

Rise of independent media in South Asia

By Sabih Mohsin

THE media environment in South Asia has been changing rapidly and drastically since the beginning of the satellite age in 1990. But reluctance on the part of successive governments in this country to permit the growth of free electronic media has pushed Pakistan, which was not too long ago in the lead in this field, trailing behind the others in the region.

Up to the 1980s, Pakistan Television's programmes, particularly its plays, enjoyed a large audience across the borders, not only in the adjoining parts of India but, through the medium of the VCR, also in the far-flung areas of that country as well as in Nepal. But now the tide has turned and Pakistani viewers find themselves completely swayed by television channels owned or managed by Indians.

It is not that the government was not aware of what was happening all around. It was this awareness that had led the interim government under Prime Minister Meraj Khalid to promulgate an ordinance on its last working day, February 14, 1997, providing for the establishment of an Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (EMRA) with powers to grant licences for the setting up of private radio and television stations free to broadcast news and other programmes, of course, remaining within a prescribed code.

However, the government of prime minister Nawaz Sharif which followed the interim set-up, had no intention of allowing non-government parties to enter this 'exclusive' domain and, therefore, the ordinance was conveniently allowed to lapse.

were four more stations operating from Karachi, Rawalpindi-Islamabad, Peshawar and Quetta. Colour transmissions were introduced in 1976.

Entertainment has been the dominating feature of Pakistan Television's programme fare. But in the past a conscious effort was made to keep it free from the influence of the film industry. Consequently, there was a considerable intellectual depth in its programmes, especially the plays.

Television came to India a little earlier but its development was very slow because the then official thinking there was that in a country like theirs the utility of such an expensive medium was very little. The first TV station started its operations from Delhi in 1959 with funds provided by the UNESCO. It was mainly used for educational purposes. The second station came after a long interval of 13 years, at Bombay.

According to some writers, it was the 1971 war with Pakistan that made the Indian govern-

ment, Subhash Chandra, to start in 1992 a Hindi channel, Zee TV, through the AsiaSat-1 broadcasting satellite. The channel offered a rich and varied fare of entertainment and news which appeared to be free from government control and soon became popular not only in India but also in the neighbouring countries.

Subsequently, while Zee continued to multiply with special-interest channels, numerous private channels sprung up to cater for the requirements of audiences speaking regional languages, particularly the South Indian languages, which were never served properly by the official Doordarshan. In 1996 the Star TV, with the objective of exploiting the Indian market more fully, launched StarPlus with entertainment, news and current affairs programmes in Hindi. Another foreign channel, Sony, also entered the field with entertainment in Hindi. Thus, by the end of the year 2000, in addition to the government's Doordarshan channels, there were dozens of independent channels owned or managed by Indians, of which those in Hindi, Urdu and Bangla enjoyed considerable popularity in the neighbouring countries as well.

This revolutionary departure from the suffocating government control on the electronic media, inherited from colonial rule, was the result of a number of factors: the growth of a more independent press, the popularity of the video, the beginning of economic liberalization and the emergence of a larger and more articulate urban middle class. In varying degrees, these factors have been active in other countries of the region as well. This is evidenced by the extent of growth of an independent electronic media in these countries.

In Sri Lanka, as early as in

The advent of independent electronic media in India and other countries of the region was the result of a number of factors: the growth of a more independent press, economic liberalization and the emergence of a larger and more articulate urban middle class. It did not happen in Pakistan.

lapse. Hopes for independent electronic media were re-kindled when the Chief Executive, General Pervez Musharraf, said in his second address to the nation after the October 12 takeover, that he was in favour of private television and radio. These hopes were strengthened when the draft of a proposed ordinance was released to the press in April last year regarding the establishment of a similar body now named as Regulatory Authority for Media Broadcast Organizations (RAMBO).

Yet no progress was made in this direction and according to the sources in the ministry of information and media development, the draft was 'under further scrutiny'. The proposed ordinance was again mentioned in a presentation made by the secretary of the said ministry to the Chief Executive on January 16, this year with the name of the proposed authority changed to the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA). More than two months have elapsed since then without any further action in this direction — which only indicates the government's unwillingness in the matter.

Recently, a television channel claiming to be the first 'independent' Pakistani channel, has started test transmissions. However, it is learnt that though a private television production house is on the front, large stakes are held in this venture by an ex-servicemen's foundation. Under these circumstances, the channel can hardly be expected to function independently in the real sense. After this development, it does seem very improbable that the fate of the PEMRA would be any different from those of its predecessors, the RAMBO and the EMRA, which could never see the light of day.

Though Pakistan was not the first in South Asia to introduce television, at one stage it was certainly on the top with its fast growing TV network, superior production techniques and high quality programme outputs. PTV started in 1964 with a pilot station at Lahore. By 1974, there

ment realize the importance of TV, as sensitive border areas in the Indian Punjab and held Kashmir were within the range of PTV's Lahore centre. To counter the influence of the PTV in those strategically important areas, television stations were set up in 1973 at Amritsar and Srinagar on a priority basis. Interestingly, the main item in the programme fare of Amritsar TV was the telecast of Indian films. This was meant not only to attract the Pakistani viewers, many of whom liked the Indian movies because of the disappointing performance of their own film industry or on account of nostalgia, but also because films have been a dominating force in Indian society itself.

By 1979, TV stations had been set up at Calcutta, Madras, Lucknow and Jullunder. However, the quality of locally produced programmes continued to be poor and Doordarshan had to rely mostly on the screening of movies and telecast of film-based programmes. The transmissions remained black and white until 1982 when the Asian Games held in Delhi spurred the government to introduce colour. Only after that, the Indian television started attracting viewers and advertisements in a big way.

But what changed everything on the media horizon of South Asia was the launching in 1990 of the first broadcasting satellite, AsiaSat-1, covering the Asia Pacific region stretching from Turkey to Japan. The Hong Kong company which owned this satellite, also introduced through it a television channel, the STAR (Satellite Television Asia Region) TV. The channel was beamed towards East, South-East, and South-Asia and carried programmes consisting of entertainment, movies, sports and news in English language. Unexpectedly, the channel gained great popularity in South Asia, particularly India, despite the language barrier. Soon India, because of the larger size and faster growth of its economy, became the main target and the principal market for that channel.

The success of Star TV prompted an Indian entrepre-

In Sri Lanka, as early as in 1993, there were four television stations. By 2000 the number rose to eight, including the official Rupavahini.

In Bangladesh, besides the government-controlled Bangladesh Television (BTV), a private channel, the Ekushey TV, started working from April, 2000. Initially, this channel was to carry BTV news bulletins but later permission was granted to it for having its own news and current affairs programmes.

In Pakistan, PTV-1 and PTV-2 (also known as PTV World) are owned by the government. Channel 3 or STN is owned by the Shalimar Recording and Broadcasting Corporation in which the Pakistan Television Corporation and the Pakistan Broadcasting Corporation, both controlled by the government, hold between them the majority shares. Thus, all the existing three are under the control of the government. The fourth, expected to come up soon, can hardly be as independent as one would want it to be — because of its indirect links with the government.

Though the unwillingness of the government to part with its present role is a major obstacle in the emergence of free electronic media, it is not the only one. There are some fears also. At a consultative meeting called by the ministry of information and media development in January, 2000, and attended by prominent media persons, top advertising executives and others, it was apprehended that since some of the major aspirants for private TV channels happened to be owners of a newspaper group or of advertising business, allowing them to enter this field might lead to unfair conditions for their competitors. Then, it was also to be considered if the economy with its present poor health would be able to support additional television channels.

In any case, if Pakistan has to act according to the dictates of changing times and to keep pace with others in the region, these hurdles will have to be removed and the way cleared for independent channels.