

FORTY YEARS OF KOLKATA DOORDARSHAN

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(English Version)

On the 9th of August 1975, the city of Kolkata was gifted its own AIR-TV Channel that would be renamed next year as Doordarshan. This was at the height of Emergency that it was Siddhartha Shankar Ray who inaugurated this Kolkata Kendra, along with V.C. Shukla, the Minister for I&B. What a combination.

In the early days, Doordarshan would telecast programmes for just 3 hours a day and its range was only 50 km within and around Calcutta to be picked up by twisted aluminium antennas. But excitement was high in the city, as people gazed at this new wonder that came in black and white but often had a tint of blue, when screen shields were placed to protect the eyes. Satellite television was still many years away. It is not our purpose to record the history of forty years of Doordarshan Kolkata in a few words but let us recall a few events.

It is a pity that officials of Doordarshan and Akashvani have not taken the trouble to write their own history, rather than keep dreary noted on government files, but if one too long in this regimented system one for chokes the flow of thought that is essential for interesting narratives. I have found a few exceptions, of course, like Abhijit Dasgupta, Bhabesh Das, Pankaj Saha and Tuhin Shubhra Bhattacharya, as well as Swapna Mondal, the present Director of Akashvani, Kolkata. From them, I could gather a lot of interesting stories.

The DD of 1975 was indeed a real pioneer in every respect. Prof. N. Viswanathan, read the English News in his baritone voice and clipped Oxonian accent, along with other stalwarts like Leena Sen. Chhanda Sen, Tarun Chakraborty, Ramen Pyne, Debraj Roy were the better known Bangla news readers. Mother Teresa gave her first and last studio recording in Doordarshan and it was none else than Desmond Doig, who interviewed her. What a prime archival recording it is, if only we can find it out. The same Mother Teresa’s funeral was yet another very significant coverage that was handled by Doordarshan Kendra, Kolkata with staff and equipment pouring in from various Kendras. After all, it was really a very prestigious event which was beamed to an international audience from Kolkata, that does not get too many such opportunities. Doordarshan also covered the visits of many an international personality who stopped at Kolkata, like Nelson Mandela. His civic reception was

at the stadium in the Eden Gardens and DD was all excited as helicopters were used for the aerial shots.

It is needless to say that games and sports were high on the priority list and those days there were no private TV with sponsored mega events like IPL or 20:20 in. Before we forget, let me also mention that Live telecast of Pele - Cosmos Vs Mohun Bagan football match that was done without the aid of modern communication equipment. In fact, it was this right of Doordarshan to telecast sporting events on its own terms that was challenged by the Cricket Association of Bengal in 1995, which led to the very famous order of the Supreme Court that unshackled broadcasting from the apron strings of government. Prasar Bharati was hurriedly created as some sort of an autonomous body theoretically away from the government, and it is strange I happen to head it now, because Jaggu Dalmiya fought with Doordarshan over sports rights.

An interesting programme, 'Naba Barsher Baithak' was anchored by Pankaj Saha, who also used to answer viewers' questions in 'Darshaker Darbare'. 'Youth Time' was also a very popular slot that had participants like Utpal Bose and Ashoke Viswanathan, Chandan Mitra, Kunal Sarkar and Ratnabali Bhattacharya. A news breaking documentary was made overnight on Sir Edmund Hillary's Yeti expedition. DD Kolkata has in its archives priceless recordings of icons from the world of drama like Ajitesh Banerjee and Bijan Bhattacharya. It has taken many a great play before audiences in Kolkata. Another interesting programme of this Kendra was called 'Face to Face', that was a series where two celebrities literally interviewed each other and among its stars were Sambhu Mitra and Uday Shankar. Doordarshan Kolkata produced the first serial 'Teni Da', where Robi Ghosh the lead role and Jochhon Dastidar's 'Tero Parban' was a great hit, that brought Indrani Halder to stardom. 'Nauka Dubi' was produced with so much passion that real water was used in the studio to depict drowning.

Kolkata used to wait for films to be telecast from the Kolkata TV centre but it is only recently that I came to know how laborious this manual process was in those days. Throughout the day the projectionist had to review and rewind numerous film reels, that could be as many as ten, so that the film could be watched uninterrupted. He had to keep all these reels ready and these heavy cans had to be carried by hand from the rear block to the telecasting studio. As happens in government offices, where taking sudden leave is considered to be a birthright, all the can-carriers were found missing on a particular Saturday. The office peons present refused to car-

ry these cans because it was not their task. Even the projectionist felt it was beneath his dignity to carry such loads. But, imagine how the audience would have felt if the screen showed just colour bands instead of the promised movie? An appeal was made to the junior engineers who were offended at the very idea. Then Meera Mazoomder, the first Director of DD Kolkata, a formidable lady from Delhi, came to know about this man-made problem. She had little regard for the ideological debates of government offices of Kolkata, where only rights and demands were discussed but duties to society were out of bounds. She walked straight to the store and started carrying one heavy can after the other. This caused a lot of commotion and every one was put to shame. So they all joined to help in carrying the cans.

But moving away from such stories, we should come to the other realities that Doordarshan brought to Kolkata and to other parts of India during this critical stage of the nation's adolescence. Ramayan, Mahabharata, Buniyaad, Hum Log and several other Hindi serials were created in Bombay and Delhi and relayed by Kolkata and other DD stations. These were the golden days of Doordarshan when an emotional wave was generated as never before. In fact, unofficial curfews were declared on Sunday mornings as the entire locality sat around TV sets, absorbed in the colourful recreation of their history, culture, religion and ethics.

To understand the real value of public broadcasting as distinct from jazzy TV serials one has to appreciate 'Krishi Darshan' or 'Palli Katha' the agricultural programme about which so many city people joke as the rustic side of Doordarshan. Let us not forget that if we are self sufficient in food today, it is thanks to the Green Revolution. One has to recall the desperate food shortage that led to so many political movements in the sixties. Can I forget those days in my early terns when we were fed on PL 480 American wheat that went straight from the ship to our mouths? We were woken up at 5'o clock in the morning to queue up for a bit of vegetable oil, because quotas were given according to the number of heads who stood in the line. Had it not been for programmes like Krishi Darshan and Palli Katha that promoted and spread the message of modern agriculture, we may still have been living on foreign food.

Doordarshan has played its role and can still do it provided it gets the support that was due to it when it was separated from government 17 years ago. The world has moved forward very fast, but many in government hardly realise this as they look eagerly for the next DA instalment and calculate the number of holidays in the year. Somewhere down the line, we lost the visionaries and those who scream for modernisation, professionalism and accountability are viewed as cranks. The experi-

ence that I have had with unimaginative and obstructive bureaucrats and some political persons when trying to rescue public services, makes me sad at times. Yet when I see quite a few enterprising officials in Doordarshan, surviving among the forest of disinterested bored faces, it still gives me a lot of hope.

But this is not the time or place for discussing these subjects, so let me refer to a story that Abhijit Dasgupta once told me. As most people know, toilets in many government offices stink so much that one does not need any signboards or arrows: their bad odour mark them out. Abhijit babu recalled how surprised he was one morning to find the Doordarshan office looking so clean and how the dirty toilets were spruced up overnight. Even the cobwebs that had not been removed after four generations of spiders had left for their heaven, had suddenly disappeared. The Administrative Officer was there before 9'o clock supervising such a Swachh Doordarshan operation. When he asked around about this sudden improvement, he was told that the big boss from Delhi was visiting the premises and it was his habit to inspect the toilets first.

I smile as I relate this, because much before I heard this story, I had also developed this awful habit of checking the public toilets in whichever office I visit, rather than use the clean one in the Director's room. It tells a lot about the habits, hygiene, tolerance and character of the people in the office and no remodelling or clean up can ever succeed unless it learns to start from the right place.

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