

Need to develop e-media

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At the time of independence, Pakistan inherited, like in all other spheres of life, a next to nothing infrastructure for communications and radio outlets only in Peshawar, Lahore, Karachi and Dacca. Everything else had to start from a scratch and despite the odds, by the grace of God, the country has progressed in all directions. Radio stations multiplied by the dozens, the film industry developed and culture found new dimensions, and in 1964, the country ventured into public service television disseminating a mix of news, views, educational programmes and entertainment.

Within no time, Pakistani entertainment programmes emerged as the best in Asia, waited and craved for across the border in neighbouring countries. Pakistani drama was thematically so strong, situations so close to life, and the performances of a crop of talent from educated families so refreshing and natural, that Pakistan took the entertainment world by storm, with its plays becoming a catch word around the globe among the expatriate communities from the sub-continent.

Television entertainment in the neighbourhood struggled for years to find an answer to the Pakistani standards, until some one launched what Khalid Hassan calls "naval invasion" with the females adorning low-cut mini-blouses in plays and features revolving around themes of elopement, flirtation, seduction, divorce and adulatory, and portraying their own culture through serials and soaps. Speaking Hindi, a language closely sounding like Urdu, but for its dominant Sanskritised strain, it was designed to influence and confuse the cultural facade of the Pakistani society in the name of entertainment.

In Pakistan today, the electronic media is finally taking the shape of an industry with the promulgation of the ordinance relating to the development and protection of the electronic media in the country. Media as a whole is beginning to find an air of freedom, and the private sector is fast joining in to play its role in the wake of the new openings. Unfortunately, due to the jaundiced policies of the past, the Pakistani electronic media, once rated as next to none in Asia, was fast overtaken by other countries in the region, including India with its cultural invasion by a multi-

tude of local and foreign based channels, some specially focused on striking at the genesis of Pakistani values.

In my view, the unhealthy influence of other foreign channels and programmes is comparatively less harmful than the pollution and permeation into our cultures of similar looking and sounding neighbouring cultures, which in fact are not even their own, but a hybrid of so-called modernism which may be in line with their own cultural acceptability, but cuts across the basics of Muslim social value system.]

Just like any other industry requiring incentives and protection for development during its nascent period, the Pakistani electronic media with an array of diversified talent among performers, technicians, artists and entrepreneurs also require incentives and protection. One therefore does not see the ban on such channels and their software, only in the context of the cultural dents they seek to make, but also as an opportunity for the media in

scope and its horizons. All this needs a playing-field, which promotes healthy competition within, before one opens up to the outside world. The People's Republic of China is a next door example of achieving excellence initially through protection.

Pakistan's own film industry is a case in point, where the floodgates of foreign cinema which had inundated Pakistani cinema houses in the fifties shortly after independence had to be closed down in order to give our gasping industry some breathing time. The argument that open competition creates quality becomes fallacious when you expect pathetic budgets to compete with unlimited resources. The ban on these films resulted in stabilising the Pakistani film industry until more recently, when foreign ban materials found their way into Pakistani house-holds, through cable and the illegal video market.

So as not to let the Pakistani electronic media suffer the same fate as its film industry and to help develop both media in the country in national interest. While the

Ministry of Culture must play its due role, it ought to be obligatory upon the regulatory body to ensure striking a balance while allowing foreign channels to form bouquets for Pakistani subscribers. There is no doubt that Western foreign channels have been the conduit for sex, nudity and violence into Asian societies and have, to a great extent, influenced and coloured our own programme software in the name of modernism and advancement. But Indian programmes of drama, dance and music have embraced

Pakistan is so rich in its cultural dimensions that we have managed so far to merely scrub and scratch the surface and need to map the country and create our own discovery channels. We need to intimately peep into the little joys, emotions and values of our huge rural expanses, and stop adding cosmetics and distorting our urban society. We must nevertheless mirror and project our landmarks in development, which add to enrich the new look landscape and its horizons. All this needs a playing-field, which promotes healthy competition within, before one opens up to the outside world.

Pakistan, to become economically viable in the face of an unequal competition. The Pakistani electronic media needs to re-discover its lost tracks and explore and exploit the thousands of years old culture of the Indus valley civilisation, which is our proud heritage.

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Westernised glitter and glamour, mindless of their own cultural boundaries, perhaps in pursuit of commercialism. Modernism and advancement need to be selective updating and not thoughtless aping. Preserving our society and culture from the ostensible blitz of modernism is our inherent right.

The Pakistani electronic Media have already within the span of a year taken a jump start. Around 50 FM radios and half a dozen private T.V channels are in the offing, with CTV already operating, and MMDS, LMDS and DTH stake-holders, all ready to play their role. The scene is set and needs all the goodwill at our command to provide the electronic media industry the boost and protection it deserves.