

# REVISITING “TELEVISION FOR SOCIAL EDUCATION”

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*Now faded from the public memory, an insightful “Social Education through Television” sponsored by UNESCO, telecast by AIR-TV Delhi received by about 70 community TV sets constituted nascent beginnings of the history of educational TV in India. Conceived as a citizenship education project, this social experiment aimed to educate and inform the public on topics related to public health, sanitation and civic behaviour. In today’s world of numerous commercial satellite TV, prolific use of ICT in education, the effort may look archaic, but when information communication technologies (ICTs) per se are euphorically projected to provide access to the new technologies and thereby improve education, foster citizens’ participation and open new economic opportunities, it is imperative to revisit the enchantment and elation educational television, Aladdin’s lamp sans genie, offered for education five decades ago. The paper critically evaluates this public educational experiment drawing lessons for contemporary times.*

## INTRODUCTION

Television promptly evokes the images of entertainment, tinsel, glamour, sex, violence, consumerism and in the recent past hate speech and intolerance. Fashion, lifestyle, sports particularly cricket, gadgets and celebrities dominate the television times and even news segment. Yet in its nascent years even while entertainment and recreation were part of the agenda, TV was public service oriented and educational.

To deflect the charge that TV will inevitably have a 'corrupting influence' on the society and culture, leading to indolence, early defenders argued for education and not entertainment as the primary goal of television (Briggs & Burke, 2010, p. 228-29). Japan NHK introduced a separate educational channel in 1957; USA FCC reserved more than 200 TV stations for educational broadcasting in 1952. Swedish TV of 1947s, 'heavy' with education and science content, was partly financed by the Swedish board of education. Television was deployed for spreading adult education in post-war France (Dumazedier, 1956), National Education Association of US advocated use of TV for instruction (NEAUS, 1958) and TV was seen “to help teachers accommodate the rapidly expanding student bodies in all institution” (NRC 1957; iii); and as an answer to 'teacher shortage' (Martin 1959; Whaley 1957). The third international meet of the UNESCO took note of the growing clamour for use of TV for education and promoted Instructional TV.

Galvanised by the UN General Assembly Report which pointed out that then, 70% of the world’s population had inadequate access to information, calls to improve mass communication systems of underdeveloped countries were made. Positing that 'backward attitudes' were the impediments and that mass media such as TV can engender major behavioural change and thus entice and enrol publics for 'development', an avowed goal of the nation-states such as India, the case for television was made (see Schramm 1964 for a contemporary imagination).

Early decades of Indian television, was marked by communication experiments such as 'citizenship education project' in 1959, massive 'Delhi School Educational Project' of 1961 which had a reach of one and a half million students in nearly three-hundred Delhi Secondary Schools (Mathur, 1960; 1961) and *Delhi Agriculture Television (DATV) Project (Krishi Darshan)* in 1966 using television (Sharma & Singh, 1972). This paper revisits the enthralling history, which has faded from contemporary memory, to garner lessons for contemporary times when again with the ubiquitous ICT devices, gaming software, cloud sourcing and internet, technology is seen as the 'silver bullet' curing all the ills of education.

## Arrival of Television

Although the invention of television is ascribed to John Baird in 1924, it was the erstwhile USSR that commenced regular TV broadcast in 1931 and by 1938 there were two regular full-fledged TV stations telecasting programmes on a regular basis. The Britain followed in 1936 and the BBC was established. While the first TV station in US was established in 1939, the commercial broadcasting began in 1948.

Concern for expending precious foreign exchange towards what was seen as expensive 'toy', fear it becoming a conduit for electronic imperialism (Ohm, 1999, p. 77-78) and perceived as morally 'corrupting' medium promoting indolence<sup>1</sup> (Roy, 2008, p.31) clamour for introduction of television in India was resisted for long. However India stumbled into TV when Philips, participated in a trade exhibition organized at Delhi in 1955 and demonstrated TV. As their initial effort to set up a commercial TV in Bombay<sup>2</sup> using the production and transmission equipment like camera and small transmitter imported for the exhibition was thwarted by the Government stating that only AIR<sup>3</sup> had the monopoly for radio-TV transmission in India, Philips came forward to donate the 21 receivers and sell other equipment at subsidized cost to AIR.

Thus a TV unit under the AIR was established, AIR-TV was born and experimental transmissions were conducted during 1958 using the low power transmitter, a mast of just about 80 meters height, reach of just 25 kilometres and just 21 TV sets installed in the houses of bureaucrats and senior ministers. The regular transmission commenced on September 15, 1959 but the telecast was limited to duration of 60 minutes on two days of the week, during which 40 minutes were devoted to educational aspects and 20 minutes to entertainment items in variety of formats. Bhaskar Ghose, who later come to head Doordarshan, reminiscing his childhood days as a child of a senior bureaucrat provided with a TV at home, recalls with amusement and with a tinge of presentism, that his early memories of television included listening to music on television; the accompanying video of the gramophone playing it (Ghose, 2005, p.22). The fare was a melange of *Krishi Darshan* (agriculture educational programmes), school educational programmes, Film Division's cartoons, Films projected on to a screen and captured by the TV camera and live telecast of puppet shows etc. performed by the Song and Drama unit of the Government.

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1 'Frivolity is all the country is going to get if television in India is going to pay its way', said an newspaper (cited in Dizard, W. P. 1966)

2 Now 'Mumbai'

3 All India Radio, a public broadcast service established by British

## **Project: Citizenship through Television**

Vikram Sarabhai (1969), architect of India's satellite communication experiments, famously argued that backward countries can and should tap the most advanced communication technologies including television for leapfrogging into rapid economic growth and social transformation. Dr. Rajendra Prasad, the President of India in his inaugural speech stated that he “*hope[d] television will go a long way in broadening the popular outlook and bringing people in line with scientific thinking*” (JSIR 1959, p. 454). The conference of UNESCO held at Delhi during November 1956 also suggested that member states, in particular India to commence pilot project of using Television as a medium of education. These being the policy guidelines, once the AIR-TV had acquired experience and expertise to conduct regular TV telecast, it chose to use TV for education rather than yield to middle class clamour for entertainment.

The proposal '*Citizenship through Television*' made to UNESCO way back in 1956 by AIR stated that “*pilot project will be set up...for experimental television unit to conduct investigations in the techniques of transmission, reception and the also production so that the experience gained by this project may be made available to member states in south and South East Asia*”. India was seen to share with other Asian countries, teeming population, rampant illiteracy, 'conservative' social norms, it was expected that the lessons learned in Indian experiment of the use of TV for social communication could be transposed to other Asian Countries.

The proposal was accepted in 1958 and the actual implementation commenced in 1959. UNESCO provided a grant of 20,000 dollars to produce programmes that would help improve urban and rural conditions especially with respect to adult literacy, health education and promotion of community recreational activities. In a small way the programmes were also expected to act as educational TV for schools. The experimental project commenced on 23 December 1960 and was continued until 5 May 1961.

The project implied that the specific TV programmes would be designed and developed on the themes such as *Traffic and Road Sense; Dangers to Community Health; Adulteration of Foodstuffs, Drugs; Manners of a Citizen; and Encroachment of Public property and Town Planning* with the objective of informing and educating. Further it was envisaged that the TV receivers would be placed in a location accessible to public such as schools and the whole community would be invited to watch the programmes during the scheduled telecasts. Rather than passive viewing, 'tele-clubs', consisting of select adult members from the local community were to be organized. The tele-clubs were expected engage in discussion and dialogue subsequent to the watching the telecast of programmes so as to internalise the messages of the programmes. Keeping these objectives in mind programmes were designed to add to the information of viewers on these topics, to influence, if possible, their attitudes towards various aspects of these issues and to encourage follow-up group action and behaviour. The project also stipulated that proper evaluation would have to be conducted to evaluate the impact of the medium and assess the usefulness of TV as a mass medium for social education, and hence a pre-project baseline survey and post project 'impact' was conducted and the project was evaluated on number of parameters (Saksena, 1960; Mathur & Saksena, 1963)<sup>4</sup>.

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4 All the references to the evaluation of the project in this paper unless stated are from this comprehensive documentation.

By the time the project commenced in 1959 AIR could source additional 71 TV receivers (in addition to 21 that were already installed for home viewing in senior bureaucrats residences). Locations were selected in the urban and semi-urban localities in and around the Delhi municipal corporation by involving civil society organizations, adult literacy advocacy groups and municipal officials for placing the community TV receivers. These location were neither posh upper class areas nor were marginalized poor; but consisted of largely aspiring lower middle class citizen. Usually the local higher secondary school was favoured for locating the community TV receiver, as they were common secular space accessible to all and the receiver could be kept secured. Further the same TV set could also be used by the school students for receiving the school TV programmes. Due to novelty of television, in the initial days it was popular and overcrowding<sup>5</sup> was the norm. However as the novelty waned with time the attendance was uneven, and stabilized in the range of 150-300 per location.

The three elements of tele-clubs were watching the TV broadcast, regular discussion and follow-up activity. The enrolment in the tele-clubs was although voluntary the facilitator of the tele-club was expected to actively recruit members for the club. The facilitators, who were mostly civil society activists or adult literacy officials, were advised to visit the locality, talk to people and urge 'important' people from the locality to be associated with the tele-club, not so much to accord any special status to them, but to ensure that no hostility or ill feeling is not aroused due to imagined neglect or slight. Further they were to contact all civil society voluntary groups such as social committees, cooperative society, office bearers of community centers and people connected with educational centers and seek their membership. There was a conscious effort to make the composition of tele-clubs mirror as far as possible the local society in-terms of vocations and effort was made to keep the age spread such that the members could freely discuss amongst themselves without deference to elders or indifference to youngsters<sup>6</sup>. It was ensured that the members of the tele-clubs is not dominated by school or college going youth or unemployed youth. Thus the composition of the teleclubs were largely males, middle age and upwardly mobile middle class engaged either in government employment of professional vocations.

The convener of the tele-clubs recorded the proceedings and a report was sent to TV Unit of AIR. Often tele-clubs sought additional information and clarification and at times also voiced critical opinion differing from the experts who 'talked' to them through the TV screen. Even government employees at the lower rungs of the establishment were as vocal as 'public' in voicing critic of the governance.

### **Dilemmas of Programming**

The serials that were produced and telecast as part of this project were *Chalti Duniya* -Traffic and road sense, *Hazaar Niyamat* -Good health is thousand blessing, *Asal aur Naqal* – on adulteration of food stuff, *Lakshaman Rekha* – encroachment of public property, *Ghar aur Bahar* – manners of a citizen. Perceived intent of the project being informing and educating, the dilemma of the imperative for presenting dry facts and the need to infuse artistic and aesthetic television production value, was pervasive. Take the case of the serial in 'community health'. The serial were expected to educate the viewers with the health laws, health administration system and the role of various staffs deployed and inform citizens about

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5 One tele-club even reported attendance of 1000 people.

6 The project was acquiescent to the traditional Indian social ethos that demand not speak or voice contrary opinion in presence of the 'elders'.

vaccination, inoculation, sanitary measures and medical care facilities provided through public funded dispensaries and hospitals. In addition scientific information on how contagious diseases spread, care that one needs to take with regard to food and clean water and statistical data on health issues were provided through the programme and the citizens were to be extolled to take active part in the civic life by way of keeping their living environment clean and healthy.

Shooting such programmes was not easy. Jai Chandiram who returned to India in 1961, with training in TV from England, recalls how they had to struggle to get live demonstration recorded with the basic of studio equipment that was available with AIR-TV. She says “...for demos on the nature of light, we found that the studio window between 4:00 to 4:20pm gave us the rays of the sun to go through the prism and demonstrate VIBGYOR. What an achievement, catching light and going live!...The technical staff, Madan Mohan, Mr. Desikachar and others were fully involved in finding solutions to record these simple experiments...” (Chandiram, 2009)

The programme producers came up with number of creative solutions to meet this challenge. Early TV shows were influenced by Radio format as most script writers and producers were drawn from the talent of AIR, and a style akin to the radio-drama was adopted and adapted for the television. Fictionalized story of a 'typical Delhi family' was made as the peg and realistic situations were interspersed with facts and figures presented thought charts, films and diagrams to communicate information. Various the broadcast narratives such as features, talks, plays, were incorporated deftly into the programme production. Studio drama was blended with actual reporting and shots from the field.

In the plot development of such dramatized episodes, protagonist or a character usually tended to convey the 'message', often becoming a character to exhort, rattle information and facts like a sermon, making the programme dull and drab. Scriptwriters had to be mindful and a lively stock character, *Shanka Prasad*, a sort of doubting Thomas, eccentric and curious, was contrived. Mirroring the intuitive feeling of ordinary citizen, often in the initial part of the episode, *Shanka Prasad* sounded cynical of the officials and schemes, but interaction and dialogue with experts converts him into a protagonist for reform and development in the latter half of the episode. Further, the real life experts, such as food inspectors, doctors and nurses were weaved into the fictional narrative and made to 'act' a part in the television play. Moreover innovative narrative drawn from traditional drama troupe such as allegorical play '*prabodha chandrodayasya udaya*', which attempted to communicate profane philosophical ideas through the medium of performing arts, were harnessed. In a sense these were forerunner to 'development soap opera', *sans* 'soaps', treating the audience as discerning rational person, rather than attempting to manipulate from a behaviourist perspective. Unlike today's Doordarshan and AIR with heavily Sanskritised Hindi, it is interesting to note that there was no hesitation to use the colloquial 'boli' Hindi spoken in and around Delhi, with a fair proportion of Urdu words and expression, perhaps contributing to its positive reception and acceptance amongst the audience.

### **Television for Social Change**

While informing and educating, the tele-clubs were anticipated to become of agents of social change. The tele-club members persuade the people for inoculation; they undertook testing of adulteration of milk and other products as described in the TV episode and acted like a watchdog. The tele-clubs also informed the citizens in the locality about the role state institutions such as Municipal Corporation and health department should play to provide

public health and sanitation facilities in their habitation. Tele-clubs extolled people to draw benefit from the amenities provided by the government institution as well as voice dissent when the governance failed. Thus the tele-clubs became a bulwark for creating public demand on the governance institutions.

On an average the 60 to 70 reports were received by the AIR TV unit every week indicating the earnestness of the tele-clubs. The level of enthusiasm shown by the tele-clubs impelled the AIR to commence a reprographed fortnightly periodical “*Teleclub pathrika*” providing space for the tele-club members to share their ideas and indulge in a *Hebermasian* dialogue with experts and state officials. The *patrika* became a printed publication very soon and carried cartoon, illustration and even extract from programme scripts apart from practical information useful for the tele-clubs.

Tele-club supervisor at the AIR TV abstracted the questions and clarifications sought by the tele-clubs and passed it on to the experts and government officials for suitable response. The responses were telecast next week. Some questions were simply seeking additional information like “what is the procedure to sell a vehicle registered in one's name to another?”; “is it possible for women to get professional driving license”. There were also curious and inquisitive questions such as “is there vitamins in rice?”; “is there any difference in the nutritive value of cow and buffalo milk?” Some were voicing dissent and criticism 'Master plan of Delhi is not for the lower middle class at all...[does not consider] practical difficulties of lower income group in the community’; “to be very enthusiastic about modern architecture may not help us to change the face of the Delhi for better. Delhi is a historical city...[we should not turn] Delhi into another Chandigarh.” In the initial period clarifications and explanations were obtained from experts/ officials and narrated by the TV anchor; however later the project team decided to confront the officials directly and answers were recorded and telecast as part of the programme, bringing a sense of transparency and responsive governance. Such feedback influenced the content of the programming too.

The tele-clubs were imagined to be the bud, from which the modern citizen civic bodies would flower, transcending the old social divisions of caste, region, religion and language. Meaningful opportunity for public action that the tele-clubs provided was crucial for public mobilization in tele-clubs. Along with the obligation placed on the coordinator to undertake some follow-up, possibility of their club being mentioned in the *Patrika* galvanised the clubs for civic action. Delhi, having attracted migrants from various parts of the county was to be nurtured into a cosmopolitan exemplar for the new India that was to emerge<sup>7</sup>. However the bureaucracy were cynical and were not expecting any useful sustained follow-up activity on the part of the tele-clubs. To their utter surprise and perhaps alarm, most tele-clubs became responsive vocal and demanding. The project showed albeit in a small way that passive pedagogic activity could be endangered also as a communicative collective social action for development.

## DISCUSSION

Dominated by the behaviourist media theories, during 1960s, it was argued that the social problems can be solved through the enlightened application of expertise. Behaviourist social science and technology were seen as a means to bring in 'development' of underdeveloped sections of the society and the institutions such as public broadcasting were seen as an

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7 A particular tele-club noted that the municipal sweepers felt unwelcome by other white collar workers; reality of caste was staring at the face.

instrument of the 'third force' that could assist the enlightened application of 'behavioural sciences' effecting social change. It is in this background that the Carnegie Commission on Educational Television (1967) suggested potential of TV "as a broad vehicle for public enlightenment and social amelioration, makes us better citizens." (Killian, 1967)

Revisiting the project of 'social education through television', embedded in this behaviourist media ideology is important in current context where it appears not possible to imagine television in any other way other than commercial private media driven by the chimera of TRP. Radically differing from even the then television deployment elsewhere, treating TV receivers as consumer goods and TV viewing as leisure to be enjoyed in the company of the family, the project boldly emphasized community TV viewing and the community ownership of TV receivers.

The topics identified and communicated under this project were locally relevant for then fast expanding urban area like Delhi, highlighting the potential of spread of epidemic in overcrowded city spaces. Issues such as adulterated food, a burning issue in those times, need for 'discipline' in an Industrial society, public hygiene related issues like spitting in public spaces as well as etiquette required for harmonious urban living along with the fears of nation-state towards 'unruly mob' encroaching public property were the main themes identified for 'citizenship education'.

Although as the project progressed a section of the tele-club members, in particular people with higher educational level, stopped attending, on an average the post viewing discussion lasted for 28 minutes with about 70% of the tele-club members taking part in it. The official baseline survey and a terminal survey of 20 clubs and their 418 members measured the impact of 20 special telecasts and found that the "greater success was realised in bringing about shifts in information than in attitudes" (Mathur & Saksena, 1963). However, the 'attitudes' of the tele-club members saw shift not in the directions that the state anticipated but in different directions. One of the consequences of the project was that taste of the members of tele-clubs could be cultivated and they came to regard TV as an engaging but primarily a serious medium. To great extent the tele-club members eschewed flippancy, and welcomed programmes that promoted a lively and stimulating discussion.

Although programmes were primarily pedagogic, imparting information to viewers they also contained deliberative elements that enabled the tele-club viewers to critically examine their living conditions and promoted 'critical consciousness'. While the aim of the programme was to instil citizen responsibility, the programmes could not overlook common complaints and grievances of the citizens. In the course of the project it became clear that it was the "question-answer" item at the end of every episode, wherein the expert/official was made to answer, was vital to its success, so much so the duration of this segment was increased from five minutes to ten minutes.

The candid discussions in the tele-clubs upset and unsettled some of the bureaucrats who viewed citizens as 'children' needing chaperoning sought to use mass media, including TV, as a social control tool. They were weary of the tele-clubs becoming a forum for ventilating grievances and constantly criticizing government and authorities. AIR-TV programme producers had to walk a tight rope and had to guard against ceaseless sermonising on the one hand and thoughtless criticism on the other. In short the experiment turned out to be a "community experience in the democratic process".

Until 1972 when the Bombay TV was established, Delhi TV remained as the only television station in India. For many years, TV sets were not available in the Indian market, as there

were import restrictions and they could be obtained only from the stock of AIR or from the additional sets made available by UNESCO. Slowly and steadily, as the number of home TVs grew, the middle class demands for entertainment could not be ignored. City-viewers failed to appreciate the educational programmes, which they came to see it with amused distaste and with antipathy as it took up a daily slot on the only channel available to them. Over a period of time when the privately owned sets became so dominant, the nation-state shed the pretensions and Indian TV succumbed to 'commercialization', without any real 'public broadcasting' left worth its name.

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