private channel *Sun* while for Hindi channels it is a sign of tradition or conservatism. Door Darshan's figures report that 73.8 per cent of urban households has television sets while 23.7 per cent of rural homes has television and the ratio of urban and rural C&STV households is 40.6 to 6.5. There is a disparity of access, projection and representation. The diversity that 'pays' gets 'space' in present media environment.

Ninan (2002) comments that the press censorship in India means 'censorship imposed by the market, by political correctness, by militancy and extremism, by the political connections of the editor/owner, by the inability to substantiate, and generally on account of laziness accompanied by fear of libel (Can't get proof or the other side's version? Just drop the name.)'. Indian television has more or less the same players.

## Conclusion

*"I do not want my house to be walled in on all sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the culture of all the lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any".* This most frequently cited quote by Mahatma Gandhi, Father of the Nation, becomes

most relevant when it comes to culture and globalisation. Today Indian television has become the mirror of cultural diversity present in the Indian society; it unites Indian society mainly through dependence on respective film industries while disparity still exists in terms of representation of identity and access.

What happened in Indian markets is a clear indication of collision of culture and commerce. The legal frameworks may be sound on paper but that does not ensure implementation. 'Unity in Diversity' the catch slogan of the Government of India appears to be in disparity with the ground reality. Indian consumers have multiple choices and the Indian Government is working hard to cope with the changes in the media environment in its own tortoise style. Indian television in the era of globalisation is witnessing 'the elimination of the government monopoly and the attempt at broadcasting regulation (as) mere reactions' (Mehta, 1998) due to technological developments and market forces.

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## Annexes

**Table 1. Milestones of INSAT launches by the Government of India**

Satellite	Launch Date
INSAT 1A	April 10, 1982
INSAT 1B	August 30, 1983
INSAT 1C	July 21 1988
INSAT 1D	June 12 1990
INSAT 2A (First indigenously built second generation satellite)	July 10 1992
INSAT 2B	July 23 1993
INSAT 2C	December 7 1995
INSAT 2D	June 4 1997
INSAT 2E (Last multipurpose satellite in INSAT 2 series)	April 1999
INSAT 3A	February 2000

Source: DECU, 2000

**Table 2. Television Households in India**

Year	1985	1990	1995	1997	2002
No. of sets (in millions)	6,8	6,8	6,8	6,8	6,8

Source: Doordarshan 1997 and [www.ddindia.net](http://www.ddindia.net)



**Table 3. Cable Television Homes in India**

Year	Jan 1992	Feb 1993	Oct 1993	Jun 1995	Dec 1996	Sept 1998	1999	2002
Estimated households (in millions)	0,41	3,30	7,23	9,30	11,0	18,5	29 (NRS)	40 (NRS)
							25 (NRS)	

Source: Doordarshan 1997, The Economic Times 1998, IRS and NRS Figures

**Table 4. Transnational Television on Indian Sky**

Panamsat 4	Asiasat 1	Asiasat 2	Intelsat 703	Intelsat 704	Thaicom 2/3
BBC	StarSports	CNBC	TVI	Eenadu	PunjabiWorld
CNN	Star Plus	TV 5	SunMusic	VijayTV	RajTV
Discovery	Star Movies	Star News	Asianet	Gemini TV	Asianet
ESPN	Zee Cinema	Star TV	Sun TV	MTV	ATN
Home TV	ZeeTV	TVE	UdayaTV	SunTV	ATNBangla
MTV	Star World	Sky News			ATN Hindi
Sony TV	Zee India	CCTV			
TNT		TVSN			
Music Asia					

Source: India Infoline Sector Reports Media Sector Update, Thu, 15-Mar-2001

<http://www.indiainfoline.com/sect/medi/up03.html>

**Table 5. Milestones of Television in India**

Year	Event
1959	TV was introduced in Delhi as experimental service under UNESCO grant
1965	Daily broadcast of an hour was regularised as a service
1966	Verghese Committee recommends autonomous National Broadcast Trust.
1969	Agreement for SITE experiment with NASA, USA
1968	Increase in the duration of Television service
1975	SITE was launched in 2400 villages of six states for a year
1976	DoorDarshan- national broadcaster of India, separated from All Indian Radio
1980	First Television commercial was telecast
1982	INSAT-1A launched, TV go Colour, National telecast of Asiad games
1984	First sponsored serial Called 'Hum Log' telecast, UGC CWCR began
1987/ 89	Morning transmission began, Afternoon transmission began
1990	<i>Prasar Bharati</i> Bill was passed by Indian Parliament after many amendments
1991	STAR beamed its satellite channels to India in May
1992	Zee started Hindi channel as a part of STAR network
1993	Four additional satellite channels & regional channels in 10 languages by DD
1995	DD launched international channel, Supreme Court's landmark judgement on 'air wave as public property', Ram Vilas Paswan Committee on National Media Policy, Cable (Television Network) Regulation Act promulgated
1997	Broadcast Bill was introduced in LokSabha under which <i>Prasar Bharati</i> Board (Broadcasting Corporation of India) was constituted in September
2001	Communication Convergence Bill of Department of Telecommunication was introduced in LokSabha
2002	DD has 1242 TV transmitters reaches 40 million of the 75 million TV households have C&S connection. CATV Networks (Regulation) Amendment Bill was introduced with a view to mandating an addressable system for pay channels through cable networks Conditional Access System Bill awaits Rajyasabha approval to become Act

**Table 6. Acts & Regulations for cable & television in India**

<p><b>The Cable Television Networks (Regulation) Amendment Bill (2002):</b> The new policy permits to link up with any television channel from India. It also allows the Indian news agencies to have their own connection facilities for purposes of newsgathering and its further distribution. This Bill includes the Conditional Access System provision for households to choose satellite channels. The Bill is under Parliamentary discussion.</p>
<p><b>The Broadcasting Bill (1997):</b> The Bill is to provide for an independent authority to be known as the Broadcasting Authority of India, which is for the purpose of facilitating and regulating broadcasting services in India. It made it mandatory for all the channels to transmit programmes from Indian territory and kept cap on foreign equity.</p>
<p><b>Cable (Television Network) Regulation Act (1995):</b> There has been a haphazard mushrooming of cable television networks all over the country due to the availability of signals of foreign television networks via satellites. To check the screening of undesirable programmes and advertisements which are screened on these channels and to regulate the operation of the cable television networks in the country, so as to bring uniformity in their functioning, the Cable Television Networks (Regulation) Act was passed in both Houses of the Parliament.</p>
<p><b>The Prasar Bharati Act (1990):</b> This Act was passed to provide for the establishment of a Broadcasting Corporation for India, to be known as Prasar Bharati. It says that it shall be the primary duty of the Corporation to organise and conduct public broadcasting services to inform, educate and entertain the public and to ensure a balanced development of broadcasting on radio and television.</p>
<p><b>The Copyright Act (1914):</b> "The importance of copyright was recognised after the invention of the printing press which enabled the reproduction of books in large quantities. The Indian Copyright Act was thus passed in 1914. But, during the last four decades, modern and advanced means of communications like broadcasting, litho-photography, television, etc made inroads in the Indian economy. It necessitated the fulfilment of international obligations in the field of Copyright. A comprehensive legislation had to be introduced to completely revise the Copyright law. This was achieved by the introduction of a Copyright Bill, 1957 in the Parliament."</p>
<p><b>The Indian Telegraph Act (1885):</b> The Indian Telegraph Act 1885 came into force on 1st October 1885. "Telegraph" means any appliance, instrument, material or apparatus used or capable of use for transmission or reception of signs, signals, writing, images, and sounds or intelligence of any nature by wire, visual or other electro-magnetic emissions, Radio waves or Hertzian waves, galvanic, electric or magnetic means. The Indian Telegraphic Act, 1885 was an Act to amend the law relating to Telegraphs in India.</p>