

Mid-term narrative report

Grantee: **Jenson Joseph**

Grant Number: **2014-G-0-013**

Popular Malayalam language film *Passenger* (Ranjith Sankar; 2009) offers us an intriguing entry point into the problem that I have taken up for discussion in this project: what has television actually changed in a context like India? The film revolves around the events that unfold in an extraordinary day in the life of an inconspicuous, politically indifferent, middle class man (a government office clerk played by Sreenivasan¹) who accidentally gets entangled in unusual circumstances only to become instrumental - incognito - in first breaking a political scandal through a news channel; then in saving the lives of a TV journalist and her lawyer husband who are on a mission of exposing the nexus between a local corrupt politician and a greedy multinational corporate; and eventually, in preventing the eviction of a whole fishing community from its land - all in a matter of few hours! The climax of the film is striking: after coming home in the evening on his heroic day, our protagonist sits back on the sofa to check the TV news. Tears of joy well up in his eyes, as he watches the news program paying homage to the anonymous hero of the day. At this moment, his ageing mother, totally unaware of the poignancy of the moment, grabs the remote control and changes to the channel running her favourite prime time devotional serial. On any other day, this is the time for our protagonist to unleash his rhetorical attack on the overly sentimental staple content of TV, in desperate attempt to wean his mother or wife away from their favourite reality TV show, mega-serial episode or the mythical devotional drama. However, on this day, he does not react at all, but rather wipes his tears secretly, and

¹ A highly successful scriptwriter, actor and director, Srinivasan is considered the icon of modernization of popular cinema in Malayalam. In many accounts, Srinivasan is credited as that one man who has made all the difference in keeping Malayalam popular cinema away from those maladies that are often pointed out as having gripped popular cinema in other Indian language films - i.e., star domination, unrealistic/fantasy narratives, retrogressive aesthetic tendencies, monotonous song-and-dance formula, etc. His scripts especially are considered as centrally instrumental in retaining rationality in narrative structures, and in ushering in a 'golden era' in Malayalam popular cinema when 'the common man' was a recurring thematic obsession.

quietly leaves the TV to the women of the house. Television news now *moves* too; and social action is rendered inwardly affective².

It is rather easy to suggest that the film points towards the centre stage that television has come to occupy in contemporary politics. At the outset, the film is indeed about how television has taken over the place that hitherto the newspaper had occupied in facilitating democratic politics in India until 1980s/1990s, though in different ways. What strikes me as more important is how the film hints at the recuperation of affect in/for democratic politics in the contemporary – a development closely linked to the history of television, and enabled through the medium.

In offering a narrative on the emergence of satellite television in Kerala during the early 1990s, my attempt in this project is to propose that the history of Television in India (and perhaps everywhere) is primarily the history of the political career of affect, and to suggest that the re-imagining of politics and modernity – by affording affect a new centrality – is the most fascinating aspect of the history of television in the region. In other words, I am to argue that there are crucial links between the emergence of television as a mass medium in India, and the diminishing hegemony of politics and modernity practised and experienced through the application of rationality as the key principle, which works by delegating domains and excesses of affect to the margins of rational modern politics.

Probing these links would require conceiving a radically new and broader mode of thinking about the cultural-political implications of television's popularity in India than what are often offered in existing accounts in the field. For example, in his 2008 book *India on Television: How Satellite News Channels Have Changed the Way We Think and Act* – one of the best available accounts on television in contemporary India – Nalin Mehta invites our attention to the spectacular spread of satellite television in order to propose, later, what he considers as its political implications:

In less a decade, between 1998 and 2006, India has experienced the rise of more than fifty 24-hour satellite news channels, broadcasting news in 11 different

² In fact, in the live news programme that our protagonist watches, we see the anchor asking Advocate Nandan (played by the star Dileep) whose life was one that the timely interventions of our protagonist helped rescue, to say a few words to the viewers. Reciprocating to this, Nandan tells the camera poignantly: "all that one needs to possess in order to make a change in this world is not might or strength, but a tender heart – just like our anonymous hero today".

languages. They are a prominent part of a vibrant satellite television industry, comprising more than 300 channels, that has targeted Indian homes since the early 1990s. In one form or the other, at least 106 of these broadcast daily news in 14 regional languages, and their emergence marks a sharp break with the past. (p. 1)

Mehta, then, proceeds to offer us his analysis of the political implications of this 'satellite news channel revolution', by borrowing Robin Jeffrey's formulations on the expansion of newspaper industry in India and the deepening of democratic politics in the region:

Much like India's 'newspaper revolution' that started in the 1970s, and the 'cassette culture' of the 1980s, the availability of privately produced satellite television has meant that "people discovered new ways to think about themselves and to participate in politics that would have been unthinkable a generation before" [quoting Jeffrey 2000, p. 1]. (Ibid)

In effect, the story of satellite television's impact becomes a mere extension of what the newspaper expansion had begun achieving in India since the 1970s. Such formulations pose a set of serious problems for writing histories of media. Firstly, the assumption that media expansion leads naturally to wider participation in democratic politics tends to make the media historian a champion of the medium. In fact, often it becomes imperative for the media historian to prove the positive 'political impacts' of his/her medium which then serves as the *raison d'être* for the exercise of history writing. This framework, moreover, works with a reductive idea of political participation as restricted to domains of voicing opinions and visible partaking in democratic machinery. Finally, the specificities of the medium is often side-lined, while 'the effect' of mass media – as a generic category – is afforded an overwhelming emphasis, with effects measured directly in terms of the medium's success or failure in broadening the general public's rights-based political being.

A cultural history of television, I suggest, would demand an enquiry that pays attention perhaps precisely to those aspects of the medium that hardly qualify for positive celebration in accounts of how television facilitate, or not, the broadening of participation in democratic politics. Popular cultural references to television's centrality in contemporary life, like the one that I started my narrative with, enable us to identify many such aspects that lie beyond the visible domains of positive politics. The specific focus in this project is the political-cultural contexts of the 1990s when satellite

television began to evolve as a crucial mediating factor in social life in Kerala, a south-western linguistic state in India. Broadly, the project probes the possibilities of situating the advent and popularity of satellite television in post-colonial regions post 1990s outside the overarching frames of 'globalization', by foregrounding, instead, the quests to mould newer relations to modernity as central to the phenomenon. Narrating the cultural history of *Asianet* – one of the first satellite television channels in India launched by a group of Malayali³ journalists and expatriate entrepreneurs, which started transmission in 1993 from a hired studio in Philippines using a Russian satellite, targeting Malayali audience in various parts of the world – would be key to the project in exploring these themes. The project proposes that television's specificity as a markedly *domestic medium*, and satellite television's *address from the horizons*, are two aspects that needs foregrounding in order to grasp how the medium becomes instrumental in (gendered) layers of refashioning of the modern political subject in post-colonial contexts, post 1990s.

Situating the project

In much popular discourse on the changing media-scape across the third world, the immense popularity that satellite television has gained even in remote corners of the world is often foregrounded as compelling evidence of electronic media's pervasiveness in social life in these regions. This is then invoked as index of the expanding sway of Western media conglomerates and the interests they represent over local domains of the cultural and the economic, given the predisposition in this discourse to invoke 'satellite television' and 'Western/American media' interchangeably. Satellite television, in this approach, is the medium of Americanization, the images it beams from above having the potential to perforate deep into even the most hardened layers of the local and alter it fundamentally. Thus, even in cases when much of the content of a transnational satellite television channel is locally produced, specifically to cater to the 'regional' audience across the globe, its economic and political ambitions are understood as essentially driven by the medium's ideological commitments to the hegemonizing pressures of an America-imposed globalization. The cases of MTV India and STAR Network are classic examples. The offshoots of this discourse have ranged

³ 'Malayali' is the term widely used to refer to people hailing from Kerala, after the region's official language Malayalam.

from an overwhelming sense of cultural pessimism permeating debates on media effects, to the right wing groups seeking governmental interventions and prohibition on what they identify as 'culturally alien' content.

The emerging scholarship on the field often complicates theories of one-way flow of content from the dominating centres of the West to the frail regions of the third world. Attempting to move beyond cultural pessimism, recent studies look closely at the political implications of, for example, the unsettling of delicate nationalist resolutions on sexuality, gender, desire, the erotic, the domestic, etc., that ensues the proliferation of a variety of programme content through transnational satellite television since the 1990s in post-colonial contexts. The domain of consumption emerges as the locus in much of this discourse. Satellite television hails us, first and foremost, to consume by inducing desire: it hails us to consume the images it beams, the products it advertises as well as the desires and affects packaged in a variety of its programme content. The corollaries of the success or failure of this interpellation (to consume) on the local audience is, then, understood as generating all the significant material-cultural effects of the medium in the local contexts. For example, in India, situating the advent of Satellite TV in the context of the 1990s – a decade known for the initiation of economic liberalization policies that radically altered the country's political-cultural horizons – often has the outcome of the scholarship attempting to grasp the medium's interventions exclusively in terms of the sites of 'consumption' that it engenders. This preoccupation becomes an overarching frame in explorations of other related themes as well, like the transnationalism of Satellite TV, the changing patterns in the production and presentation of news after the arrival of 24x7 news channels, the unleashing of hitherto tabooed desires and images in advertisements, etc. The remote control in the hands of the viewer sitting back on the sofa, letting him browse leisurely through the hundreds of channels that Satellite TV offers, becomes the archetypal emblem of 'consumer agency' that the medium represents and its affiliations to a global market that privileges the individual and his choices. In effect, the story of Satellite TV's advent in most of the third world is framed within a much larger narrative charting the expanding drives of globalizing capital. Moreover, the persistent concern with 'media effects' remains central in this discourse as well, as Satellite TV is understood as one of the crucial sites

that facilitate, *on behalf of globalization*, the dramatic encounter – where ‘effects’ are produced – between West-induced content and the local cultural contexts.

In the context of India, this narrative runs parallel also to a field of theorising and critiquing the country’s urban middle class – a section of population understood as erstwhile protagonists of the Nehruvian socialist state (representing restraint over the desire to consume), but that has swung, of late, to become the market-driven globally-oriented consumer citizenry. The changing appeal in television advertisements of consumer products, from the days of the state-run television to the era of transnational satellite television, itself is considered as adequately indicative of this class’s shifting ideological leanings. While these accounts do open up possibilities of critiquing the dichotomous categorization of programme content and images as foreign and local, ‘content’ remains the core object of analysis. Besides, affording centrality to globalization’s cultural capitalism in accounts on the mediations of satellite television in the third world contexts can obscure an important question in understanding media practices in these regions: *what are the ways in which the effects specific to a technological medium attain political-cultural significance in post-colonial regions like India where media have always been sites of the local’s negotiations with modernity?*

Rather than viewing the ‘arrival’ of transnational satellite television as a rupturing moment coinciding exclusively with the expanding thrusts of globalization, this project attempts to identify historically contingent factors, during and after the 1990s, that necessitated a refashioning of the regions’ relation to modernity – a project in which satellite television’s *hailing from the horizons* (as opposed to the *terrestrial* transmission, flowing from centres to peripheries – the model associated with the state-run television until then) (see Image 1) as well as television’s specificity as a markedly *domestic medium* attained vital significance. In the case of Kerala, the project would argue that satellite television provided a platform to shift the locus of the regional imagination from the spatial-cultural frames of the nation-state, as well as the particularities of the regional subsumed within that, to a realm of the transnational horizon – a realm the incorporation of the region into which is definitely formed through the governmental technologies of the nation state and globalization’s imperatives, but which in fact has radically reconstituted the state-citizen relations. The consolidation of Malayali expatriate communities across the world after the large-scale

migration from Kerala to other parts of India, the Gulf, Europe, the United States and South East Asia, turned out to be a crucial mediating factor in this process, the project would argue. The nature of this mediation ranged from infusing capital that has sustained a number of satellite television channels, most of which run into losses often, to facilitating for the region a new relation to the world. The significance of the sphere of the domestic in this mediation, and the layers of gender embedded in it, are aspects the project would want to probe as well.

WHY IN THE WORLD WOULD ANYONE BUY AN EXCLUSIVE SAT SYSTEM?

Because you want the power to travel to different worlds, uninterrupted. Because you want to be there when it happens. Wherever. Whenever.

Because you want undisturbed transmission and brilliant colour quality. Even Clint Eastwood's silhouette has a razor sharp quality to it.

Because you want to enjoy hi-fidelity, concert-quality Wegener PANDA Stereo Sound. When played through your stereo system "Michael Jackson Live" takes on a whole new meaning.

Because it allows you to lock-out channels you wouldn't want viewed by children or anyone else.

Because it is future proof, you can hook up to all the available channels today. And more than 80 channels in the future. With the full function remote control in the palm of your hand.

Because unlike Cable Television, the Solidaire Sat System means absolute and total control of world entertainment.

And finally because an exclusive Solidaire Sat System comes from a leader in consumer electronics. So go ahead. Pamper yourself with the luxury of an exclusive Solidaire Sat System.

STAR TV
BBC
WORLD SERVICE TELEVISION
CNN

SOLIDAIRE SAT SYSTEMS
Be there when it happens

Featured option available to receive CNN, ATN, Pepsi and other satellites.

Call today at: Ahmedabad: 489055 Bangalore: 256276/256261 Bombay: 5785363/578998 Calcutta: 379967/379968
 Delhi: 667541/667105 Hyderabad: 280709/2807833 Madras: 413098/413281/415747

Image 1: Advertisement of a Solidarie's satellite dish antenna, promising access to Star TV, BBC and CNN. The first caption says: "Because you want the power to travel to different world, uninterrupted." (TV and Video World, September 1992).

Television in India before satellite TV

In the 1980s, after the Indian state turned to it as a potentially more effective medium (over cinema and radio) for its various ideological tasks, television started occupying centre-stage in cultural life in India. After almost a decade of unchallenged dominance of the state television Doordarshan, by the late 1980s, private entrepreneurship took television into a completely different direction than what the state had imagined as the medium's destiny. As a prelude to the narrative on the coming of satellite television in India, the following section charts the influx of private entrepreneurship mainly in the form of cable television networks, and video magazines in VHS tape format.

In the early 1980s itself, cable television networks had started sprouting across urban centres of India like Bombay, Calcutta, Madras and Delhi. According to an article in the August 1988 issue of *Play Back and Fast Forward*, a cable network called 'Nemula Video Network' – an electronic communication services company – started a commercial installation for residential viewing in Bombay in 1982 (Vol 3; Issue 3: p. 67). Soon, in 1983, Sidhartha Srivastava – an Electronics Engineering graduate – started Cable Video Corporation; Adroit Advertising and Marketing launched its cable network called Channel 2 in the same year, but closed down in a few years (Ibid). Soon, cable network witnessed vast entrepreneurial interest and companies offering services multiplied fast by the end of 1980s. Many video cassette library owners launched cable networks, offering entertainment using full length films and fragments of them. Such cable networks depended mainly on cinema to generate staple content to be transmitted – a factor that lead to ruffles between the network operators and video cassette companies.

Another field that witnessed private entrepreneurship is in generating content exclusively for television, taking into account the increasing presence of VCRs in urban houses. Video magazines were the results of this. Initially, print film magazines started their version of video magazines offering news from the world of cinema. *Play Back and Fast Forward*, a magazine dedicated for music, television and video sectors, sites 'Lehren' and 'Movie Video' as examples of film magazines launching their video versions (*Play Back and Fast Forward*, April 1988, Vol 2, Issue 11). 'Chalte Chalte', 'Bush Film Trax', etc., are other examples of video magazines on the world of cinema. Soon, a number of publishing houses launched their video magazines: Living Media Pvt Ltd, the publishers of India Today, started first news video magazine – 'Newstrack' which

became very popular by the 1990⁴. PTI TV soon followed this with its own news magazine in video format (Ibid). In 1991, Hindustan Times, Observer Group, Independent Television launched their video magazines namely 'Eyewitness', 'Observer News Channel' and 'Indiaview', respectively (TV and Video World, June 1991, Vol 8, Issue 6).

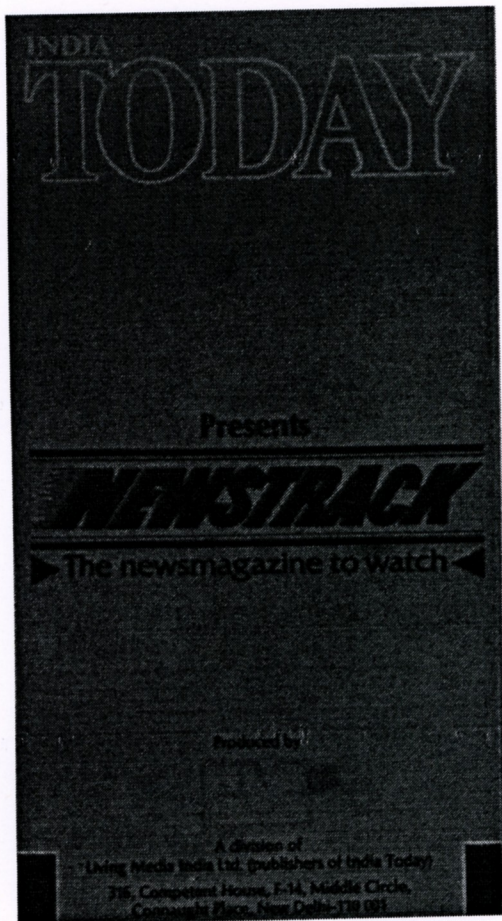


Image 2: Cover of Newstrack – India Today's video magazine.



Image 3: The cover of The Observer's video magazine on 1991 elections.

In fact, Doordarshan was a crucial facilitator in stimulating private entrepreneurship in production of content for TV – especially features on current affairs and stories on human rights violations. Outsourcing the slots of features enabled Doordarshan to cater

⁴ TV and Video World's June issue says: "The initial foray into the video magazine market by *Newstrack* was meant to fill a vacant slot that existed mainly due to Doordarshan's inability to provide credible and innovative programmes. For almost two years, *Newstrack* operated in isolation with little competition. With the Mandal issue in October 1990, *Newstrack* hit an all-time high, thereby making people more aware of video magazines and their value as a more credible alternative to Doordarshan (TV and Video World, June 1991, Vol 8, Issue 6: p. 33).

at least to some extent to the demand for feature and investigative stories as well as political analysis of current affairs, while at the same time absolving itself of the direct responsibility of stances and perspectives in such content that would potentially have displeased the government, the officials, the politicians, etc. NDTV, during the late 1980s, started producing programmes like 'The World This Week', and 'The News Tonight', for Doordarshan that became popular among the urban viewers. The formats of these programmes seem to have served as models for the video magazines.

Specialized video magazines like 'Business Plus' launched by Bombay-based Paradigm Media in 1990 had a subscriber base of above 4,600, and sold 7,500 cassettes. Paradigm Media also launched 'People Plus', another video magazine focusing on human interest stories. Times TV (of *Times of India*) and Business India also launched their monthly business magazines in video soon. Dev Features launched its video magazine for sports-related news and clips, called *Sports Channel*. In the South, before the coming of Sun TV, Kalandhi Maran started a video news magazine from Chennai in Tamil called *Poomalai*, for which the North Indian component was covered by PTI TV (Interview with Sashi Kumar).

Meanwhile, Doordarshan, with its nation-spread network and vast reach among even the non-urban regions of the country, found tremendous success especially with serialized formats of Hindu mythical tales like *Ramayana* (1987-88) and *Mahabharata* (1988-89). The bundle of programmes that Doordarshan started offering by the late 1980s was the result of deliberations from the early 1980s on the ideal nature of programme contents for a state television. On Dec 6, 1982, the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting set up a working group "to prepare a software plan for Doordarshan, taking into consideration the main objectives of television of assisting in the process of social and economic development of the country and to act as an effective medium for providing information, education and entertainment" (*An Indian Personality for Television*, 1985). The report of the working group headed by PC Joshi as chairman, called *An Indian Personality for Television: Report of the Working Group on Software for Doordarshan*, was published by the ministry in March 1985. The report quotes The International Commission for the Study of Communication Problems, or MacBride Commission Report (1980) which says "television has a strongly transnational face" (p. 108); (quoted in p. 4).

Much of the deliberations revolved around the ensuring that the domestic sphere – where television ultimately belongs – is not polluted by undesirable content. The report says:

Being a hungry medium, it has to be fed all the time. (...) [A] major threat to national culture arises from cheap and titillating programmes produced within a country which are projected through the television day in and day out in order to fill television time (p. 4-5).

It summed up the need for deliberations on the content in the following manner, throwing light on a set of crucial underlying anxieties of the officials:

Unlike a pornographic book or journal read in privacy by an individual, or a lewd or sadistic film viewed by a person in the anonymity of the crowd in a darkened cinema hall, a film screened on television is often watched by three generations of a family. To watch these lewd scenes in a family group is highly embarrassing (p. 159).

Significantly, the committee regards broadcasting through television as the most effective link between *“the vast majority of the population who are still illiterate and a large section of the women who do not go out into the public on the one hand, and the progressive part of India on the other”* (p. 5; emphasis mine). The state’s intention to turn to television as its primary ideological tool, and the reasons for this shift, are abundantly clear here: television offers the possibilities of bringing together nation’s disparate constituencies better than any other medium till then. The challenge, then, was to identify a mode of address – an aesthetic for Indian television – that would appeal to these constituencies simultaneously whenever possible. It is my contention that these considerations and their resolutions, though concerning only Doordarshan at this stage, were to have a long lasting impact on Indian television.

A cultural history of Asianet?

The narrative on the emergence of Asianet in Kerala – one of the first satellite television channels in India – is to be constructed against this backdrop. A cultural history of the medium would mean paying attention to the ambitions and desires that propelled the initiative and the imagination, the affects mobilized in moulding the mode of address,

and the mediations between the region and modernity that the channel inevitably gets entangled in.

So far, my attempts towards building this narrative has been concentrated on interviewing key people who were associated with the channel from its early days, who were instrumental in drafting the nature of it – in terms of its aesthetics and politics. Other than interviews, my attempts to get hold of samples of the channel's early programmes have not been successful so far for various reasons. I am attaching the transcript of the interviews below.

Work to be finished

The remaining work mainly involves interviewing a few more people, constructing a comprehensive account on the political economy of media in Kerala by the late 1980s, and most importantly, pursuing with the attempts to access the channels archives in order to derive an idea regarding the format of its early day programs.

Interview with Sashi Kumar

JJ: The emergence and spread of satellite TV in India is often understood as part of the story of Western media' global expansion, as the result of an America-propelled media imperialism's attempts to reach to the Third World market, etc. However, the history of a channel like Asianet does not fit easily into this framework. This was one of the first satellite television channels in India, and it was envisaged from within the local context. In that sense, that envisioning is something we need to revisit.

The late 1980s... You were already in the field of Television when you came up with the proposal for Asianet. You were with PTI TV then. This was also the time that witnessed several formal experiments in the field of television in Indian metropolitan cities. From home to home cable television networks in cities, to video magazines, different formats of television were being tried out. PTI TV also had plans to launch its own video magazine. How did journalists' fraternity look at television as a medium at that time?

SK: I was chief producer at PTI TV at that time. TV was not a new medium for me because my main medium has been television. I started to work as a news presenter in Doordarshan. I broke into print journalism for a brief period but I came back, as certain things were happening. The state of affairs in the state-owned Doordarshan was jokingly referred to as 'Glasnost and Perestroika'. Even though it was a government channel, the brief was that 'you can be open; you can be critical', etc. Many critical programming on government and state started appearing on state television. A lot of these programming were not done by the Doordarshan staffers, but by the outsiders, as slots were contracted out to others.

Parallely, as you indicated, there were video magazines. India Today had a video magazine called 'Newstrack'. This is how Prannoy Roy, for instance, started 'The World This Week' in Doordarshan. I was called back by PTI in 1986, and we set up a television centre in PTI. We became a big banner for production of current affairs documentaries on domestic and particularly international issues, on Doordarshan. We did a number of important documentaries; we did many-parts documentaries on what was happening after the break-up of the Soviet Union, withdrawal of the Russians from Afghanistan, the Sri Lankan IPKF engagement, what was happening in Iran-Iraq, the Kuwait attack... We also did a multinational documentary on the theme of disarmament and development. For a while from 1986 to three or four years after, the biggest banner on Doordarshan in terms of critical programming was in fact PTI TV. We also did another programme called Money Matters – an economy program on Doordarshan on Saturday morning slot, which looked critically at economic policies. Many prominent economists even of Left persuasion got a lot of visibility on state television through this program. We did a cultural program called *Thana Bana*, looking at the plural culture of India. We did another program called *Jan Manch*, putting a minister in the dock. In fact, variations of these program formats became independent channels later. For example, Money

Matters is probably the first sustained programming that pointed towards the business channel as a logic. In that sense, PTI TV was not just doing programs for Doordarshan, but also innovating on programming, emphasising on how to be responsibly critical.

Because of certain restriction on free expression of ideas in Doordarshan, video magazines like Newstrack emerged. In the South, before the coming of Sun TV, Kalanidhi Maran started a video news magazine from Chennai in Tamil called *Poomalai*, for which the North Indian component was done by PTI TV.

So there was a kind of effervescence in the air [about TV]. That set me thinking. Time was becoming ripe for an independent-minded television network in the country. The initial expression was in the form of these video news magazines, as only the state had the rights to uplink content, and TV was still operating in terrestrial telecast format. Incidentally, the technology also came to our rescue, as direct broadcast satellite technology came into being in the mid-1980s, enabling us to look beyond terrestrial broadcasting. Direct broadcast satellite technology liberates you because if you have a transponder up in the sky and if you are able to uplink a signal to that transponder, that signal can be beamed down to the footprint of the transponder. That was the principle.

The big player who had already used direct broadcast satellite technology by then and started an independent channel was Ted Turner of CNN. This is when BBC was still operating on terrestrial transmission, though BBC World was using satellite transmission to a greater extent. Thus, my real inspiration was Ted Turner and what he did. He not only started satellite transmission, he also cabled up Atlanta. It is from him that I got the idea that we can use the utility poles for cabling up: the poles are already there and all you need is get a licence from the state to use them to for your cable networking.

Asianet was not meant to be a Malayalam channel. It was meant to be the national channel of PTI TV. As the chief producer of PTI TV and the joint general manager of PTI, I had proposed to the board of PTI that PTI is well positioned to start a national news channel, and that the channel should be called Asianet. Otherwise why would you call a Malayalam channel Asianet!

A number of people on the board were very enthusiastic about the proposal; some of them were not very enthusiastic because they had their own private ambitions to start channels. They saw PTI as a probable big player, which created conflicts of interest in that situation. I wasted almost one year waiting for the nod, but nothing was happening. And I decided to start it on my own. I spoke to my uncle Mr Reji Menon, who was a trader in Russia.

Soviet Union was breaking up, and a lot of transponders were being liberated. Because of certain confusion there, state-owned transponders were being made available, but for a huge cost because that was still the age of analogue technology. Indicatively, the

cost of a transponder was something around 18 crores a year (whereas today you get a transponder to uplink for 1.5 crores).

As the law of the land said you can't uplink from here, we started with a Russian transponder called Ekran. To receive the signal, one had to use the helical antennas. We started selling those helical antennas in Kerala when Asianet started.

I knew that it would be difficult to launch this at the national level, and hence started looking at a region. Though I lived all along in Chennai, I thought let me look at Kerala. Luckily for me, when I went and talked about it to the then chief minister K Karunakaran, he was very enthusiastic about it. I presented both the ideas to him: we will have a satellite channel, and also a state-wide cable networking which was unprecedented in India. We entered into a contract with Kerala State Electricity Board to use their poles, for a monthly payment per pole for a period of 10 years.

The initial impetus was that the technology was available. And we wanted to do something different from Doordarshan. When I moved to Kerala, it looked far easy to decide what is to be done there in the state – as a cultural, political, social intervention. K Karunakaran inaugurated it in Guruvayur, and later in Thiruvananthapuram, by receiving the signal.

We continued with the Ekran transmission for almost a year. Many companies started making the special antenna for households. It was a simple technology and was as cheap as Rs. 2000. We didn't ask for any royalty from the manufacturers of these antennas. It was potentially a big thing. But what didn't know what this transponder we contracted was one the life of which was over. It was already drifting out of its orbit. That the Russians didn't tell us!

After we started all this, suddenly the signals started becoming weaker. Initially, they wouldn't tell us the reason. Once the cat was out of the bag, we were in deep trouble. We frantically started looking for alternatives. I went to Hong Kong and started negotiating with IntelSat. Thus, we moved on from Ekran transponder to the more modern, American, C band transponder. This is where you have a big dish and an offset sort of a receiver, and you have to distribute the signal via cable.

This was a big let-down. On the one hand we got a good reception in Kerala; on the other hand, technologically we were suddenly shifting track in a very early phase which can kill a project. We had to survive that.

JJ: How were the programs uplinked?

SK: Initially, the content were uplinked from Russia. We would send tapes through Aeroflot or Air India pilots or airhostesses we knew. We used the connections of my uncle who was in Russia. The uplinking station was 3-4 hours away from Moscow. Later, the uplink for the C band transponder was from Philippines. And then we shifted to Singapore.

JJ: How did the newspapers respond to the emergence of private television?

SK: Newspapers did not believe in the future of TV. They thought this is too expensive and people wouldn't come to it... and after all, the state-owned Doordarshan is there. In fact, we decided to start on our own, we thought of finding big partners. The first big partner I approached was Vivek Goenka of Indian Express. I met him at Express Towers in Bombay. I knew him; he was from my school in Chennai. He was very receptive to the idea. But he had just taken over the newspaper after Ramnath Goenka passed away, as was still under the tutelage, in some sense, of the textile man Nasli Wadia. He took me to Wadia's office; we had a long chat. Nasli Wadia told Vivek: "This is a great idea. I understand why Shashi Kumar wants to do this. But you should decide whether you would want to be a newspaper baron or a cable operator."

It was seen like that. Because our first direct satellite broadcasting experience was during the Gulf war, CNN's war coverage was shown across homes by cable operators who just strung cables on the multi-storeyed buildings in particularly Bombay, and also in Kolkata, Delhi, etc.

Then I approached *Manorama*. In fact, Philip Mathew from the *Manorama* family was already in the PTI Board, and he was one of those who was enthusiastic about the project. Philip Mathew told me to talk to his father K M Mathew. I went and met K M Mathew in *Manorama* office in Kottayam. He listened to everything and said, he finds this too risky. Then I approached The Hindu, as N Ram was my friend. The Hindu group too was too conservative to venture into TV at that point of time. Much later, when Asianet became popular, K M Mathew called me and said "I should have listened to you; I made a mistake." Out of sheer compulsion, I was forced to do it on my own.

After we started, once or twice, when we ran out of money to pay the transponder; the uplink stations in Philippines pulled the plug a couple of times. We managed to cover it up with sending out video cassettes to be played from cable network stations. Only those outside Kerala came to know that the channel was off the air for a brief period. Later, we managed to get some money from the bank and paid them. In short, it was like a tight rope walking in the beginning. I don't think I have slept properly for almost a year. I knew without money one can't run the channel, and the advertisements were going to take time to come.

Later, we signed a contract with Kerala State Electricity Board for using their poles. This contract was something I could leverage. Many foreign as well as Indian companies including BPL and Reliance were interested in the cable network - which was named Asianet Sat Com - and we had discussions with them. But they couldn't see the full potential of it. The first big money comes for the channel when I divested 50 percent of the stakes of the cable network to the Raheja Group in Bombay for roughly 40 crores, which was big money those days. I put this money into the channel.

JJ: In many narratives about the arrival of private channels in India, we see mentions about the desire of the middle class – a group familiar with what cable TV offers in places like America and fed up with Doordarshan's limited fare – for better program content is attributed as one of the reasons. What do you think?

SK: I don't think people knew what to expect. Maybe some wanted news programs that are critical of the government. Other than that, I don't think they had any idea about the possibilities of the range of programming, the cultural space that satellite television could create, etc. I don't think there was any felt demand from people, which created this. I even feel everyone was happy with whatever was going on.

JJ: Then, how did you decide what to offer on the channel?

SK: Initially, the programs on Asianet were a judicious mix of entertainment and what I would call informatively stimulating programming. The logic of entertainment program has gone through three broad phases: the first big spurt of programming was film-related. We went and bought the rights of as many Malayalam films as we could – mainly the old ones. We had recruited Shobhana Parameashwaran who was in charge of film acquisition. The producers also thought of this as additional revenue from films that had completed their theatrical runs. These films would run as films; then we would extract parts from them and make programs based on comedy scenes, romance scenes, etc.

In the initial budget allocation, I said: for entertainment programming, we will just use films and spin it off into other programs. And let us invest more money on other kinds of programs like *Ente Keralam* by Chintha Ravi, K P Kumaran's attempt to do serials based on literary works, etc. We had recruited big people to do all these tasks.

The first big break happened when we commissioned out a serial to Shyamaprasad: *Sthree*. Suddenly the whole logic of the channel underwent huge transformation. This was a learning experience for me. You are running a channel, and you think you are in control of everything that goes on there, editorially. *Sthree* became such a big hit, and took the channel in a particular direction beyond that control. I even think it was the beginning of all soap operas in regional channels. Shyamaprasad was a bright chap and had a hunch that housewives would watch this.

JJ: Was *Sthree* modelled on anything?

SK: It was not modelled on anything. It was not there on any other television anywhere. Maybe in Brazil, there were these tele novellas. Their sentiments are similar to ours. But the hit serials in American television during those times were those like 'Dallas', 'Dynasty', etc. which were celebrations of American lifestyle. Incidentally, that was the time when Soviet Union was disintegrating, and these programs in fact were a way of telling what these places were missing out on.

Here, *Sthree* was one of our emotional, trivial dramas. When it became a huge hit, you can't resist that in your own organization. Your marketing section demands prime time for *Sthree*. In other words, the sheer success of the program becomes the defeat of your vision. It is very paradoxical in that sense. My vision that I will have a thinkers' channel with book reviews, intellectual programs, etc. When *Sthree* became a hit, I knew that was the beginning of the end of what I wanted to do.

JJ: Did *Sthree's* success change your idea about who is or who can be television's audience? Especially in terms of the gender composition?

SK: Yeah it certainly did. Before that, we were marketing for a family audience, but we were marketing for the male more than the female audience. Because conventional wisdom was that it is the man of the house who would look at news and related programming. But suddenly it became the woman, for the wrong reason though. Till then I was telling the advertising and marketing guys what to do; after *Sthree*, they started telling me what to do!

JJ: You have also mentioned in interviews that the attempt was to introduce a media sensibility different from the one that the print had enabled. What was to be the new sensibility of media and how was it envisaged as different from that which was determined by the print medium?

SK: Surely. Print has its limitations. The experiences that the print enables are limited. You can't have interactions in print, outside the 'letters to the editor'. That is why social media has taken over. Television was the intermediate phase, where we had programmes like *Nammal Thammil* [Between Us], or *Ente Keralam* [My Kerala], which was a micro level ethnographic look at the region, its life, etc.

Print was at its arrogant heights those days. It was the most dominant medium. Bulk of the print was talking only about politics and changing governments. Reporting about other spheres like culture was in clichéd formats in the print. The lived life of people in an urban-rural continuum was missing from newspapers.

And print also had the habit of not critiquing itself or other media. One of the early programming in Asianet was *Pathravishesham* [News from Newspapers], which was unique and critical of the print. On BBC, I had seen programmes where they would review newspapers and be critical of them. I said why don't we have a program like that.

JJ: So media literacy was one of the key agendas?

SK: More than media literacy, our aim was to make people critically aware of the media. In fact, when we started *Pathravishesham*, the chief editor of *Malayala Manorama* K M Mathew wrote to me asking whether it was a healthy thing to do. He said he heard about the program from his people that this program talks about the shortcoming in the coverages of *Manorama* or *Mathrubhoomi*, etc. I took his words seriously and wrote back requesting him to watch the program and decide himself whether this is unhealthy

subterfuge of the media. He later wrote back to me saying he watched a few episodes and that it is good that there is a constant invigilation of what the media is doing. He said, 'you will be happy to know your *Pathravishesham* is routinely discussed in our editorial meetings'. These are some of the new things, though not new in strict sense, that we wanted to do in the Indian context.

JJ: Let's come to news programming. I have looked at magazines published from Bombay in late 1980s and early 1990s which were dedicated to discussing Television programmes, like *TV and Video World*. And I have seen in them articles that discussed women newsreaders on Doordarshan, treating them as stars, whereas interestingly a similar interest in male newsreaders is absent. When I interviewed BRP Bhaskar, he also suggested that women definitely started getting more visibility in news as well as journalism after the coming of TV. How did this happen? Was this only about pretty faces as one explanation goes? What was Asianet's approach towards how to use women – as presenters and journalists – in news when it started Asianet News?

SK: Women newsreaders represented certain aspiration. The glamourization of these newsreaders was in fact counter-productive. Because they were discussed for the wrong reasons – not because they read well or they were intelligent, but because they wore a certain ornament or dressed well, etc. It wasn't a compliment to the gender really speaking. It was a token exercise.

Doordarshan had more women on screen, and it was followed in our case too. But in our case, some of the women would also go on to do interviews. We had women producers like Diana Sylvester. There were others working in the newsroom. Our newsreaders came across as more intelligent than the Doordarshan newsreaders, whether it is Maya or Rani, etc. Even our male newsreaders would ask questions. Like, Nikesh Kumar, Pradeep, etc. The quality that we looked for in them was they should have some journalistic background.

JJ: After talking to some of the journalists who have worked with Asianet for a long time, I have started getting this hunch that human rights stories have emerged as a key component of journalism after the coming of television. Do you agree?

SK: That is true. A program like *Kannadi* started out by just talking about the plight of the people, etc. It soon turned into an activist program, exploring way of intervening and helping people. Getting an impact from your program emerged as important. Issues of human rights lapses or violations became an important part of programming.

Moreover, some of the stories that Asianet did during its initial days in fact set a new standard in investigative journalism. For example, the ISRO spy case. It was Asianet which said this is all cooked up. The print media was sure that this is a genuine case, and they went on with it. Neelan used to be the editor, and I have called him up asking: "are you sure, because we are the only ones saying it's all cooked up. We would look very foolish at the end." To which he would reply: "No problem; we have all the inputs." I had

to take anticipatory bail from Cochin Court, as Kerala Police filed a case against me saying I am defaming them. Paul Zachariah was my guarantor. Shekhar Gupta was the other man who wrote that this is all cooked, and he was summoned. He didn't appear before the court, and an arrest warrant went for him. He somehow got out of it.

The other example was Chekannur Maulavi case. We did an investigation and said he was actually kidnapped and murdered. The government and the police view was that he had just disappeared, and it was a suicide.

JJ: So what exactly was the print doing at that point of time, in your opinion?

SK: Print was sitting comfortable because they were making money. Print thought this television thing is a foolish exercise. Once they found the advertising started shifting to television, they started getting anxious. *Malayala Manorama* started a full-fledged campaign, carrying a series of full and half page ads mocking television viewing, mocking people who think television is going to take away from print. They even started putting up big hoardings! In short, these big media were so convinced that nothing can shake them. They were powerful, and making profit; they didn't think a new medium was going to make a dent into their share. That is the reason they were not going out of the way to do anything different or difficult. Whereas for us, the only way to garner viewership was to do the difficult. That had to be our trademark. Unless we took those risks, we could not score a point over them, because they had many correspondents; they had contacts in governments; they could get an interview with a minister at any time. Often, the opposition was willing to come to us, but the government would not; so we had a problem in balancing, etc.

JJ: How did the Malayali viewership outside Kerala figure in the discussions on marketing and distribution? Was the diasporic Malayali a serious consideration?

SK: Yes. Especially the Gulf Malayalis. The footprint of our satellite was anyway covering the Gulf regions. So we knew we had to have programs that appeal to Gulf Malayalis. I went to the Gulf. I organized the distribution in Gulf; spoke to local agencies that had rights to distribute channels there. At that time, we had only started talking about America and all. That came much later. We also thought of having a spread in Singapore and Malaysia too. There were some programs that looked at the issues of the NRIs. But they were all interested in what was happening here [in Kerala] rather than what was going on there.

We set up a marketing department in the Gulf right in the beginning as we knew a lot of them were watching it there. In fact, a lot of people here would tell those in the Gulf 'bring us this product, that product,' etc. Such products were interested in advertising on the channel. So there was sort of a relationship through advertisements. We realized that right in the beginning.

Interview with BRP Bhaskar⁵

Question: *The public that existed in a region like Kerala, until the coming of television channels like Asianet, was a public mediated primarily through the print. The public that TV channels sought to enable seems to be different from, and even oppositional to, this 'print public'. Nevertheless, we have not accounted for the exact difference between 'the print public' and the public mediated primarily by television.*

BRP: We had television before the coming of channels like Asianet. We had Doordarshan. It has been there for a while when Asianet came. It didn't have much influence though. Initially, Doordarshan aired only Hindi programs. Moreover, as an institution within the government's control, it didn't have much influence. Just like the government-controlled radio didn't affect or alter the print media and its public in any significant manner, Doordarshan did not have much significance on the public. Nevertheless, people had started watching Doordarshan, and responding to it too.

Doordarshan started telecasting serials quite late. In one of its first long serials, it used to introduce new characters in its weekly episodes. In one such episode, it introduced a Malayali character – a Malayali woman looking for a job in Delhi, being introduced to two scheming [male] politicians. It turns out that her father was an independence struggle veteran, and the family is now in penury; the two scheming politicians plot to manipulate her vulnerability. After the episode was telecast, many viewers from Kerala responded angrily and wrote letters alleging that the episode portrayed Malayali women in bad light. The following episode opened with an apology, stating that it regrets the fact that a character portrayal in its earlier episode insulted the sentiments of the viewers in Kerala.

This was an indication of television's potential to influence people. However, Doordarshan would hardly telecast much content related to Kerala. It is after the coming of Asianet that television became an institution with tremendous influence on everyday life in the region, making TV-viewing a habit. One fundamental reason could be this: a crucial element in habit-formation is the frequency of exposure [to media]. For example, a weekly would have more influence on readers than a magazine, because the weekly comes out more frequently, maintaining a stable continuity especially through serialized stories and novels, etc. Magazines cannot maintain such continuity due to the inevitable lapse in publication. Similarly, a daily might have more influence than a weekly. Television takes this a step forward, and tries to maintain this continuity uninterrupted. Live telecasts and breaking news accentuates this further. Thus, its capacity to hold people is more. That is one element.

⁵ BRP Bhaskar is an eminent senior journalist, media analyst and activist. He has been the editorial advisory board to Asianet News when the channel's news wing was started; he, along with the famous writer Paul Zachariah, used to anchor a weekly media analysis programme called 'Madhyama Vicharam' on Asianet, which played a central role in nurturing a critical relationship among Malayalis towards its hegemonic press.

The other element is related to the nature of the content. Certain content has the capacity to form strong viewing habits than other – a factor that television exploits in its favour too.

In fact, all media is habit [forming]. When we say one medium is more effective than the other, what we mean is, it is more habit-forming than the other. If one newspaper makes the reader crave for it intensely, it has a greater ability to influence you and form a habit in you. How? This is because it is easier to pick up a bad habit than a good habit. Equally, it is easier to give up a good habit than a bad habit.

Question: *Had you started watching Asianet even before you became associated with Asianet's 'news division' as a member of its editorial advisory board? Or, even before Asianet launched its news-related telecasts?*

BRP: Not much. Initially, the reach was poor. And I was in Bangalore those days. And it was not possible to pick up the signals from Bangalore. One needed a special antenna which the Russians supplied, to pick the signals from the Russian satellite [using which Asianet beamed its signals initially]. It was a U-shaped antenna that looked like a lightning arrester. One of my neighbours in Bangalore had a Russian wife. He was picking up Russian television by making an antenna.

Question: *During its initial years, was it perceived as an initiative which would inaugurate a new 'media culture'?*

BRP: Undoubtedly, it was perceived as a medium that was to make a change. For example, Asianet launched its news-related programs, there were hardly any women in the newspapers in Kerala. In fact, when I came back to Kerala in 1992-93, some magazine asked me for an article, and I said I will write about the absence of women in media in Kerala. Even if there were women in newspapers, they led an invisible career. This was the backdrop when Asianet was launched. And from the beginning, it was felt as if this is going to make a difference.

Question: Even in terms of the representation of women?

BRP: Yes.

Question: Why?

BRP: Because it was already happening in places like Delhi after the arrival of Television. In Delhi, there were indeed a few women in newspapers, but in miniscule number. When I worked in the Statesman in Delhi, there were no women. In UNI, when I used to work there, there was one girl in the desk. She used to be on a permanent evening shift from 3 to 9 pm. She wanted that shift. At 9 pm, she would go to All India Radio and read the 10.30 bulletin. When Doordarshan came, she became a news presenter there. So, the change in the presence of women with the coming of television

could be seen in Delhi. Gradually, the status of women in newspapers also improved, as they were given better reporting tasks.

In Doordarshan, Pronnoy Roy's programs started offering women important roles in them. But in fact, the man who brought girls into Indian television was M J Akbar when he did a program for Doordarsan. In this program, he used women journalists from his newspaper. He had already started employing a lot of women journalists in his newspaper – Telegraph. He had brought a lot of girls from all over the country. In fact, journalists used to say jokingly: 'Akbar's harem'!

When Akbar and NDTV used girls in their news programs for Doordarshan, these women did very well. That was a major change, and it was hoped that the same will happen here too. However, the initial efforts towards that didn't succeed. There were very few women candidates during the recruitment.

Question: So you were actually looking for women candidates?

BRP: Oh yes. In fact, in contrast to the conventional approach of "other things being equal, a girl is disqualified", we adopted the approach: "other things being equal, a girl will be preferred to a boy", during the recruitment.

In newsrooms, boys never used to like the presence of women because that affected their freedom. They wanted to be boisterous, use language without bothering about the presence of women, etc. Such resistances were there in Asianet too, initially. Of the first batch of three women who joined, only one survived – Leena Manmadhan; the other two discontinued, probably because of such problems. The atmosphere was not very conducive. The boys were not very receptive of girls being around. But later this notion was broken, and several women started joining in the following batches.

In fact, before the recruitment of journalists began, we recruited one of the women candidates for the travelogue that Ravindran did in the channel. We had interviewed the candidates and the selection process had been completed, but we had not started giving out the appointment letters since we didn't know when we would start the news transmission. Ravindran wanted a woman companion for his travelogue – a fellow traveller on his journey across Kerala. So we decided to use one of these candidates whom we had interviewed and selected. She was the first to be appointed. (Vinu Abraham's wife)

Question: Did Asianet want women as news presenters?

BRP: Among our first set of newsreaders was Maya, who came from Doordarshan. She was the first known face of Malayalam television. She was taken off Doordarshan after an issue regarding her appearance in some advertisement. In the beginning, she was the only person in the team who came with some experience in visual media.

We had male news readers as well in the beginning. We – especially Shashi – were particular that *journalists* should read the news; we didn't want presenters reading the news mechanically. Maya herself was rather a newsperson than a mere news reader, who was shaped up in UNI and Asianet.

Question: In an interview, Shashi Kumar has said the intention was to mould a media sensibility which is different from the one that the print was nurturing. What exactly was imagined as that difference?

BRP: There were two aspects to our approach to the news. On the one hand, we didn't want to follow the bureaucratic approach of Doordarshan towards what is news, i.e. 'if the prime minister wants to say something, or if the minister says something at a function, that is news'. On the other hand, we wanted to remain close to the newspaper – in the concept of news. The attitude of the people of Kerala towards news has been shaped by the print media. They have certain concepts in their minds about news, and those come from our newspapers. We wanted to remain close to them. This approach reflected in our recruitment as well: people from the newspapers were recruited at the higher levels, so that certain professional values can be established. And we didn't take anyone from Doordarshan, because we didn't consider Doordarshan experience as an asset from our point of view, though Doordarshan was the only visual media at that time.

Personally, I am of the view that Doordarshan and All India Radio are very professional bodies. Probably, they stand at a higher level professionally, compared to other media in the fields. But they have their limitations – which is that they are part of the government. They think of themselves as a government bodies. There need be no imposition from the government on them. They have internalized that ethos.

Whether you are in private sector or in a government sector, the employer has an ability to control, which is an accepted factor. One can't dispute the newspaper owner's right to control or determine the newspaper's policy. What is objectionable is interference in day-to-day working, and attempts to promote or run down somebody, etc. A newspaper can decide they are against reservation, or against this or that. But interfering in the day-to-day judgment of people is objectionable.

I know a lot of young people in Doordarshan have tried to explore the limits of their freedom, and they have found it possible to achieve certain things.

There was also the element of corruption which affected Doordarshan significantly.

Question: Corruption at what level?

Answer: For example, in allotting slots for serials. There were instances of officials getting arrested after allotting slots for the next one and a half years by taking money just before the transfer from one station to the other. I myself have had a bitter experience. I had given a proposal to make a serial out of Thakazhi's novel *Kayar* for

Doordarshan, with M S Sathyu as the director. The approval was pending. Soon, middlemen approached us. It was a Malayali from a Madras-based advertising agency. They made an offer: "if we pay Rs 1 lakh, we will get the slot easily. The agency will pay the money and get the slot; in return, it should get the right to produce it." When I had proposed the idea to Sathyu, he wanted to produce it himself. So I told them their offer is not acceptable. They went straight to Thakazhi, booked a flight ticket for him and brought him to Bangalore where I was based. I scolded Thakazhi, and I told the agency: "This man is an eminent writer. Just because you can flaunt an air ticket, do you think you can drag him all the way here?" Later, Thakazhi told me he agreed to come to Bangalore just to see his grandson who was settled in the city!

Ultimately, Doordarshan rejected the proposal. Roughly five thousand serial proposals were waiting for approval. They could not have read all of them; so they started summarily rejecting many.

Question: Shashi Kumar also talks about a 'renaissance' which the channel was trying to inaugurate. What was the mission?

Answer: Renaissance, everywhere, is a movement that reflected on all spheres of life. In Kerala, the first communist government of the 1957 was the result of the renaissance. It reflected in spheres of art, literature, cinema, industry, etc. It reflected in the print medium too, and most of our newspapers are products of it.

After the 1970s, with the coming of editions, newspapers strived to become the most widely read newspaper rather than the best newspaper. Increasing the circulation began to be the ultimate test. Using this analogy, one can say when Asianet started, we were a movement which stood close to the spirit of renaissance or what was left of it. Shashi Kumar maintained it throughout his period.

Asianet goes into the mode of competitive marketing and serial-oriented culture when Sun network introduced Surya channel in Malayalam. Initially, Surya operated within the format that Asianet had introduced; they had a counterpart for each and every program that Asianet had introduced, except one: *Pathra Vishesham*. Ironically, later Asianet started following Surya's path. Asianet started serials because they were anticipating that Surya will come up with serials which they were already doing in Tamil.

Surya came ready to compete with Asianet with its terms, after conducting market studies which proved Asianet's popularity. But when Asianet went into the path of commercial telecasting, the competition shifted on to Sun Network's terms.

Question: How crucial was the migration factor?

Answer: The satellite used for transmission determines your footprint. Initially, what Asianet does is to unite the Malayali community in the Indian subcontinent. I used to do *Pathra Vishesham* those days. People in Bangalore and Bombay started recognizing me.

Asianet people – those who appeared on the channel those days – would be identified immediately anywhere; those who used to travel extensively would know that.

Later, the Gulf becomes a major factor. But that was the case with newspapers too. Malayalis in Gulf desperately wanted Malayalam content. In fact, it was a Pakistani named Mallik who found out that there is a market for Malayalam print in the Gulf and started bringing newspapers and periodicals to the Gulf. I happened to meet this Mallik once when I was in the Gulf on a UNI assignment. He told me: "If you give me more Malayalam newspapers, I can sell all of them too." Such was the craving there for Malayalam content in the Gulf. But our newspapers and periodicals reached the Gulf late.

Question: So it is with the coming of the cable television that Malayalis in Kerala and outside started consuming news together again?

Answer: True. When large scale migration started, those who went to various parts of the world had already developed a habit of reading while they were in the region. However, the unavailability of publications in Malayalam in these areas meant that Malayalam started losing its readers. It took a while for Malayalam publications to start their editions in the Gulf and other diaspora. But Asianet had succeeded in reuniting the Malayalis with the diasporic Malayali.

Question: Was *Pathra Vishesham* popular? What was the idea behind starting a program like that?

Answer: It was Shashi Kumar's idea. Initially, there was the concern of sustaining this from episode to episode. Because, how do you sustain the interest in a program that discusses what was printed in newspapers in a visual medium? We started using clippings of the newspapers in the beginning. Later, we started using visuals related to the news we discussed in the program.

Malayalis were already a newspaper-savvy people, and a people under the heavy influence of media. They could easily relate to the program.

Question: This was also a platform to nurture a critical relation to media among the public?

Answer: Yes indeed. And we started getting evidences that this was happening quite effectively. After the program was on for some time, viewers started writing their responses to us. Some of these responses were in the format of the program itself, analysing what a newspaper was doing, etc. They did it almost the way we would do in the program, often imitating our style and format closely. I still remember this young chap who was doing his medicine at Kottayam Medical College: one Sajan Raghavan. He is a doctor now. He used to write to us regularly. These letters reflected how the program influenced how the readers looked at newspapers.

But beyond than criticism of the newspapers, much more profound was the program's effect in bringing the newspaper within the limits of where you can deal with it. Before that, newspapers would stand above you and talk down to you. The program started with the message: here is somebody who is able to talk to them.

Interview with Mangad Ratnakaran⁶

Question: Before you joined Asianet, how did you perceive the coming of the channel? Do you remember what were your feelings about how would it affect the media-scape in Kerala?

Answer: When Asianet entered the media scene in Kerala, it was definitely being seen as a positive signal by many. It could maintain the image of a 'Left media' from the beginning. This was not because it flaunted affiliations to a particular ideology or a political party. Rather, the channel's predominant outlook was determined by a Human Rights perspective. Programs like *Kannadi* and *Ente Keralam* reflected this, representing the channel's image. *Pathra Vishesham* was known for exposing the hidden agendas of big newspapers; the media coverage of sensational issues like the infamous *chaaracase* (The ISRO Spy Case) was scrutinized in public, etc. The channel was definitely looked up to by the public as well as the journalists' fraternity.

Question: What did it promise which the dominant print media could not do?

Answer: The reports of early Asianet journalists like Jayachandran proved that visual media was going to be more effective than print in dealing with human rights issues like the Adivasi struggles of the 1990s, the victims of Endosulfan in Kasaragod, etc. The animated visuals of the Endosulfan victims alone would convey things much more effectively than even a well written newspaper report. The medium was more suited for telling human interest stories.

Question: Was the viewership in Gulf as well as other regions with significant Malayalee expatriate population a significant factor in how the channel operated during its initial years?

Answer: Asianet played a significant role in unifying Malayali population across the world. We kept getting enough evidences about a major viewership base in places like London, the Gulf countries, Europe, etc. This was the reason why the channel started programs like *Meghasandesham* which were platforms for the migrant Malayalis to get in touch with their loved ones in the homeland.

I have always felt that even if I may not be recognized in Kerala as a media person, many would recognize my face in Gulf.

In fact, when the program *Kannadi* became popular, it started getting contributions from a lot of viewers for the victims whose stories the program covered. And most of these contributions came from the Gulf and other overseas Malayali emigrants.

⁶ Mangad Ratnakaran is a senior journalist with Asianet News, Thiruvananthapuram.

Question: What were the Kannadi stories that received most responses and monetary contributions?

Answer: Mostly victims of tragedies, calamities and human rights violations. Initially, the producers would give away all the money that it received in response to a story to the particular victim that it featured. But when some stories started evoking overwhelming responses in terms of contributions while others would not generate adequate contributions, it set up a fund and started channelizing some of the money to stories that do not get enough contributions.

Question: Would it be wrong to argue that TV as a medium is more suited for human interest stories than the print?

Answer: That's quite accurate to argue so. The animated visuals of TV are an advantage over print in conveying the effects of calamities, famines, etc. Moreover, the body language of people is something that gets lost in print reports, whereas in TV it is conveyed well and often evokes major interest – both from the point of view of human interest and news interest.
