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DOORDARSHAN

2243

A Study of its "News in English"

The Indian Committee for Cultural Freedom, and the Indian Liberal Group commissioned a study to monitor Doordarshan's "News in English".

The purpose - to assess Doordarshan's standards of objectivity, fairness and good reporting.

Spread over ninety days between April and August/1986, the study used The Times of India's coverage of news as reference.

The study confirms what is already widely accepted - that Doordarshan is guilty of not only distortion but also suppression of news. The study also comes up with factual evidence of the disproportionate coverage given to the establishment in general and the Prime Minister in particular.

This report, based on the study, provides conclusive evidence, if any were required, of the manipulation of a vital medium - a state monopoly - to subserve the interests of the party in power.

The report is divided in 3 parts:

1. Excessive projection of Ministers;
2. Suppression and censorship of inconvenient news; and
3. loaded and distorted news.

I

EXCESSIVE PROJECTION OF MINISTERS

The eminence of personalities involved in events is a factor which makes for news. But when the most inconsequential of events are not only mentioned but are also accompanied by film clips because some minister or the other happens to be present, then the telecast becomes objectionable. This is what is happening on Doordarshan. As it would require a tome to give a day-by-day commentary, we give below a summary of the news telecast on 10 different

days between April and August 1986. These days have been selected at random. (Asterisks indicate these items were not reported in The Times of India).

April 24

1. The Prime Minister's visit to Rajasthan.
2. The Prime Minister's statement in the Rajya Sabha that India will not be cowed down.
- 3.* The Information and Broadcasting Minister, Mr. V. N. Gadgil giving away the Harischandra Prize.
- 4.* The Home Minister, Mr. Narasimha Rao presides over a lecture-cum-demonstration of yoga by Swami Ram.
- 5.* The President & the Prime Minister giving a send-off to the Seychelles President.
6. The Prime Minister's address to the bi-annual Army meet.

May 5

1. The Prime Minister speaks to a Science and Technology Seminar.
2. The Prime Minister's statement on the Muslim Bill while speaking on the Education Policy.
3. A two-day Seminar of Doordarshan Directors featuring Information and Broadcasting Minister, Mr. V. N. Gadgil and Mr. Harish Khanna, Director-General of Doordarshan.

May 18

1. Mr. Narasimha Rao inaugurating the Anant Balike School.
2. Mr. Shankaranand's statement that only certain irrigation projects have received techno-clearance.
3. Mrs. Mohsina Kidwai inaugurating an Ayurvedic Vidyapeeth.
4. Report that Mr. V. N. Gadgil will lead the Indian delegation to the 9th Film Festival at Tashkent.

May 27

1. The Prime Minister's informal chat with pressmen saying some peace has returned to the Punjab.
- 2.* The Vice-President inaugurates a Photography Exhibition organised by the Inter-Parliamentary Union.
- 3.* The Vice-President releases a book on Mr. Jawaharlal Nehru's death anniversary.
- 4.* The Prime Minister contributing to the Jawaharlal Nehru Trust.
- 5.* The Prime Minister inaugurates a seminar on Mr. Jawaharlal Nehru.
6. Mr. Arun Nehru is unwell.

May 28

- 1.* The Prime Minister speaks at the CSIR Conference.
2. Mr. Laldenga calls on Sardar Buta Singh.
3. Mr. Arun Nehru is improving.
- 4.* Mr. Neil Kinnock meets the Prime Minister.
- 5.* Mr. Jagdish Tytler lays the Foundation-Stone for an air-terminal.
6. Documentary on India containing interview with the Prime Minister dealing with current Indian problems.

June 26

1. The Prime Minister in Mauritius.
2. Mr. K. R. Narayanan inaugurates a two-day "National Liberation" seminar.
3. Mr. Ram Niwas Mirdha introduces the Speed Post Service.
4. Mr. V. N. Gadgil announces that Telugu programmes from Hyderabad will be telecast throughout Andhra Pradesh.

July

1. The Prime Minister speaks to Congress(I) party workers in Calcutta.
2. The Prime Minister presents awards at the meeting of a Ladies Study Group.

3. The Prime Minister inaugurates a new Doordarshan Kendra.
4. The Prime Minister meets a group of Industrialists.
5. Celebrations marking the signing of the Mizo Accord.
6. Mr. Chidambaram inaugurates a programme organised by the Indian Institute of Public Administration.

July 19

1. Mr. Venkateshwaran arrives in Beijing.
2. Mr. Bhajan Lal and another Congress(I) leader elected to the Rajya Sabha.
3. The Prime Minister meets the President of India.
- 4.* Mr. Narasimha Rao participates in a meeting of the Sports Authority of India.

5.* Mr. K. C. Pant inaugurates a Seminar on "Taking Science to the masses".

August 9

1. The Prime Minister's Press Conference in Mexico.
- 2.* New Ceremonial Lounge at Indira Gandhi Airport inaugurated by Mr. Jagdish Tytler.
- 3.* The President inaugurates the All India Penology Conference in Agra.
4. Mr. Chidambaram's statement in Parliament on the arrest of Mr. Badal and Mr. Tohra.
- 5.* Floral tributes to Mrs. Indira Gandhi on the occasion of the Quit India Anniversary in Delhi.

August 13

1. The Prime Minister's statement in the Lok Sabha regarding the Gorkhaland agitation.
2. Mr. Shiv Shanker calls for extension of co-operation - SAARC Meeting.
3. Mr. Buta Singh's statement in the Lok Sabha that the Centre had asked the CBI to look into Gen. Vaidya's murder.

- 4.* The President releases a book "Azadi-ki-Kahani". Mr. Narasimha Rao speaks on the occasion.
- 5.* The Prime Minister says that his Government is determined to preserve Unity.
6. The Prime Minister expresses unhappiness over diversion of AI plane due to technical snag.

The Prime Minister himself is reported to have rebuked Doordarshan for over-projecting him. He is reported as saying "from my point of view, it is counter-productive and I have told them very categorically that they should not project me ... but somehow these people lack imagination and are so bureaucratic".

In an interview with Mr. Khalid Mohammed on April 13, 1986, Mr. Harish Khanna, the Director-General of Doordarshan observed that the Prime Minister felt that if he was inaugurating a building, information should be provided about the building ... instead of just focussing on the Prime Minister.

Our study shows that five months after the above statements, things have not changed materially.

Doordarshan's coverage is marked by sycophancy. It is interesting to note that on May 27, while Doordarshan covered in detail the Prime Minister's participation in functions organised in Delhi on Nehru's death anniversary, it failed to cover several important items which received front page coverage in The Times of India that day. Among these:

- a) A bandh in Darjeeling for the second day running.
- b) An invitation from Mr. Ramakrishna Hegde to Mr. S. M. Joshi and Mr. Sharad Pawar to settle the boundary dispute, and
- c) Reports of factional fighting in the office of the Gujarat Pradesh Congress.

The Times of India also carried in its middle page that Mr. Pranab Mukherjee had formed a "front group". This was ignored by Doordarshan.

II

SUPPRESSION AND CENSORSHIP OF INCONVENIENT NEWS

Doordarshan as a governmental department perverts the proper function of media as the watch-dog of democracy. A survey of the news broadcast on five days selected from our study period reiterates this point.

May 17

Doordarshan omitted any news of Belgaum and the border conflict. Neither did Mr. Tripathi's pleading on behalf of Mr. Pranab Mukherjee and others find any mention. Both these items made it to the front page of the Times of India.

Other items ignored were a report on how the Arwal firing was pre-planned; on the Talcher fire - how danger signals were ignored. On the other hand, Doordarshan reported a conference on how to deal with drought; Mrs. Mohsina Kidwai's inauguration of a machine at AIMS where she was the chief guest at their Convocation; and the de-railment of a passenger train in Bangladesh, all of which were accompanied with film footage.

Reports of the Arwal firing in Bihar in which a number of Harijans were massacred found no place in the telecast on May 17. The report which appeared in the Times of India revealed that the police action was pre-planned. Why was this issued blacked out? Doordarshan should have made the viewer aware of the horrors being perpetrated on the Harijans as a result of collusion between the rich and those responsible for law and order.

The Times of India reported that the Karnataka-Maharashtra border conflict was brewing in the early days of May. This development found no place in the news telecasts of that period. Even when the conflict made front page news in the newspaper, T.V. did not think it worth mentioning.

July 15

The lead item in the news telecast was TULF discussions with President Jaywardene of Sri Lanka, then a news report on the Reserve Bank of India introducing machinery for speedy clearance of cheques; an item on tree plantation; a report on the Sri Aurobindo Ashram handicraft centre; news of a meeting of the national integration committee presided over by Vice-President Venkatraman. But the telecast excluded news of Chinese intrusion into Indian territory - headlines in every newspaper. It was one of the deepest intrusions since the 1962 war. The Chinese had penetrated 6 to 7 Kms. into Indian territory in Arunachal Pradesh.

Why is the news on Doordarshan cluttered up with trivialities? Of the nineteen items included in the telecast on July 15, only three or four had news value.

On the other hand, Doordarshan omitted reports of

- a) 'Protected' U.S. aid for Pakistan;
- b) Mr. Ghulam Nabi Azad's visit to Goa to evolve a consensus among ruling Congress MLAs;
- c) The Andhra Pradesh Government's decision to hike the Backward Classes quota to 44%; and
- d) A new power base of young congressmen sought to be established to fight the 'old guard'.

All these reports appeared on the front page of The Times of India that day.

July 17

The news telecast opened with a report on the opening day of the monsoon session of Parliament - the Prime Minister expressing sorrow over the death of Jagjivan Ram, followed by other MPs expressing similar sentiments. The next was an item in which the Prime Minister expressed solidarity with the struggle against apartheid in South Africa; an item on how it was forty years since India banned trade with South Africa (no reference however to the fact that despite this ban, India continues its diamond trade with South Africa - an article that appeared in the Sunday Observer); British Minister Howe's visit to South Africa; General Ershad's pilgrimage to Ajmer, and so on. The papers that day were, on the other hand replete with reports of terrorists being trained in Pakistan, the U.S. resolve to protect Pakistan; and the Chief Minister of Arunachal Pradesh saying Chinese claims on Arunachal Pradesh was baseless.

July 20

The telecast this day included news of India's withdrawal from the Commonwealth Games; the President's visit to Kathmandu, the inauguration of a film festival and the crisis faced by OPEC.

There was no reference to a Parliamentary panel's indictment of Gujarat Chief Minister Amarsinh. A five-member parliamentary delegation led by Mr. Madhu Dandavate issued a statement that inept handling by the police and the State's political leadership had triggered off the lawlessness during the Rath Yatra in Ahmedabad.

Is it anathema for Doordarshan to carry news items critical of the party in power?

On July 27, the news that the army was called out in Kalimpong - a 42-cms news item in The Times of India on page one was blacked out by TV News.

One could continue. For instance, the suppression of the following news:

- a) Sobhraj's escape,
- b) the Chernobyl disaster (until much later),
- c) the Gorkhaland issue (until it became a political weapon for the ruling party),
- d) the communal clashes in Ahmedabad,
- e) the Karnataka-Maharashtra border dispute,
- f) the Arwal massacre.

These lead to TV News' loss of credibility.

III

LOADED AND DISTORTED NEWS

It is fortunate for the television news viewer that ^{other} sources of information are available. Otherwise, Doordarshan would be misinforming the public on a number of issues. A warped sense of priority leads Doordarshan to clutter up its news with trivialities such as Zail Singh releasing a book on Brahmavidya or Ramesh Bhandari inaugurating an exhibition of Ranganathan's cartoons but omit news of Chinese encroachments into Indian territory in Arunachal Pradesh or police firing in Arwal on Harijans. Their coverage of the opposition bandh in February drew fire from all sides. The eminent critic Amita Malik commented on the "ostrich like coverage" of the Delhi bandh.

Again on July 28, the TV newscast report that the bandh that day was largely peaceful. In fact, Mr. Buta Singh's thanks to the people for remaining calm was telecast. The Times of India on the other hand reported that violence marred the bandh in Delhi, 35 buses were damaged and a Deputy Commissioner of Police and two others were stabbed.

Projection of one point of view is a regular feature on Doordarshan's news telecast. That is why there was no proper evaluation of the Non-Aligned Meet at Harare. Mr. Dhiren Bhagat in his article in the Sunday Observer revealed

the manner in which Khomeini's speech at Harare was totally blacked out. Again, if one had viewed the telecast on August 4, the news on the Commonwealth laid greater emphasis on Rajiv's itinerary rather than the failure of the Commonwealth to force Britain to impose sanctions.

Most of Doordarshan broadcasts on economic issues 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-time high investments (21.5.86), record output of potato crops (8.7.86), the World Bank lauding the Indian system of buffer stocks (8.7.86) or how crop insurance schemes have been adopted by 15 states (18.5.86) or a 5.7% increase in oil export and a 11% increase in minimum wages for miners (28.6.86).

Totally omitted are news items like the one which appeared on 20.5.86 in the Times of India on how the crop insurance scheme is likely to be a big drain (19.5.86), oil valued at Rs.350 crores lost at Bombay High (22.5.86), ONGC ineptness hit private firms (25.5.86), FCI's wheat had become unfit for human consumption (23.4.86).

Why is it that Doordarshan only interviews people who endorse the government's point of view? At the time of the Kumbh Mela tragedy, none of the pilgrims interviewed found fault with the police machinery which all newspaper reports pointed out had broken down.

When Charles Sobhraj escaped from Tihar Jail, the telecast failed to mention it nor was there an indictment of security lapses. On the other hand, when bread with morphine hidden in it was discovered being passed on to one of the prisoners, Mr. Kapur the Lt. Governor spoke to Doordarshan about how jail authorities had been toned up and further improvements in jail administration were taking place!

A criticism of the government is not an attack on it and is permissible under the AIR Code which also applies to Doordarshan. Unfortunately for the viewer, Doordarshan is not following the Code which has been agreed to by all the parties. The result is there is only one point of view presented and that is the government's point of view.

The views telecast on the new education policy were one-sided. One heard the official point of view. But there were no reports of the critical views of eminent educationists. The newspapers reported their views many of which were quite critical. But Doordarshan saw fit not to publicise the criticism.

Reports are sometimes only partially true. For instance, in the telecast on July 22, Mr. Bharadwaj said in regard to the Bhopal tragedy that the U.S. Judiciary was in our favour. But what he did not say was that not a paise had been paid to the victims of the tragedy and the Rs.50 crores received was for relief and not compensation. Nor was the fact that Union Carbide had sold its Division, mentioned. All this was part of a news item on the first page of The Times of India.

Untruths are also resorted to. While one can understand the need for restraint so as not to inflame communal passions, one does not have to utter falsehood. On July 25, Doordarshan broadcast a statement by Mr. Buta Singh in the Lok Sabha stressing that members of both communities were killed whereas the fact was otherwise. This erodes TV's credibility.

Television news' promotion of "national unity and integrity" consists of film clips of Id, Buddha Poornima or Ganesh Utsav celebrations. It also consists of religious heads praying for peace or sharing satsangs or showing Ministers presiding over yoga demonstrations or releasing religious texts like the one on Brahnavidya. This certainly is no way of promoting secularism and most certainly not of national unity and integrity.

Namedia in its seminar "A Vision for Indian Television" in March this year spoke of the need to treat news as a process not merely as an event, as a fact and not as an act. It is a worthwhile effort to bring about this transformation for here is a medium which can at the same moment reach millions of people and unlike print, does not call for "previous preparation for assimilation".

For a thorough analysis and expose of Doordarshan news, we cannot do better than turn to the Joshi Working Group's Report on TV Software. (It will be recalled that the Group was set up by Mrs. Indira Gandhi's government in 1982). The Report says, under the heading VIP ORIENTED NEWS, "This could well be a description of Doordarshan news. It is a pity that a television system which is not only publicly funded but is also run by the Government, on the ground that this is necessary to make television serve the purpose of development in the direction of socialism, should show such little orientation towards

the common people in its news and current affairs programmes ... A witness said to us that Doordarshan's news bulletins often sound like court circulars. Another witness said that while it was the Prime Minister's duty to go from place to place and convey to different audiences the message of national unity, communal harmony etc., it was neither necessary nor appropriate for Doordarshan's news bulletins to report the same messages repetitively to the same audience Doordarshan news needs to be gathered and presented from perspectives not only of the Government, the ruling party, and the urban well-to-do, but also of the many other social, economic and political groups who constitute the nation the record of the Indian Press, which is privately-owned and run for profit, has been better in this respect than of Doordarshan which is subsidised by the tax payer and is run ostensibly in the public interest". (Chapter V paras 5, 6 and 8).

Bombay,
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This report seeks to study how far the Doordarshan broadcast of English news has departed from standards of objectivity, fairness and good reporting. It is based on data collected after monitoring the news for a period of about ninety days spread over the months from April to August. Therefore the conclusions can be regarded as definitive. The English daily The Times of India has been used as the standard to compare the coverage ~~been used as the standard to compare the coverage~~ in terms of priority, suppression, distortion, etc of news.

Tables have been prepared after analysing the news broadcast on three randomly selected days of the study period. It offers an insight into both the conclusions arrived at and the method adopted to arrive at these conclusions. It establishes that neither is arbitrary. It is in a sense a blue print of the report. The report itself serves to reiterate the conclusions arrived at and to add to the list a few new ones which are less evident on the days selected.