Myth of Indian media

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In 2011, India leading media production company UTV was gobbled by US media giant, Walt Disney. In 1996, ironically, UTV was contacted initially by Disney to dub its products into Indian languages. Being I in the BRIC [Brazil, Russia, India, China], India is eyed by global media conglomerates as world's third largest market (Kohli 2003:68, Sinha 2006:7). State television was launched in India, on experimental basis, in 1959. Since launching of first privately-owned Zee TV in 1992, the country had 800 channels by 2010 while media was Rs 42,230 crore business employing several millions. Overawed by the Indian-media boom in the 1990s, liberal academics began to glorify it as 'making of little media imperialism' in their bit to dismiss the notion of media imperialism (Sonwalker 2001). They declared that emerging cultural centres like India (Bollywood in particular!) and Globo-feme Brazil have delivered the end of Western domination of media and cultural productions.

It was Marxists who raised alarm in the 1960s about media imperialism. They pointed out that the flow of news, film, drama and other cultural products was primarily from North to South thus undermining the cultures in the countries of South. In the post-WTO world, West is however not merely exporting cultural content, it has physically arrived to run the media systems in the third world. India, with its emerging middle-class is a good destination. From Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation to Time Warner and Sony, all global conglomerates are operating on Indian airwaves. What consequences global media penetration is likely to have on India? Who benefits: India or West? Certain indicators are already there. Of the top 4 mostly watched TV networks, three---Colours (Viacom), SET (Sony) and Star (News Corporation)--- are owned by global media conglomerates ranked among world's top ten (Sinha 2006, Kohli 2003, Miller 2007).

In 2004, Star claimed to be broadcasting its programmes to more than 31 million homes in India, Sony to 35 million households (Sinha 48-51). Of the top 20 advertising agencies in India, 15 have multinational roots (Ibid 86). The mushroom growth of Indian TV channels combined with multinational advertising agencies, is having consequences on the distribution of advertisements [Ad spend in the media lingo]. The Ad spend is undermining the Indian press. For instance, Ad spend in 1992 for television was 395 crore (23% of the total Ad spend). For press, it was 1325 crore (63% of the total Ad spend). In 2002, Ad spend on TV had reached 4717 crore (48% of the total Ad spend) while the share of Indian press had been 'reduced' to 4424 [43% percent of the total Ad spend] (Kohli 2003: 4-5). The state-broadcaster DoorDarshan (DD) never recovered from the body blow of audiences running away to 'global media'. Today the only captive audience DD has is 40 million odd country-side homes that have no other option. A struggling DD was relying on an approximately Rs 6 billion subsidy (to be paid by tax-payers) by 2002 (Ibid:77-78). However, the global media have bypassed Indian poor. The countryside poor are no good consumers of multinational products advertised on global TV channels. Instead of posing any challenge to West, Indian media houses are either being devoured like UTV or becoming junior partners, in the name of joint ventures, to the global giants. Cable-netwrok Siticable (Zee-owned), reaching 6.7million homes, is a joint venture with Turner International India Limited, CNN, Cartoon Network, Pogo, CNBC and Reality TV.

Among news channels, we have CNN-IBN, Times now (a symbiosis of Times Group and Reuters) while NDTV is collaborating with ABC. Every major news channel and daily has a global tie-up. The 'Indian media', in short, is like a reality show: Local in appearance, Western when it comes to profit-making.

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