

Doordarshan and the Public Sphere of Kerala in the 1980s

Nisanth TV Assistant Professor of English CKGM Govt. College Perambra Kerala
tvnisanth@gmail.com

Abstract: This paper discusses the influence of Doordarshan in the formation of the trans-modern public sphere of Kerala in the 1980s. It makes a brief analysis of various popular programmes of Doordarshan and their cultural function.

Doordarshan started its expansion to the regional centres in the wake of ASIAD in 1982. In 1985 the Doordarshan Kendra Trivandrum was inaugurated by then Chief Minister of Kerala, K Karunakaran. Even before the broadcast of Doordarshan started, there were experimental telecasts by KELTRON through a Russian satellite (The Man Who Brought TV to Kerala). Television programmes were received in Kerala with a lot of apprehensions about their cultural impact. Many linguistic, infrastructural, financial and cultural factors influenced the broadcast of Doordarshan in the public sphere of Kerala in 1980s.

Infrastructural factors

In 1985 the population of Kerala was estimated to be around three corers (According to Economic Review of State Planning Board Report -1985 it was 273.17 lakhs –page 7). The same report says that the total number of domestic electricity connections was 1603138 (127). That means the number of domestic electricity connections was only five per cent of the total population. Most of them were in the urban areas while the villages still lacked electricity. This was a factor that prevented the spread of television in Kerala in the initial stage. Though there was a section of the nouveau riche who made money from gulf migration, they could not enjoy television due to lack of electricity.

The cost of television sets was another prominent factor that kept the mass away from owning them. According to the Economic Review of the State Planning Board, the per-capita income of a Malayali in 1984 was Rs.1761 (91) while colour television sets cost Rs. 8000 to 10000 (Dubashi). The production of television sets was in the initial stage in 1985. The government was planning to give a liberal hand to the production of TV sets since the 232 crore expansion project for Doordarshan was expected to increase the demand to 80000 in 1985. Many public sector industries could not provide enough sets into the market according to consumer demand (Dubashi). It was an exhausting task for the common man in Kerala to buy a TV set. According to the Economic Review 1985, the number of applications received for non-employment assistance in the financial year was 102939 and the number of beneficiaries was 244669 (95). In a society that was in a stage of chaos with low per-capita income and a surging rate of unemployment, television was a luxury affordable only to the rich and elite.

Political factors

The political left of Kerala has always been suspicious of new technologies. When the tractor was introduced for agricultural work in the state the left trade unions of the state opposed arguing that the workers will lose their work. When Rajiv Gandhi brought computerisation to various sectors in 1984 there were many protest movements organised by left parties in Kerala. As an answer to a question raised by a person named Balakrishnan Manjakkulam, EM Sankaran, the veteran theoretician of CPIM had answered that CPIM opposed the sudden computerisation of various sectors by Rajiv Gandhi. The reason he raised this was that computerisation in a capitalist social structure would bring unemployment (Sankaran 198-201). This is a part of the cultural consciousness of Kerala so much so that technological innovations are often taken as tools of American imperialism. Television was mockingly called '*tele-visham*' in Malayalam

because *visham* in Malayalam means poison (from the experience of the researcher). So taking television as a poisonous substance that pollutes the cultural environment also made people show reluctance to own a television.

Linguistic factor

The language factor also played in the cold reception of television in Kerala in the initial stage. As it is already noted the programmes in the regional language were only 2 per cent broadcast from 6.30 pm to 7.40 pm. Hindi was always considered a north Indian language that has no cultural connection with Kerala. So in the national broadcast, people used to watch English news instead of Hindi Samachar. "There seemed to be a disregard for financial and linguistic barriers to a truly mass audience: those urban well-to-do who were able to watch would have to understand a Sanskritised Hindi or English. One hundred and twelve towns would receive low-powered transmitters, which would act as relays, broadcasting the programmes aired from the capital. This meant that although fifteen major language groups were encompassed in these areas, they would all receive the same programme" (Rajagopal 96).

Popular programmes of Doordarshan and their reception

Broadcast of Malayalam Film

The broadcast of Malayalam films on Sundays on the regional channel was one of the most popular programmes of Doordarshan in Kerala. The 1980s was one of the richest periods in the history of Malayalam cinema. Both the popular genre and the art-house genre flourished with a host of talented directors who often claimed national and international accolades. In 1982 there were nearly 1600 movie theatres in Kerala. Due to the Gulf boom much amount of money was pumped into the film industry (Pillai). So movie-going was a normal activity for all types of

families because various classes of theatre offered affordable ticket rates for all income groups. Though the low-income groups were unable to watch movies in releasing -A class- theatres they could watch them after a few weeks in B or C-class theatres.

In the 1980s Doordarshan used to broadcast old black-and-white movies due to a crunch in the allocation of funds. Compared to those movies the commercial aired for fifteen minutes before the beginning of the movie attracted more viewers (Lutgendrof 133). Since the interest in old black-and-white films was comparatively less the audience was not watching the films as such. So instead of watching movies, the viewers were participating in some kind of ritual of watching television. Neighbours, friends and family members used to gather in the TV owner's house to watch Sunday movies in Doordarshan. The space around TV, *varandha*, and front courtyard would be occupied by often strangers who claim a spot in a private space being a member of the community. If the television is placed inside a room children would sit near it on the floor along with women, the elders in the group would sit in chairs with the owner and the young would watch it from the courtyard and even peep through open windows to watch the film. This structure of the crowd neither resembles the prearranged seats in the movie theatre nor the family in India, and one can never find a formal analogy with the lonely TV viewer sitting alone and inside his house in the West. So, Kerala's engagement with Sunday regional films was partly ritualistic. The gatherings and exchanges between people usually had the same pattern as a temple festival. Engagement with television here becomes a worshipful viewing where instead of the film the television itself is watched and admired. Williams writes:

It is ironic to have to say, finally, that one of the innovating forms of television is television itself. So many uses of the medium have been the transmission and elaboration of received forms, or have been dominated by the pressures of overt content, that it is

often difficult to respond to some of its intrinsic visual experiences, for which no convention and no mode of description have been prepared or offered. (75)

Epic Serials: *Ramayan* and *Mahabharath* in Kerala

The broadcast of *Ramayan* began on 25 January 1987 and ended after 78 episodes on July 31, 1988 by that time number of television sets and familiarity with the technology have changed the perception of TV among people and colour television sets had become a familiar object. The first episode was aired on 25 January 1987 *Ramayan* "as an All- India tradition, a symbol of national unity and integration"(Lutgendrof 135). Some of the viewers even had a devotional attitude to the serial so they came after bathing as though they are visiting temples and sometimes performed *poojas* in front of the television (Melwani 56). DK Bose, Director of Hindustan Thomson and Associates tells Shilaja Bajpai that the reach of *Ramayan* was immense even in the non-Hindi states. " Even in Kerala, the response has been about 60 -65 per cent"(Bajpai). Apart from the huge audience participation, it reveals how the response of southern states was viewed by the authorities that they never expected this percentage from Kerala.

In Kerala, for the first time, a Hindi serial had 65 per cent viewership. It was for the first time Malayali was involved in a pan-Indian ritual and shared a cultural and religious fervour. Unlike the northern part of India Kerala has only limited acquaintance with Rama as a god. There are only a few Ram temples and there are no mass celebrations of the Ram cult like Ramlila in north India. The god Ram is known to Kerala through the Malayalam *Ramayan* written by Thunchath Ezhuthachan named *Ramayanam Kilippaattu* (A bird singing *Ramayan*). There is also a tradition of reciting *Ramayan* in the month of *Karkkitaka* (according to the

Malayalam calendar) to ward off evil spirits. The children were acquainted with serialised *Amarchitrakatha Ramayana* in Malayalam Children's magazines like *Balarama* and *Poompatta*. The calendar art of Raja Ravi Varma was another source of knowledge of *Ramayan* for the common people. So the formal aspect of the epic serials was more important in understanding their reception compared to the affiliation to the content.

One of the formal aspects that attracted the viewers to the screen was an anxious apprehension regarding the transformation of oral experience into visual content and the surprise element of television that brings special effects more telling since the surprising visuals happen inside your house. Another aspect of this popularity is the intensity of visuals mediated by technology. The special effects of these epic serials were not watched as effects in a film were watched. Since the tale with all its surprises and super-human dimension was embedded in the social memory of the viewers, the involvement with special effects evoked a realistic presence. The visual transformation of the oral imagination creates a reality effect that can transform the imaginaries into a commodity. The abstract characteristics that kept the repertoire of synesthetic pleasure (McLuhan 346) intangible so far it is mediated by technology into a nearby visual reality. "The TV image, that is to say, even more than an icon is an extension of the sense of touch. Where it encounters a literate culture, it necessarily thickens the sense-mix, transforming fragmented and specialist extensions into a seamless web" (McLuhan 365). The Doordarshan *Ramayan* offered a continuous and tangible combination of all the fragments with the enhanced intensity of TV visuals. Lutgendrof writes, "At the same time the tradition acquired greater standardization through the impact of new technologies for the mass production of images, texts and sounds. A certain homogenization has been one result of this process: visually speaking, the characters and setting of Sagar's serial look much like those of *Amar Chitra Katha* comic books,

which in turn look like poster and calendar art”(168). It was a shift from the discomfort of multiple narratives to the comfort of a standard, homogenized and linear continuity.

The activity of engaging this polluting visual modernity that questioned the sanctity of imaginary texts of Ramayana was erased by the participatory nature of viewing and engaging the very effects with devotional expressions. "As I have noted, viewers of the "Ramayan" serial, far from being passive, interacted with the performance to a remarkable degree. For most people, the epic serial was not simply a program to "see," it was some- thing to do-an event to participate in- and this participation was nearly always a group (extended family, neighborhood, village) activity” (Lutgendrof 164). The viewer was thus engaged in a ritualistically shared sin of having the ‘*darshan*’ of the god on a screen. It was this ritualistic aspect that saved him from the curse of being on the brink of modernity while viewing. So the modernity in the form of capitalistic capsules filled with technological marvels in the form of special effects as wished by Gill itself drew the audience of Kerala to throng before neighbour’s television on Sunday mornings.

Chitrageetham

Chitrageetham was a film music-based programme in which a compilation of film songs are presented. This regional programme was a copy of *Chitrhar* popular on national television. The format is used in all regional languages for the broadcast of film music. Music and dance are essential parts of Indian movies. Song sequences are specially shot in elaborate settings with a lot of special effects. They are not essential for the plot to progress but are included as time-lapse so that they can be removed from the main plot without affecting the storyline and presented as a separate performance. *Chitrageetham* explored this possibility.

The programme had two different functions. One was to carry out the function of a dance-music programme with film-quality visuals and the other was to do the function of an advertisement of the film that runs in theatres or those upcoming ones. Bollywood dance sequences were creeping into Malayalam cinema. So in effect, the programme was a dance-music-commercial programme that needed no script for itself. Without any intervention of an anchor or a narrator, those songs were played one after the other like commercials. *Chitrageetham*, like *Chitrahara*, can be seen as an example of how the commercialisation of Doordarshan was attaining fast pace in the 1980s. Such programmes came out of an Indianization process along with the commercialization of Indian television. The convergence of the film industry and television industry gave birth to many unique programmes like *Chitrageetham*, Reality shows based on film sequences and songs and many other similar formats (Kumar). The enjoyment of *Chitrageetham* lies in what Raymond Williams called the 'flow', which conjures up a non-existing continuity between various types of programmes. He writes:

Analysis of a distribution of interest or categories in a broadcasting programme, while in its own terms significant, is necessarily abstract and static. In all developed broadcasting systems the characteristic organisation, and therefore the characteristic experience, is one of sequence or flow. This phenomenon, of planned flow, is then perhaps the defining characteristic of broadcasting, simultaneously as a technology and as a cultural form (86).

The film song sequences and commercials were placed in a continuous sequence that exemplifies the concept of flow. Here the totality of enjoyment comes from a combined effect of both. So the popularity of this programme comes from how it allows visual fulfilment of consumer desires of a trans-modern cultural context to be in an organic continuity of an aesthetic experience. Since

film songs provided an undefined aesthetic feeling -with music and visuals but without any storyline for anxious waiting to watch the end it was easy for the consumer-viewer to get involved in visual fantasies of fulfilment with commercials.

The 'Public' in Kerala in the Doordarshan Era

The Doordarshan era came to an end with the invasion of television signals from space in the 1990s. Many social, cultural and economic factors led to a paradigm shift in the last decade of the twentieth century which in turn became the effect of these shifts too. How Doordarshan performed as an instrument of culture in the context of Kerala was different from other parts of India in some aspects. For the trans-modern culture of Kerala, technological marvels always offered a sanctuary from the existing social realities. Television thus represented a form of lifestyle that engages a future possibility without constraints of reality. The effect is enhanced by traditional forms that will subsume the anxiety of cultural loss.

Doordarshan's role in preparing the mindset of an emerging middle class for accepting an aesthetic blend of tradition and modernity was significant. On the one side, the colonial legacy of forced nationalism in broadcasting and on the other side was television itself as a medium that mediates this modernity through technological modernity. So Doordarshan that tried to create a national culture by cherishing those values that make a nation unique (Selznick 2) contented with a trans-modern context in Kerala. So, in the form of appropriation, a complex blend of tradition and modernity is created that in turn offered a trans-modern public sphere.

.....

Reference

- Bajpai, Shylaja. "Is there Life after Ramayana." *Express Magazine*, 7 August 1988, p.1.
- Dubashi, Jagannath. "Motivated Expansion Plan for Doordarshan, Govt. becomes Liberal with Colour TV Industry." *India Today*, 31 July 1984, [https://www .indiatoday .in /magazine/economy/story/19840630-doordarshan-sponsorship-of-shows-by-private-companies-becomes-a-wave-803060-1984-06-30](https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/economy/story/19840630-doordarshan-sponsorship-of-shows-by-private-companies-becomes-a-wave-803060-1984-06-30)
- Kerala State Planning Board. *Economic Review 1985*. Government of Kerala 1985 <https://spb.kerala.gov.in/sites/default/files/inline-files/1985.pdf>.
- Kumar, Shanti. "Spaces of Television: Rethinking the Public/Private Divide in Postcolonial India." *Channeling Cultures: Television Studies from India*, edited by Biswaroop Sen and Abhijith Roy, Oxford University Press, 2014, Oxford Scholarship Online, DOI:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198092056.003.0004. Preprint.
- Lutgendrof, Philip. "Ramayan: The Video." *TDR*, vol. 34, no.2, summer 1990, pp.127-176. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1146030> .
- McLuhan, Marshal. *Understanding Media*. Routledge, 2002.
- Pillai, Sreedhar. "Kerala Goes Through Frantic Theatre Boom Fuelled by Gulf Money." *India Today*, Nov.15, 1982, [https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/ indiascope/story/19821115-kerala-goes-through-frenetic-theatre-boom-fuelled-by-gulf-money-772359-2013-07-30](https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/indiascope/story/19821115-kerala-goes-through-frenetic-theatre-boom-fuelled-by-gulf-money-772359-2013-07-30).
- Rajagopal, Aravind. "The Rise of National Programming : The Case of Indian Television." *Media Culture and Society*, vol. 15, 1993, pp.91-111.
- Sankaran, EM. *EMS inte Sampoorana Krithikal [Complete Works of EMS]*. Vol.52, Chintha Books, 2007.
- Selznick, Barbara J. *Global Television Co-Producing Culture*. Temple University Press, 2008.
- "The Man Who Brought TV to Kerala." *New Indian Express*, 24 Dec. 2010, <https://www>.

newindianexpress.com/cities/kochi/2010/dec/24/the-man-who-brought-tv-to-kerala-213671.html.

Williams, Raymond. *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*. Routledge, 1990.

.....