

Development (without) Communication: Viewing Doordarshan Methodologically

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Introduction

This paper is based on an attempt to understand the prevailing televisual scenario in India, with particular emphasis on Doordarshan (DD), from the vantage-point of Development Communication (DC). To note, despite the burgeoning literature on broadcasting in India and the DD in particular, except for stray instances (such as, Farmer 2003), DD's role in DC has not been problematized as it should have been by the social scientists specializing in media and communication studies. However, it must be made clear at the very outset that the paper does not intend to present a programme-to-programme analysis of DC- widely known as one of DD's "foundation pillars". The stress here is more on the current predicament of DD which, as we would argue, is faced with a vital dilemma - on the one hand, it cannot discard DC and lose a major component of its organizational-constitutive logic; on the other hand, if DD has to continue DC it has to be thoroughly reoriented, shedding its earlier 'authoritarian' form, to come to terms with the liberalized broadcasting scenario. While explaining how the dilemma has a direct link with the methodology of the DC itself we would avoid the argument that DD must discard its tie with DC. We take a rather unconventional route to argue, after a critical estimate of DD's tryst with DC, for a 'new look' DC for the sake of DD's survival with a distinct identity.

The main hypothesis of the paper is somewhat ironical: that communication is a blind spot in the methodology devised by DD in relation to DC. DC, to present a general description, is based on the construction and diffusion of specific developmental messages, relating to both institutional mechanisms and grassroot-level processes, with the aim of generating relevant knowledge and the subsequent conversion of received messages into action. But at the same time the spirit and the motive-force of DC need to have an interactive

character with “opening of dialogue, source and receiver interacting continuously, thinking constructively about the situation, identifying developmental needs and problems, deciding what is needed to improve the situation, and acting upon it” (Nair and White 1993:51). This is why and how DC is supposed to rest on two legs - *development* and *communication*. We would, however, argue that the DC, as devised and practised by DD, walks on one, that is, development.

Doordarshan's background

In order to understand why communication remained a blind spot in DD's scheme of DC it is imperative that we explore, albeit briefly, both DD's parentage and upbringing and its adulthood. A number of studies (Ohm 1999; Gupta 1998; Page and Crawley 2001) show that DD's emergence and its parenting are to be attributed to what we may describe as the *activist state*. Here we are referring to the post-colonial Indian state which, in the twilight of India's independence, had made itself the sole custodian of the development of the society. The activist state, so to say, acquired the form of an omnipotent and omnipresent state when it came to guiding the destiny of development of the its citizenry, entwined with the be-all and end-all objective of 'national integration'. The state, despite being so overwhelmingly empowered, needed to disseminate information about its development activities, preferably with the widest possible reach. DD, which began its operation in 1959, was supposed to be a major 'agent' of information dissemination.

Accordingly DD began its formal broadcast in 1959 with three prime ethos: '*To educate, to inform, to entertain*'. Of no less symbolic significance is the fact that DD's first incarnation was that of an 'experimental agent' involved in promoting educational programming in schools in and around Delhi. Interestingly, the first two ethos, which are traditionally recognized as major (pre)conditions to the official version of 'nation-building', illuminate the thrust in DD's functions, and beyond that, the rationale for its existence. But

what is of greater significance in our discussion is the patrimonial ambition that is inscribed in the prime ethos, which is perfectly in harmony with the developmental ambience desired by the 'activist state'. As Ohm (1999:82) writes: "The state's definition of Doordarshan has consisted of its central vision: that the future should bring forth an educated, civilized and united citizenship. Long after the proliferation of the private satellite channels it was still stated that DD's 'main aim is national integration, inculcating a sense of unity and making people proud that they are Indians'". To add at this point, the 'activist state' was not only responsible for inculcating such spirit in DD since the latter's birth; it was also responsible for constant parental surveillance of DD and the continuation of the same spirit in its 'adulthood'. The point continues to be true even in the days of Prasar Bharati, which has ostensibly been set up to provide 'autonomy' to DD and its sister concern, Akashvani. If it hints at some kind of incongruent and contradictory trend one can go further to point out that contradictions and ambiguities were DD's birthmarks. Thus, for instance, the very emergence and existence of DD in independent India (unlike that of radio broadcasting in the colonial India) continue to be ruled by the utterly colonial The Indian Telegraph Act (1885). If one takes into account that such an act, notwithstanding the anticolonial rhetoric of the Indian rulers, was regarded as 'necessary' by successive regimes it is not difficult to realize that DD was fated to be governed by a complex mix of patrimony, ambivalence and paradoxes. One can attribute much of DD's insecure adulthood that has brought DD down to face the dilemma, stated earlier, to the strictly statist parenting.

Development communication: Doordarshan style

It is perhaps not surprising, especially in the light of the discussion made in the previous section, that DC would be a perfect tool for DD in its key role as the *agent* of the 'activist state'. Farmer reinstates the proposition when she elaborates how the DC was sought to be utilized by DD "to justify monopoly over broadcasting and further to rationalise its centralised, politicised and hierarchical nature" (2003). Development, as such a very slippery and

amorphous concept, was defined by DD with a broad sweep - as creation of national imagination, stimulation of scientific temper, aid to social change, and ensuring progress. So far as DC was concerned, the messages of `development' were to accord particular attention to sectors like agricultural extension, education, health, family planning and so forth. All the sectors are evidently known not only as major means of development but also as major domains of `nation-building'.

While in an ideal mode dissemination of the messages of development has to be a two way-flow (thereby integrating the communicative dimension to it, a point which would be taken up later) DD, by virtue of being the loyal official media of the Indian state, continued to rely on one-way flow of information dissemination based on `officially appropriate' representations, as part of its duty to reinforce the ritualized `nation-building' process. A significant, though not the sole, instance in this context is the well-known programme *Krishi Darshan*, which started its telecast on 26 January, 1967, in which the overwhelming orientation was towards *top-down flow* of experts' advice by way of `informing' and `educating' the farmers about improving agricultural productivity. Vertical modes of information dissemination like this left many vital questions - from the farmers themselves - unaddressed and unanswered. Thus for instance, *Krishi Darshan*, the DD's longest surviving programme with prime-time scheduling, played no role in making a serious critical evaluation of the Green Revolution, in the specific context of its limitations and long-term disastrous effects on Indian agriculture. It is perhaps undesirable but not surprising if *Krishi Darshan*, DD's most publicised programme of DC, did not take up such a vital issue for consideration. The Indian state for a long time remained a victim of exuberance about the `miraculous' power of the Green Revolution, and DD in true display of loyalty toed the same line. Methodologically speaking, one sees in this instance how `development', and more specifically its state-sponsored publicity, came in the way of communication, thereby reducing *Krishi Darshan* to a programme for dissemination of data and information to

the 'target-group', rather than a programme which was supposed to promote an interface between development and communication.

Methodologically, DC as conceptualized and practised by DD is a combination of the Assimilationist and the Proselytic approaches - two major 'official' paths (Thomas 1997) of promoting 'nation-building' and 'national integration'. The former sanctions and induces the nation-state to submerge all particularistic identities - which are regarded as 'backward'/'primordial'/'primitive', and therefore 'illegitimate' - to be submerged in 'national identity'. The latter calls for promotion of a specific set of norms and values at the expense of other norms and values to make compulsory adherence to an exclusive vision of the state. A pre-fixed notion and formula of development is a product of the combination of these two approaches. On the other hand, what is marginalized by these approaches is the Multicultural Integrationist approach in which development is sought to be negotiated through the lived experiences, class inequalities, cultural pluralism and regional, ethnic and linguistic variety. While there is less scope for a detailed discussion on the point one must nevertheless add that the hegemony of the Assimilationist and the Proselytic approaches and the consequent marginalization of the Multicultural Integrationist approach result in the gross underestimation of expansive and substantive citizenship, thanks to the closure on rights, responsibilities, access to and participation in the development process. In the specific context of our discussion it can be mentioned that during the period of Emergency DD-sourced DC heightened this process, with the aggressive Indian state asking its citizens to "talk less". The DC programmes, attractively titled, such as the Bangla programme *Unnayaner Shapath (The Pledge for Development)*, were geared to publicise the "glorious achievements" made by the 20 point- Programme of the then ruling party.

It is, so to say, a natural law that top-down development facilitates top-down flow of information. Thus, the audience of the development-based programmes on DD were being 'informed' without having had the

opportunity to *communicate*. Such 'information-generating' programmes accord little importance to communication as a social process of construction, sustenance, neutralization and destruction of meanings in the material and symbolic environment. Accordingly, the methodology that was inscribed in the programme was unable to generate dialogues with the audience. The audience were treated as mere spectators, with severe underestimation of their potential to communicate and to take part in determining their own development-destiny. The adopted methodology also ensured that the programmes become the site of unicentric, unilinear and mechanistic transmission into the multicultural universe of India. The failure to make a distinction between information and communication led at one level to cordoning of debates, censure of opposing views or dissent, promotion of stereotypical images and readings, and selective interpretation of reality to cater to the needs of the regimes in power. At another level it led to the promotion of the image of *mechanistic* development at the cost of its *organic* foundation - the latter marked by people-centric process of simultaneous adoption-rejection, support-resistance, and innovation. The process was intensified by the absence of the right to communication in the broader political ambience, and the denial of right to fair representation and the right to access and participation in the national media. No less interesting is the fact that while DD was resorting to such non-communicative and non-participative methodology in giving shape to DC the theorists of DC were themselves indulging in intense self-criticism to strengthen its 'participatory' dimensions, with increasing stress on micro-level interactions, felt needs of the people and the greater utilization of local and/or indigenous technology, techniques, knowledge and skills.

SITE/Kheda/Jhabua: Landmarks

At this juncture we would refer to DD's three well-known experiments in DC (for a brief overview, see Khurana and Chaudhary, 1993: pp. 220-250), which despite having a number of constraints, seem to have revealed some positive trends so far as the construction of a new methodology is concerned.

The Satellite Instructional Television Experiment (1975-76) was conducted by the Space Application Centre of the Indian Space Research Organization (ISRO) which came into an agreement with the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) of the United States. SITE was a highly publicised "grand socio-technological experiment", which would broadcast television programmes to 2400 villages of six Indian states. The experiment had many constraints (Agarwal 1981; Agarwal 1983) which include the lack of communication between development agencies and broadcasters, greater attention to developing hardware at the cost of development of software, inadequate need assessment of the potential audience and deficient feedback mechanism, and so forth. But despite these constraints the fact remains that it was a pioneering experiment, backed up by sophisticated technology, in bringing DD at the doorstep of rural Indians with the explicit purpose of addressing their needs.

The Kheda Communication Project (KCP), started in 1976, was a notable step towards decentralized broadcasting, with Network Training and a specific channel devoted to DC. With decentralization as its *mantra*, it sought to develop a multi-faceted DC. It relied on participatory two-way teleconferencing for development training in model TV station, and sought to involve, through training, the representatives of the Panchayats, workers of milk cooperatives (Kheda being part of the AMUL network), *Anganwadi* workers and primary school teachers. It also resorted to the 'campaign mode' which is an essential technique for generating popular awareness, and adopted various formats for this purpose, such as puppet shows. The KCP also succeeded to some extent in bringing mainstream Indian academic institutions like the Indira Gandhi Open University and non-governmental organizations under its network. No less important, long before the intense debate on the localization of software, it had also stressed the development of local software to provide appropriate technological support to the people at the grass-root-level and thereby making DC more meaningful to the people for whom it is meant. KCP incidentally received the UNESCO prize for

having generated “rural local effectiveness”, but in a pathetic instance of privileging the urban at the cost of the rural it was terminated in 1985 to facilitate the establishment of a second television channel in Chennai.

The ISRO-sponsored Jhabua Development Communication Project started in Jhabua, a backward district in Madhya Pradesh, mostly inhabited by tribals. It rests on communication-support development to promote projects related to watershed management, health (especially of women and children), non-formal and adult education, rural local self-government and diverse issues falling under the labels ‘socio-economic’ and cultural. Significantly again, it repeatedly stressed on the participation of local people and the greater and consistent use of local language, local skill and local knowledge. The experiment at present has a marginal presence and has perhaps the least importance in DD’s current agenda, but its spirit and its role in bringing DD ‘next-door’, that too of the underprivileged sections of the society, should not be underestimated.

The cited experiments are extremely important in the context of the main thrust of our argument that despite DD’s overall failure to utilize the potential of DC the solution lies not in withdrawing the latter but in reorienting it by learning lessons from the failure. The three experiments cited here reveal that at least on certain occasions DD did try to learn lessons from the deficiencies and sought to make some amends in the next. Thus, KCP had incorporated a number of features as a result of the lessons learnt from the SITE. The number of features the Jhabua experiment has were either part of the SITE and the KCP or were added after learning lessons from the SITE and the KCP. The process thus displayed a gradual learning of lessons by DD and their progressive incorporation in DC. Thus, notwithstanding the fact that these experiments were not potent enough to break the bureaucratic code that binds DD’s DC, they remain instances of significant departures worth providing a second look. These *positive aberrations*, so to say, could be a ‘point of departure’ if DD decides to opt for a more effective DC.

Negotiating liberalization

The 1990s brought in sweeping changes in India with the formal adoption of the liberalization of the Indian economy in July, 1991. Significantly, it was the same year in which STAR TV made its entry to India. Such changes touched every walk of the life of the Indians and DD as a major media organization could not remain isolated. In fact, the impact of liberalization-characterized as it is by the advent of the market and retreat of the state from some key domains of governance - was quite heavy on DD. A major blow to the monopoly-power of the DD was dealt by the Supreme Court, which in a landmark judgement in a case (the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting versus Cricket Association of Bengal) in February, 1995, ruled that the government's monopoly over broadcasting was 'unconstitutional'. While the judgement was not particularly in favour of broadcasting being left free and without any control in the hands of the private media organizations it did prepare the ground for the deregulated broadcasting, setting free the televisual environment for competition. An excerpt from the judgement (Ministry of Information and Broadcasting Website):

For ensuring the free speech right of the citizens of this country, it is necessary that the citizens have the benefit of plurality of views and a range of opinions on all public issues. A successful democracy posits an "aware" citizenry. *Diversity of opinions, views, ideas and ideologies is essential to enable the citizens to arrive at informed judgement on all issues touching them. This cannot be provided by a medium controlled by a monopoly* - whether the monopoly is of the State or any other individual, group or organisation. (Italics mine)

Yet another move, a result of both a long struggle for media autonomy and the landmark judgement being mentioned here, was the declaration of the autonomous status of the DD through the establishment of Prasar Bharati (Broadcasting Corporation of India) on 23 November, 1997. If such legal-institutional changes were not enough, the 1990s also brought profound

changes in the broadcasting arena with the entry and quick-paced penetration of the satellite and the cable channels. It was no longer possible to keep the 'satellite invasion' at bay by branding it as 'cultural invasion', as something 'inimical to the Indian culture'. The broadcasting scenario in India could not have a greater transformation in almost all conceivable aspects (the only exception being the foreign equity participation in private broadcasting companies) and DD had no other alternative but to face the ball game in a highly dynamic, extremely competitive environment. This is notwithstanding DD's complaints that satellite channels were resorting to unfair competition to 'reduce DD's revenue' by 'manipulating popular ratings' of television programmes (*The Statesman*, 5 December, 2002).

DD's decline in power and status, precipitated among other factors by the rise of a number of pro-active *private* competitors, led to its uneasy negotiation with the new reality. Such uneasiness, which lies at the foundation of the dilemma referred to at the outset, primarily relates to devising means to strike a balance on the one hand between revenue generation, which is essential to survive in the newly competitive environment, and on the other hand the imperatives of public service broadcasting which itself has a complex conceptual mix in combining an abiding concern with preservation and promotion of 'national identity' with the task of strengthening 'civil society' and facilitation of the growth of 'public sphere'. It is noteworthy that the Prasar Bharati Review Committee, in its report in the year 2000 (Prasar Bharati Review Committee Report), emphasizes the need for the public service broadcaster to strike such a balance in the face of the new reality. The observations of the Committee can be treated as very significant in the process of DD's coming to terms with its changed status. In the section on *The Need for Public Service Broadcasting* the Report takes up the issue of identity of Prasar Bhatai organizations, namely DD and Akashvani. Acknowledging (Clause 2.1.3) the "historical reality" that DD happens to be "one of the largest broadcasting networks in the world" the Report qualifies it by adding (Clause 2.1.4) that such

proposition by itself “does not lend meaning to the existence and identity of an organisation”. It notes:

An organisation cannot grow and excel if it exists only because of historical accident. For any living and vibrant organisation, there must be a larger purpose and mission. It is, therefore, essential to look for the basic purpose... in the context of public service broadcasting.

In observing (Clause 2.1.6) that commercial broadcasting regards “the audience as consumers, and not as citizens” it calls for a reoriented DD, ready to provide public service broadcasting: “to strengthen the democratic process by providing information, promoting debate and discussion on all vital issues, and providing a platform for interaction between the common man and the policy maker” (Clause 2.1.7).

The question that begs consideration in our context is what impact do such observations have on DD’s negotiation with DC in particular? In what can be described as the *equal and opposite reaction*, the DD, after a fairly long prioritizing of DC since its inception, seemed to have relegated DC to its least priority-area. In the current agenda of DD it seems that entertainment, the last of its prime ethos, has taken over. In a significant observation the Report on *A Vision for Indian Television* (1986) draws our attention to this:

(T)elevision, caught in the cleft-stick of raising resources and filling expanded broadcast time, had abandoned all its social objectives and placed itself at the mercy of advertisers....It is for the television to modulate and moderate programme content. The norms *and methodology...have to be carefully worked out...* (p. 34, brackets and italics mine).

Entertainment needs to be accorded much importance by DD not only because of its prime importance but also because it can contribute, especially in the face of the rising number of entertainment-oriented middle class consumers, much to revenue generation. But the question is entertainment

at what cost? Is it to be promoted at the cost of public service broadcasting and DC? Promotion of uninterrupted entertainment at the cost of the latter would not only put DD on the same pedestal of that of the private commercial media organizations, it would also contribute to DD's loss of opportunity to reorient itself to the new reality and lend itself a distinctive character. Despite the limitations that have marked the DC earlier the fact remains that DD remains the 'national' media with the widest reach and a formidable infrastructure. If this technology and infrastructure are used solely to entertain the people, and not for promoting its public service functions, people's access to and audience participation in the programmes on development, a distinct space which could remain equidistant from the dictated mode of development and trivial consumerism, would not emerge. To reiterate, the models described in the previous section reveal DD's locked potential in carving out such space. Regarding the argument that the private commercial channels are providing enough coverage to development in all its variety one has to qualify such sweeping and over-optimistic generalizations by some observations: first, such representations generally lack a sustaining character. They are more of *one-time* intense and impressive coverage, with little systematic follow-up actions. Second, such coverage is overwhelmingly oriented to the urban areas in terms of the mode of address, and also in many cases, in terms of the language and idioms. Third, even if for argument's sake we accept that the private commercial channels have the best intention to address the rural audience the fact remains that as compared to DD they are still no match in terms of their 'reach' in respect of this specific segment of the audience. Last but not the least, even in countries marked by the existence of powerful private channels the decline of public service broadcasting remains an area of strong concern, with the emergence of stringent critiques (McChesney 1999) wherever there is evidence of it being weakened.

This still leaves us with the crucial question of political will, rather the lack of it, in relation to the reorientation of DD in general and its DC in particular.

The 'lack of political will' argument, evoked on numerous occasions, in some cases mechanically but not always unjustifiably, has its share of relevance in a country like India. It is because here rulers, cutting across their political and ideological affiliations, and bureaucrats are not particularly favourable to the prospect of communicative citizens. However, it is also true that in not being willing to stimulate DD to development-oriented communication the rulers lose a key channel of legitimation of their rule and the chance to establish their long-lost credibility to the ordinary people of India. This is because the feedback from the people relating to the development activities undertaken by the state need not necessarily be negative in nature. Along with dissenting and critical tenor there would also be instances of appreciation, and even at times congratulatory responses, for efficient and effective works done. It is difficult to imagine why the rulers, who still exercise a fair amount of control over DD, would be absolutely unreceptive to such scope, that too in a democracy in which they are compelled to go for people's mandate after periodic intervals.

Conclusion: Towards sense-making methodology

To sum up, DD's identity confusion- both in general terms and in the specific instance of DC - has largely been the result of a pendulum-swing between dictated mode of development and trivial entertainment. In this policy-swing DD is also making a long shift in terms of its role-perception of the audience- from the eager_to_learn passive masses to happy-go-lucky active consumers. Both, needless to mention, are extreme formulations. In the process what remains out of the cognitive map of the DD is the possible role of the audience *as citizens* who can deliberate on issues of common concern to search for common solutions to problems. One really does not know whether to describe it as a comic or tragic situation that DD as the (electronic) medium with the largest reach has failed to live up to its potential. It is because it preferred to unleash a jumble of messages and images sourced from development dogmas and doctrines, which obstruct, rather than facilitate, the quest for knowledge and the spirit of questioning.

Asserting that public service broadcasting is not yet a thing of the past, we reiterate that if the solution is sought to be found in discarding DC it would be like throwing the baby out with bathwater. The solution lies in developing a sense-making methodology - with citizens' inalienable role in governance as the basic premise. However keeping in mind the dictum that quality broadcasting is a practice, and not a prescription, and considering the fact that varying contexts in India would defy a single formula, we may note that broadly such methodology needs to incorporate, first and foremost, problem-sensitivity (the ability to find problems), task commitment, openness and tolerance of ambiguity, and last but not the least, ideational fluency, associational fluency and expressional fluency. A methodology such as this would possibly facilitate the utilization of DC for divergent thinking, anchoring doubts, raising questions and negotiating multiple, complex and contesting meanings of 'development' in the everyday life of the ordinary people. The beginning can be made by understanding a simple point: that development is a dialogue, rather than a monologue.

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