

'Out of the Box'

Television Representations of North-East India

DAISY HASAN

As an observer of programmes about the North-East on Indian television, both private and state owned, both national and regional, I have invariably had to grapple with a sense of despair. If private television channels are, as is often claimed, making concessions to regional audiences like never before, audiences here appear to have been missed, or acknowledged only nominally, if at all. While more avenues for representation are theoretically available today, it is still only the 'newsworthy' and the out-of-the ordinary that make it to our TV screens. Whole areas of cultural, social and political experience that do not fit neatly into hard and soft news agendas are never becoming part of public memory.

To my mind, the invisibility of the region's everyday is indicative of a crisis of representation on television. My attempt in this essay is to reflect on the causes for this crisis as well as to examine the available representations of the region on private and national television and their regional and local variants.

On the profit-oriented privately owned channels that have come to increasingly monopolize the attention of viewing publics, the region remains decidedly on the periphery of news and entertainment discourses. The following message posted by a Channel [V] producer on an alumni website recently caught my attention:

"A channel [V] team is heading out to the north-east states to do a travel show – not the usual touristy thing but something out-of-the-box stuff. Need research and story ideas from all the states there...need help...weird stuff – people, tribes, strange customs, virgin/undiscovered beautiful locations. Call me dude...can you get back pronto..."

What is striking is the producer's desire to eschew stereotypical "touristy" representations while simultaneously falling prey to the very stuff that tourism thrives on – tribes, customs, beautiful locations. Ironically, the diverse musical talent of the North-East has rarely caught the popular music channel's attention. Channel [V] remains out of bounds for the many self-made rock, blues, gospel bands here, even as it does not hesitate to exploit its exotic locales and customs for its travel shows.

A similar quest for the extraordinary marks news coverage of the North-East on the privately owned channels. In this scheme of things the bomb blasts, the massacres, the shootouts – threats posed by the region to the sanctity of the Indian state – find pride of place in the headlines of prime time news programmes. News sells and therefore warrants investments in terms of North-East bureaus. Glib correspondents deliver p-to-c with the right mix of sobriety and style that they imagine befits cutting edge TV journalism. Unfortunately, the facts sometimes don't match the flair with which they are delivered. Instances of mixing up names and accompanying visuals abound in television and the print media. But, more

seriously, ethnic clashes go misreported. In 1993, the clashes between Meiteis and Meitei-Pangals in the Manipur Valley were misreported as an extension of the Naga-Kuki conflict by prominent national media. Reflective and detailed reportage of the region's everyday is glaringly absent on the channels that 'matter'.

One of the reasons for this glaring absence is that the cities and towns of the region do not come under TRP (Television Rating Points) towns. Audiences therefore are numerically insignificant against the mass viewership in major Indian cities to which sponsorship is wedded. In such a scenario, audiences in the region take what they get even as they become invisible in the images they consume.

Public service television, which could have functioned as an effective forum for diverse local voices, has been handicapped by its own agendas for national integration and state control. If one is guided solely by the investments in communication infrastructure made in the states of North-East India in the current and last decade by Doordarshan (National Television), one is likely to conclude that the region has been given a fair share of attention by the centre. In addition to the regional Doordarshan *Kendras* or centres in the state capitals, a round-the-clock North-Eastern Service was introduced three years ago, fed by programmes produced at a Programme Production Centre in Guwahati.



However, this much talked about expansion and development of television translates into a largely infrastructural affair. A great deal of resources may have been spent on setting up transmitters and building and equipping studios according to a standardized blueprint, but little attention has been paid to unique regional and local conditions for broadcasting. Most regional centres bounce off the national network on which programmes about the region are confined to half-hour weekly slots. Programmes originating from the regional station are limited, and shoddily produced. Those who can change channels do so.

The heavily centralized structure of public service television consequently makes for little resonance in the daily lives of people here. In Shillong, for instance, one gets a sense

of the local Doordarshan *Kendra's* remoteness from the rhythms of the city even by its geographical placement. It is located on a hill – aloof and inaccessible to the quotidian life of the city below.

A concentration of resources in Guwahati has aggravated the problem. Policy makers at the centre are advised by self-seeking interlocutors in Guwahati, claiming to speak for the entire region. Contracts for producing programmes go not necessarily to the most deserving, but to those who have the clout to get them. So, while the funds for the region might be generous, as the former Director General of Doordarshan claims they are, they are often intercepted by pockets of self-interest.

When queried about programming policy for the North-East, the Deputy Director General (Programme) in Doordarshan *Bhavan*, New Delhi replied, “Why should there be a different policy? Why should programmes for the North-East be different from those for South India?”

Presumably there is no difference between viewers located in a remote hamlet of West Khasi Hills District, for instance, from those located in an urban locality in Bangalore. The insensitivity to context and the preference for a pan-Indian perspective has stood in the way of enabling the national broadcaster to strike a rapport with audiences in the region.

A former station director in Aizawl recounts how he was expected to send a statement to the Information & Broadcasting Ministry on the number of public service messages against untouchability he had broadcast. “When I was posted there we started getting telegrams – ‘your untouchability statement has not reached’. Then I wrote a letter back to them and said we are in a tribal area where there is no untouchability...”

In representing the nation to itself, national television has unfailingly privileged certain positions and memories over others. Between 1984 and 1992, the period when Doordarshan monopolized television audiences in the country, an increasingly Hindi and Hindu-centric cultural agenda, supported by the market, emerged. Financially pressured to generate its own revenue, Doordarshan became vulnerable to market pressures, and in a bid to deliver maximum possible audiences to hungry advertisers, all but abandoned the developmental and public service rhetoric which had justified the introduction of television. An opportunistic policy aligning the state’s propaganda needs with domestic and foreign capital, and the demand for entertainment by the middle class emerged.¹ This audience was simultaneously co-opted into the discourses of national (Hindu) culture.

Within this scheme of things, the significantly diverse cultural narratives from within North-East India could at best be stereotyped in the national mainstream that television represented “...as Other – ‘backward’, ‘violent’, ‘underdeveloped’, ‘tribal’ in the worst sense. But, in the curious symbolic polarization that constructs Others, [the] region has also been seen as a kind of folkloric ideal – ‘tribal’ in the best sense, close to nature, isolated from the enervations of modernity, embodying the communal and uncommodified, carrying in local artistic traditions a non-reflective but powerful creativity that expresses some essential, primitive, timeless humanity”.²

Ohm (1999: 75) has analyzed the manner in which Doordarshan was historically dealt with images that it projected to the nation. The task of television, she argues, was believed to be one of disciplining the image in keeping with its self-appointed role as an educator of taste whose main objectives were educational and developmental. In trying to project

images of Indian 'reality', Doordarshan eschewed the 'vulgar exuberance' of Hindi films but came close to embracing a non-image (ibid: 76).

As far as the North-East states are concerned, these non-images continue to dominate its representation on national television.

It is the local entrepreneurial effort at narrowcasting in cities like Shillong, Aizawl, and Imphal that is able to provide a glimpse of the flux generated in the region by the forces of modernity. These weekly, and in some cases daily, news and features produced in local languages and transmitted through the neighbourhood cable networks document the everyday at a level and in an idiom that is not available to the regional, national or private broadcasters. While they might devote a great deal of attention to the workings of local government institutions and those of 'insurgents', they at least afford the possibility of documenting other local narratives that animate the cities, towns and villages of North-East India.

One worries about the future of these innovative but financially precarious endeavours in a media environment where the 'big players' are constantly looking to capture new 'markets'. One worries that the innovative spaces carved out by cultural practitioners – most prominently the music concerts – could soon become Channel [V] style frenetic events sponsored by Pepsi and Coca Cola.

Any meaningful representation of the region will have to approach it from a perspective other than the one of insurgency and backwardness that informs current coverage. Unless spaces for the expression of contemporary cultural interests and political aspirations are created, the North-East, in spite of all its 'crises' that attract television coverage, might in a real sense remain out of the box.

NOTES

1. See Manjunath Pendakur, "A Political Economy of Television: State, Class and Corporate Confluence in India", in G.Sussman and J. A Lent eds., *Transnational Communications: Wiring the Third World* (Sage, 1991, London) pp. 234-62.
2. Taylor, Betsy. "Public Folklore, Nation-Building and Regional Others: Comparing Appalachain USA and North-East India", *Indian Folklore Research Journal*, Vol 1, No. 2 (2002) pp. 1-27.