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Doordarshan – Denying the People's Right to Know

An alert and well informed public who can meaningfully participate in the democratic process necessarily depends on the existence of free and fearless media. The television is a potent medium of information. It can supplement, without replacing, in a powerful way the role of the press in a free society.

Francis Williams in his book *The Right to Know: The Rise of the World Press* (Longmans, 1969) has a chapter on news and television. He discusses the place one would give the medium in a democratic state. He tells us that Television has a wide span and that it tells the viewers "a great deal about a great lot". The news broadcast by Doordarshan does tell us a "great deal" but not about a "great lot". It tells us a great deal about the Prime Minister, his cabinet colleagues and their activities.

A recent study undertaken on behalf of the Indian Committee for Cultural Freedom and the Indian Liberal Group confirmed that the headlines are invariably devoted to Mr. Rajiv Gandhi and the Central Government. The study, after monitoring the broadcast of English news on television for a period of 90 days, conclusively established that the projection of ministers was excessive, and that inconvenient news either was suppressed or censored.

Observation of news broadcast on 10 days randomly selected between April and August 1986, revealed that on an average at least 5 items are devoted to the Prime Minister and the Union Ministers. This by itself is not objectionable, but when the most inconsequential event is not only mentioned but is also accompanied by a film clip then objection has to be raised on the ground of misuse of the medium. What newsworthiness does the item V.N. Gadgil giving away Harishchandra prizes or Narasimha Rao presiding over a lecture-cum-demonstration on yoga has for a viewer except that it affords exposure to the minister concerned? Can we afford to clutter a half-hour news programme with such trivialities at the cost of more important news?

The report based on the study, cites how Rajiv Gandhi had rebuked Doordarshan for continuing to project him much against his wishes. He had

described the people at Doordarshan as "unimaginative and bureaucratic". Yet the content has altered little. It continues to be, as N.L. Chowla puts it, a V.I.P. oriented news culture.



It is this culture of sycophancy and pandering to those in power that has led to the lack of news credibility of broadcast on Television. What can explain the deletion from the news broadcast on May 27, 1986 of Hegde's invitation to Joshi and Pawar to settle the boundary row or the faction fight in the Gujarat Pradesh Congress Committee or the *Bandh* in Darjeeling while a major part of the news broadcast focussed on the Prime Minister's participation in the function organised at Delhi on Nehru's death anniversary?

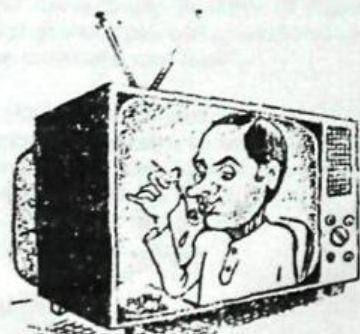
Directly linked to the excessive projection of ministers is what Anil Dharker calls Doordarshan's disease of "Seminaritis" and its Delhi-centric view of India, as the Dr. P.C. Joshi report called it. As a medium of dissemination of information television does not have to face the literacy barrier. As the network grows it can reach the remotest corners of India. But so far very little of what happens in these remote areas are part of the news. The precedence that urban India and Delhi in particular gets over rural India is a matter to which we must direct attention.

Any attempt by the Government to control the press, (during the Emergency for instance), is immediately

opposed and resisted, if not by all, at least by some committed to the citizen's right to know and to the freedom of speech and expression. But the control of the Government over television continues unopposed, and it will continue to be so controlled until it ceases to function as a government department.

An alert and well-informed public who can meaningfully participate in the democratic process necessarily depends on the existence of free and fearless media. The television is a potent medium of information. It can supplement, without replacing, in a powerful way the role of the press in a free society. It has the added strength of being able to transmit information immediately. With a capacity for visual coverage it can make the viewer an active participant in the issue concerned. It can unite people in a common sentiment. But all this is meaningful only if the medium is handled in a manner as to place "fair", "balanced" and "objective" news before the viewer. Unfortunately, Doordarshan is engaged in manipulating news so as not to displease men in power.

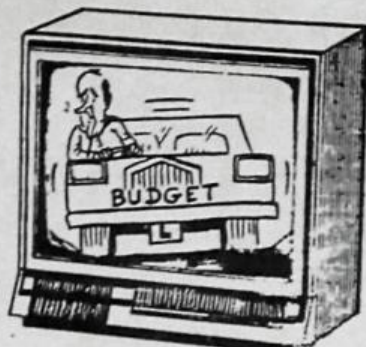
During the emergency the broadcasting media very obviously became the official mouthpiece. Akash Bharati (Ministry of Information & Broadcasting, 1978) relates that a conference was held on September 9, 1975, at which the then Prime Minister addressed the



Akashvani Station Directors. At the conference she questioned the "fuss" over radio's credibility. She stressed "I have said in a public forum that it (AIR) is a government organ. It is going to remain a Government organ. We are proud that it is a government organ". The then Minister for Information and Broadcasting V.C. Shukla went on to add his own 'informed' view that a government controlled media would reflect the policies of the party which runs the government and that nobody should make an issue out of it "... amongst the truth we pick and choose". The same traditions have been incorporated by Doordarshan. Truth which is picked and chosen can propagate lies. The news broadcast on Doordarshan on May 17, '86 included a seminar on drought, the inauguration of a machine by Mohsina Kidwai at the AIIMS college, the derailment of a train in Bangladesh. All these were "truths" but "unimportant" truths. The news broadcast did not mention the Arwal massacre in Bihar where 23 adivasis were murdered by the Bihar police. Here was an issue where public opinion should have been aroused, which deserved the widest coverage. It would have made the viewer aware of the oppression that continues under the garb of maintaining law and order. But Doordarshan chose to turn a Nelson's eye to the whole event. What if the news be "bad"? All is not lost. The irrepressible urge to please can, like a magician, call in existence only "convenient" news.

Again on May 15 '86 the news broadcast rambled over the Reserve Bank of India's introduction of machinery for speedy clearance of cheques, a tree plantation ceremony and the handicraft centre at the Aurobindo Ashram. The *Times of India's* headline the next day — Chinese intrusion in Arunachal Pradesh. The news covered in the press and by the broadcasting media seem to be talking of two different worlds as Anil Dharker observed. The omission of the Chinese intrusion in Arunachal Pradesh, was in total opposition to all dictates of good broadcasting. Doordarshan's broadcast lacks credibility. A concerned citizen has to turn to other sources for his facts, for correct information.

For Doordarshan there is only one side to an issue and that is the Government's. Any criticism of the government or its policy cannot be part of Doordar-



shan's broadcast. The voice of the opposition is rarely heard. Standards of objectivity and fairness are rarely maintained. Doordarshan can even use visual aids to tell a lie. Its coverage of the Delhi *bandh* was strongly criticised. In spite of buses and cars being off the road and shops being closed, Doordarshan succeeded in giving the viewer the impression that life in the capital had not been affected by the *bandh*.

Much of their broadcast on economic issues, the report tells us, are exercises in newspeak. "We are constantly bombarded with news about the success of the 20-point programme (20.6.86), share market boom, all high investments (21.5.86), record output of the potato crop at Lahul (8.7.86), World Bank lauding India's system of buffer stocks (8.7.86). Totally omitted are news items on how the crop insurance scheme is likely to be a big drain (T.O.I. 20.5.86), Rs. 350 crore oil lost at Bombay High (T.O.I. 22.5.86), FCI's wheat becoming unfit for consumption..."

The report discusses another event which exposes the priorities that govern Doordarshan's broadcasting of news. Charles Sobhraj's escape from Tihar jail found no mention in the news broadcast on that day. While newspapers wrote at length about the corrupt jail administration and R.K. Laxman's cartoon exposed how "insecure" Tihar jail was, Doordarshan turned a blind eye. Contrast this with the publicity given when bread, with morphine hidden in it, was discovered being handed over to one of the prisoners. Delhi's Lieutenant Governor H.L. Kapur spoke to Doordarshan about how jail administration had been stepped up and how further improvements in jail administration were taking place. Nothing was permitted, he said, to go into the jail without being checked and re-checked. In recognition of the good work the sub-inspector and constable would be promoted," noted

the report.

Another important criticism in the report levelled against Doordarshan's broadcast of news was that it provides little background information to news telecast. Most of it is just strung together. That is why the Sri Lankan problem or the issue in Punjab never grips the viewer. "Little effort is made to really inform, to go beyond the day-to-day event. News has to be treated as a process and not merely as an event."

Television was separated from A.I.R. in 1976 but little has been done by way of giving it any autonomy. Way back in 1948 Nehru spoke of approximating to the British model (the B.B.C.) of broadcasting not functioning as a government department. It was not feasible immediately according to him. In 1986 Rajiv Gandhi does not think the broadcasting media is ready for autonomy yet. But unless this autonomy is granted, distortion, censorship and suppression of "inconvenient" news will continue. Whether the broadcasting media should be open to competition is a matter for thought. But there are no two opinions about the absolute necessity at present of "earning" autonomy, when it comes to the broadcasting media, for "it is prompt access to accurate objective and relevant information that makes the people fully sovereign and renders elected representatives and all others in authority truly accountable."

And finally in wider perspective. The power of the mass media, as William I. Rivers, Theodore Peterson and Jay Jensen tell us in their book *The Mass Media and Modern Society*, (Rinehart Press, New York 1971) is not that of a tidal wave but that of a giant river. "It feeds the ground it touches, following the lines of existing contours by preparing the way for change over a long period. Sometimes it finds a spot where the ground is soft and ready, and there it cuts a new channel. Sometimes it carries material that helps to alter its banks. And occasionally, in times of flood, it washes away a piece of ground and gives the channel a new look".

(Readers interested in the ICCF-ILG report are welcome to write to the Hon. Secretary, Indian Liberal Group, 143, Mahatma Gandhi Road, Bombay 400 023. Copies are priced at a nominal Rs. 5 to cover costs)