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EDUCATIONAL BROADCASTING: THE INDIAN EXPERIENCE

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I. Background

At the time of its independence from Britain in 1947, India was a country of great paradoxes. A country of extremes, with great poverty and deprivation, led by an educated and enlightened elite that recognized that public intervention would be critical to the development of this subcontinent sized nation. It became clear that centuries of industrial development had to be telescoped into a few decades and therefore, while there was need for policy, action on the ground was equally important. India, therefore, has witnessed the growth of educational broadcasting, both as forethought and as a consequence of policy.

If we look at the Plan documents and at the decisions taken by the government in the implementation of technology for education, we would find a vibrant, avant-garde thinking when it came to applying science for the education of people. Here we define education broadly as a component of development, going beyond the formal confines of schools and colleges and concerned with the improvement in the quality of life.

The First Five Year Plan of India, drafted within a few years of the country's independence from the British, drew attention to the expected role of communication in the process of development when it stated:

"A widespread understanding of the Plan is an essential stage in its fulfillment. All available methods of communication have to be developed and the people approached through the written and spoken word no less than through radio, film, song, and drama."ⁱ

If this policy statement is coupled with the Indian constitutional provision where education is the concern of both the national and state governments, the ideological basis for educational policy is laid. Multiple levels of policy formulation and implementation of education characterise Indian education, yet at all levels, there is an acceptance of the

proactive role of government in the use of all media for education and development. The policy for this medium has not changed since and most of the pioneering experiments conducted in this country are testimonial to the national policy of utilising technology for the purpose of education.

It was also in the 1960s that, faced with the gigantic problems of India's development, scientists at the Indian Space Research Organization began examining the possibilities for the use of technology for development, culminating in the Satellite Instructional Television Experiment in 1975-76.

In outlining India's perspective on the use of communication technologies for development purposes, Dr. Vikram Sarabhai, head of India's Space Research Organization (ISRO), in a widely quoted paper stated that,

“in any developing country, one of the prime ingredients of development is the dissemination of information: information about new fertilizers, seeds, insecticides, cropping patterns, and so on. The process of education is basically related to an information dissemination process...mass media are clearly the main component in this system of information transfer...therefore, television is ideal as a medium to convey information and news to the masses of population, on whom such an audio-visual medium would have a profound effect.”ⁱⁱⁱ

He further added that India's national goals involved

“leap-frogging from a state of economic backwardness and social disabilities attempting to achieve in a few decades a change which has historically taken centuries in other lands. This involves innovation at all levels.”

(Sarabhai, 1969)

Sarabhai's perspective has formed the basis for many of India's experiments in the use of communication technologies for development. The National Policy on Education (1986) reiterated the role of technology applications in education, including the importance of open and distance learning for meeting India's educational and developmental needs.

II. The Landmarks

India's experimentation with the use of mass media for development began early in the 1950s. The Indian broadcaster has, since its inception, been an active partner in educational broadcasting, and both the broadcasting organisations (Akashvani or All India Radio; and Doordarshan or Indian television) and other governmental agencies have been involved in the production of educational programmes.

Doordarshan's was started as an educational experiment in 1959. The aim was to provide information to viewers with the purpose of influencing attitudes. The first educational broadcasting, done terrestrially, was with higher secondary schools in Delhi

with subjects such as Physics, Chemistry, Hindi, Current Affairs, and Geography covered.

Research results from many evaluations during the era of enthusiasm about communication role in the development process left both decision makers and field workers worried. On the one hand, the pace of change remained slow; while on the other, many of the existing perceptions of using media in developmental processes were challenged by contradictory findings from the field. The second major landmark in educational broadcasting was designed to test both the technological capability as well as the social utility of using cutting edge technologies to deliver education.

The Satellite Instructional Television Experiment (SITE) in 1975, as it came to be known, has remained to this day as the major watershed in technology applications in education and development. A quantum leap from zero to satellite communications, SITE was the first and largest experiment in human communication.

Lessons from the SITE and other such experiments underscored the critical importance of a multi-pronged approach the application of technology in education. The building up of technological infrastructure had to be backed up by developments on the ground. Specifically, this meant the building up of institutional infrastructures; capacity building; inter institutional collaboration; attention to the educational and development dimension and the importance of social research.

There was no looking back for Indian educators, broadcasters, and technocrats after the SITE experiment. The setting up of massive communication infrastructure began with the launching of India's own satellite INSAT IB in 1982. It is to the credit of the Indian educators that since 1984, educational telecasts have not only been sustained without a break, but have also grown to the extent that India has its own dedicated channels for educational broadcasting in all sectors.

TELESCHOOL was the project for school children. A Central Institute for Educational Technology (CIET) formed the hub of production activity for school telecasts with six State Institutes for Educational Technology (SIETs) producing programmes in the regional languages. These were telecast on the national and regional networks of Doordarshan.

COUNTRYWIDE CLASSROOM, for college students on the national public broadcaster was partnered by the University Grants Commission, university based educational media centres and a UGC established autonomous interuniversity centre, the Consortium For Educational Communication (CEC) for capsuling and forwarding to Doordarshan for transmission.

THE SINGLE MODE OPEN UNIVERSITIES are also engaged in the production and telecast of educational programmes. The Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) has been broadcasting since the late 1980s, while the B.R. Ambedkar Open University, Hyderabad has been sustaining a radio programme since its inception and a regular telecast of educational content since 1999.

GYAN DARSHAN. The success of educational broadcasting prompted a demand for an exclusive channel for education and the third milestone in educational broadcasting--

GYAN DARSHAN-- was born on January 26, 2000. Today, it is a bouquet of six channels. In essence, it is a cooperative venture with the Indira Gandhi National Open University as a nodal agency for coordinating the activities and up-linking the educational content. The programme mix is a blend of core curriculum based programmes in the areas of primary, secondary, higher, open and distance education, extension, technical and vocational education along with general mosaic programmes in areas of health, hygiene, arts, culture, environment, conservation, science popularization, etc.

In addition, there are state wide initiatives such as the SAPNETⁱⁱⁱ in Andhra Pradesh and the University of Goa'

EDUSAT. The fourth major landmark in India's educational broadcasting has been the development and the imminent launch of EDUSAT, a satellite exclusively dedicated to educational and development programming. Proposed under EDUSAT is the deployment of a satellite on the Ku band, and small size, low cost ground hardware. There will be 70 transmission channels available in five spot beams covering the country. The satellite promises high bandwidth two-way interactivity, multimedia multicasting, with a constant rate throughput and adopts an open standard approach for ease of expansion.

In Summary, the scenario in the use of satellites in India reflects a system that has

- An exclusive satellite for education with a capacity of 70 dedicated channels
- Educational broadcasts on the national public broadcaster
- Four national and one regional 24 hour dedicated satellite to cable educational television channels
- A 24 hour TDCC channel available for use in teleconference support for education
- A huge volume of educational video content available for all sectors with the various agencies involved in educational broadcasting.
- An unknown but large number of programmes available with Doordarshan, and other government agencies on educational and development themes on a variety of topics and in all Indian languages

III. The Key Triggers and the Lessons Learned

It would be presumptuous on my part to assume an unqualified success in educational broadcasting in India. There have been areas of success but there are an equal number of situations that are cause for concern but it is necessary that we briefly identify the key triggers that have enabled the system to survive, sustain itself, and grow.

The Indian experience has been with both closed and open user groups and on dedicated and free to air transmission channels of Doordarshan, with a variety of interaction mechanisms from satellite remote terminals to normal telephone lines, fax, and to a lesser extent, e-mail. It has ranged in content from broad general purpose and developmental broadcasting in support of agriculture and basic and non formal education to instructional programme in support of course materials. It has included

both simple transmission and interactive teleconferencing. The experience throws up important indicators for any developing country venturing into educational broadcasting.

Educational broadcasting as it exists in India today happened, driven by the desire to experiment with technology for development and educational purposes and promoted by small groups of committed individuals and institutions. Emerging out of the broad policy statement of 1952 cited earlier, specific implementation designs, planning, system design, funding, institutional structures, norms and practices came later and have evolved over time when solutions had to be found for problems. Colleagues working in the system have themselves often wondered at the chaos that, at first sight, appears to be its best description, especially as they struggled with making the complex system work. For all its problems and inside stories of struggles by people in the field, many of which cannot be told in public, the Indian educational broadcasting story is a remarkable one; the system has worked and the broadcast of educational content has never stopped, even for one day.

III.1 Technology.

Availability of both the technology and the manpower at little or no additional cost and at a national scale has been one of the most important triggers that have driven the policy to implementation. Today, the Indian Space Research Organization (ISRO) offers the space segment at little or no cost for educational purposes.

Technology choice has not been determined by access—but by what is the latest available free for use. While availability is itself a great advantage for Indian educators and has been tried and tested, the problems of access remain, and unless these are addressed from the viewer's end, or alternate mechanisms of distribution found, educational broadcasting in India will meet the needs of the very few in the metro cities and will fail to address the needs of those for whom it is intended in the rural hinterland; and will widen, rather than narrow the knowledge divide.

III.2 Policy and Ownership.

In the early years, there were few or no guidelines, no production capacities or skills in the media centres limited and little or no capacity building. There was little or no quality assurance. Production centres were left to grow as the local host institution or provincial government envisaged. As the system evolved and grew, realization dawned and policy guidelines, a credo or mission statement, memoranda of understanding and definition of each partner's responsibilities; shared funding, delegation of powers; content and technical quality norms, staff service conditions, etc. were developed. Funding allocation was also streamlined. But by then, it was a question of solving real field problems and of adjustment and compromise between existing and conflicting practices rather than designing policy and ownership patterns as part of system design.

Today, government responsibility remains that of policy definition and the provision of financial resources. Funding and policy is transmitted through independent agencies such as the Central Institute of Educational Technology (CIET) for school education the University Grants Commission and the Consortium for Educational Communication (CEC) for higher education which guide countrywide functioning of their systems respectively.

Production of content is the responsibility of the various media centres established throughout the country in different educational and development institutions. For instance, State Institutes for Educational Technology are responsible for developing producing content for the school sector, agricultural extension institutions are responsible for agricultural content; health institutions produce health content in coordination with the local and regional Doordarshan stations.

Gyan Darshan has been established as a channel owned by Doordarshan; guided by the Ministry of Human Resource Development, and operated as a facility hosted by IGNOU, in cooperation with several ministries and autonomous organizations engaged in the use of educational broadcasting, each of whom funds content development from their own resources and contributes content for telecast on the national system.

National and regional advisory and steering committees comprising of stakeholders in the system meet regularly to decide policy and implementation issues. Decisions of these committees are approved by the funding agencies.

On the ground, while there seems to be shared vision among all stakeholders engaged in educational broadcasting, and the system appears to be functioning, there are differing perceptions on the ownership of educational broadcasting in India. The consequence of such differing perceptions on ownership is skirmishes and turf fights that adversely affect all aspects of governance and management.

III.3 Governance and Management.

For the record, Indian educational broadcasting is a partnership and governance and management is based on memoranda of understanding signed by the different participating institutions. Yet, because each participating institutions is itself an autonomous body created either by legislation or statute, governance and management is affected, on a daily basis, by the differing perceptions of ownership described earlier. Further, because there are different governance and management practices in each institution, day-to-day system management varies substantially both in style and quality.

III.4 Funding and Infrastructure

By its very nature, public domain educational broadcasting is a non-commercial activity, and generally does not attract advertising revenues.

Funding overshadows all other issues. Cost is the biggest barrier to the use of educational broadcasting. Funding for educational broadcasting remains a contentious issue, an overpowering factor determining the success of educational broadcasting. Fortunately for Indian educational broadcasters, the space segment is free, thus substantially reducing costs. Partnering institutions absorb invisible costs, while direct costs are provided for funding agencies, and out of an institution's own budget allocations reducing the financial burden on any one institution.

III.5 Content matters.

Since the primary purpose of educational broadcasting is to disseminate particular contents in the form of educational packages, the single most important element in the

entire process is the content of the programmes or package of programmes. In conditions such as in India with diverse linguistic, cultural, and geographic realities, content has to reflect regional and even sub regional groups to be effective. The decentralized nature of content production in India enables diversity of content.

IV. The Challenge

India's educational problems are not because of the absence of strategic long or short term planning; but with the translation of planning to implementation. Most developmental projects in India can be accused of this weakness, where the problem is often well defined by policy makers, missions or projects drawn up to address these problems, funds identified, and set aside; and organisations created up to deal with the issue. Implementation gets tied up in knots of administrative politics, bureaucracy, secure government jobs, unionisation and other social issues so that both the goals, targets, time frames for implementation are lost in the process.

Yet, despite all the struggles and problems that beset educational broadcasting in India, one has to applaud the innovative and fresh approaches taken in India to manipulate the latest technological options to address educational needs. The Indian educational broadcasting system has both the awe and the envy of many in the world

The Indian educational broadcasting system has benefited from visionary leadership and ground level commitment by institutions and individuals. However, sustainability over a long time also requires that systems reinvent themselves to changing times, needs, and technologies and it is at this critical junction that the system finds itself. Which is why, one has to recognize that there has to be a paradigm shift in educational broadcasting if India is to retain its cutting edge ability to use the latest technologies on a grand scale to meet its monumental educational needs.

ⁱ Government of India, Planning Commission (1952) First Five Year Plan

ⁱⁱ Sarabhai, Vikram (1969) "Television for Development" Paper presented in the Society for International Development Conferences, New Delhi. P. 5

ⁱⁱⁱ SAPNET Andhra Pradesh, www.ciol.com/content/news/repts/102100708.asp and author's personal visits to field locations