

[Satellite TV Invades India](#)

Category : [January 1993](#)

Published by Anonymous on Jan. 02, 1993

Satellite TV Invades India

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Uncensored Sex, Unnerving Violence and Titillating Soaps Seed a New Counter-Culture

While the Gulf War secured an unprecedented military victory for the West, it exposed the Third World to an unparalleled invasion of the celluloid image - foreign television shows dished in via satellite. And India is the main victim of this assault being encountered daily by young and old in drawing rooms and bedrooms from Kasi to Cape Comorin. The assault has been led by television programs which feature subjects alien in content - especially for the rural villager - and flaunt a worldliness that even for the most cosmopolitan urbanite stridently contrast values nurtured for centuries as Hindu culture.

Behind this onslaught are colossal private companies like Star TV, ATN, CNN and BBC. In their exploitive frenzy, they aggressively compete with one another in dishing out thrill shows called infotainment, "information and entertainment" but, by conservative standards, neither the information nor the entertainment they proffer is what India's populace needs.

The craze for foreign programs is especially magnetic among the youth. They find before them a world of wealth, glitz and glamour visually paraded as the ultimate in life. Today, when Hindu school girls socialize, they allude not to Sita of Valmiki's Ramayana, but to Gina of Star Plus's Santa Barbara. When the upper crust parties, the small talk is TV-oriented and very sudsy - how vixen Taylor will outfox Caroline and seduce Ridge Forrester or whose child is Brooke carrying? Social events in India are categorically never scheduled on the same night the The Bold and the Beautiful airs.

TV D-Day - CNN Beachheads

When the Gulf war broke out, there erupted in India an uncontrollable desire among the nation's intelligentsia - bureaucrats, teachers, lawyers and journalists - to view the ups and downs of the Gulf war. They wanted hour-by-hour, blow-by-blow coverage of the "mother of battles" - US-led allies fighting Iraq's Saddam Hussain. Only CNN could deliver this. So the government allowed an unrestricted, uncontrolled entry of CNN into the country. But this irreversibly opened the air waves for other satellite TV companies to gain easy access to the Indian market.

Actually, by the time CNN arrived, Doordarshan, India's government run TV, was already aping what the foreign televisions offered as popular fare, especially the salacious and lustful shows. For years, Doordarshan had gradually lowered its standards and left a warm nesting chamber for more exciting programming. With a few exceptions - like the successful Ramayana series - viewers were weaned off the traditional sensitive socio-religious dramas and instead fed them formula shows as canned as powdered baby milk. Calloused rape scenes became routine, desensitizing respect for Hindu womanhood, as increased injections of gangsterism made mockery of the land Gandhi convinced the rest of the world was the mother of ahimsa, non-harmfulness.

Along with CNN, viewers rushed to embrace the new STAR TV channels like STAR Plus and MTV, England's BBC followed with its new Asian program. Recently, a Hindi version of STAR Plus has been launched and also MTV begun by ATN. Even conservative folks have been swept off their feet by these programs running for hours every day. Remarks M.C. Bhandari, chairman of the prestigious arts and culture institution Bharat Nirman: "Both the young and the old are now often seen glued to their television sets, together watching what would have been called obscene only a few years ago."

Star TV beams down its programs through a satellite called Asia-Sat I owned jointly by the Chinese Government, the British Cable and Wireless Company and the Hutchison Whomon, a Hong Kong-based conglomerate. Asia Today Network (ATN) is owned by a group of non-resident Indians (NRI's) headed by a Suresh Shah. It is out to exploit the market in India by competing with the Star TV by presenting Zee TV programs sexier than the Star TV presentations. ATN uses a satellite called Asianet.

The satellite television programs have become so overpowering in their influence that they dominate every aspect of the life of an Indian. Whether at the dinner table, bus, train, or government office, the talk centers around Mason's witticisms or Sinhead O'conner's blasphemies or Ridge Forrester's lady admirers. Housewives discuss every episode of the popular soap operas, aired nightly.

It is not that there is no concern about the impact the satellite television has begun to make on India's rich cultural heritage, values and beliefs. The concern is being voiced in different quarters - prominent citizens, educators and even the newspaper media. India's premier newspaper, Times of India recently carried a feature "Sex Among Teenagers" which maintained that the overexposure of sex of MTV was responsible for powerfully inciting the new sex craze among the school kids in India.

Serious concern was expressed at an international seminar held here recently about the "cultural and civilization threats" satellite television are posing to Third World countries. Sponsored by the Indian Institute of Mass Communication the seminar advised the governments of these countries to immediately modernize their indigenous television programs to win back the viewers from the foreign shows and thereby save them from culturally damaging values. Indian Information Minister A.K. Panja said he shared the concern and that his government was aware of the threat.

Programming aside, what no one is prepared to abate is the epidemic spread of cable TV customers across India. India Today, [November 15, 1992] a popular fortnightly, claimed that the phenomenal response to Star TV had escalated from 412,000 urban household in January 1992 to 1,282,000 in November! Another newspaper, Indian Express, estimated there were about 1,400,000 cable viewers in the country. Star TV authorities are so enthralled by the response to their programs that they are sure that their audience would cross the two million mark in urban areas.

Many critics of the foreign shows feel they exacerbate a conflict in India between the urban and rural and rich and poor. Even social organizations which swear by India's culture and spirituality have not yet woken up to the need of assessing the damage foreign programs via satellite have already caused, let alone taking steps to fight them.

TV, India Part II next month will explore more specifically how foreign TV influences and impacts the youth.

"IMPACT STATEMENTS"

"The exposure of the young minds to too much violence and sex through satellite television would seriously affect our long-held traditions and values. But the biggest threat is the promotion of consumerism. A lavish lifestyle projected by Indian advertisements on Doordarshan already brings frustration to deprived lots of society. New programs by Star TV have begun adding to it."

- Ms. Kamla Mankakar, a senior journalist and member of the Indian film censorship board

"These foreign films have only one aim - to promote and aggravate carnal desire of the people which does a serious violence to India's spirituality and culture."

- Swami Sureshanand, head of Gau Seva (cow service) Ashram, and a member of parliament. He plans to raise questions of regulating foreign TV in a future session.

"Children are more tuned to STAR TV and other similar shows [than cultural events]. Children are becoming defiant, prone to violence and mentally imbalanced - all because of the plenty of violence and sex they watch on cable television."

- S.P. Govil, Secretary of the Nehru Bal Samiti, New Delhi. For decades he has organized youth festivals, exhibitions and competitions to promote Indian tradition and values.

"The impact of foreign television on children has already begun to show. My two school-going children give more time to television than to their studies or outdoor

activities."

- Ms. Uma Gargesh, a teacher of Agarson Public School relates that her colleagues feel helpless. When one of them unplugged their TV cable, their son asked, "Why can't we watch what my friends watch?" She couldn't answer and plugged it back in.

"Overviewing [of TV shows] is highly destructive to the mental and physical health of children. They learn negative things faster. The violence and criminalization seen on the screen cause mental distortions."

- Ms. Sangeeta of Delhi Psychiatric Center

"The most threatening trend in Asia is the taking over of the mass communication by large corporations which tie up with the local governments and business industrial complexes and multi-nationals. Corporate journalism has taken a strong hold in Hong Kong, South Korea, Indonesia, India, Malaysia, Singapore and Japan."

- Hanumantha Rao, social scientist

"They [the multi-national corporations] cannot do this [make big profits] by showing useful and constructive programs."

- Ms. Sabina Bano, a social scientist, regrets that TV cannot be more intelligently used as a creative and effective tool to teach, inform and enlighten on any and all subjects.

WIDE ANGLE

Yes, a flood of racy foreign shows has deluged India with the predictable panic of Kerala typhoons. The prudish now feast on images that make the prudish blush. Rock star Madonna zaps young minds with phantom images of musical craziness and much ado about nothing. Kids love it. Parents bemoan it, but increasingly bubble away their afternoons in a bath of mindless soaps.

The foreign shows are new, novel - watching what was taboo. And yes, to any sensitive mind, unsettling. But the Hindu cradleland has been invaded before by minds more pernicious than Ridge Forrester and ideas more fundamentally at odds with its ethos than scanty attire. It weathered each one - sometimes rejected, sometimes befriended - but to date never broke. Historically, this is important.

Also, not everyone totally condemns the opens air waves. The most secular voice in India naturally champions the foreign TV invasion as a wake-up bell, shaking India out of certain religious patterns it deems immobilized more than enlightened its masses. The intellectual elite opines more cautiously that India simply cannot play ostrich and hide from the world by censoring foreign TV at a critical time when the rest of the planet is just learning how to work together. CNN for nearly everyone is a breath of fresh air. Social scientists recommend parental regulating, not governmental banning which would only trigger a TV smuggling nightmare.

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