

Indian media must go global

This is in larger interest of the country

by N. Bhaskara Rao

WHILE launching a business channel in Hindi recently, the Prime Minister, Dr Manmohan Singh, wondered why Indian media was not going globally and why "very few of our media organisations are yet willing to invest in foreign correspondents in important capitals of the world". The Prime Minister, in fact, felt that the "Indian media should think global and go global". He even advocated "for our own CNN and BBC type" broadcast services. These observations deserve serious attention; particularly since India has one of the oldest and largest networks of newspapers and radio and television channels.

We take pride in the fact that India has arrived on the global scene. Yes, in many respects India today is an emerging power and stands on the threshold of global leadership. An appraisal of world politics over the decades brings out that no country can expect to be a global leader without having some say in the news dissemination apparatus and visible presence in the news media in particular. Going by these important criteria, where does India figure today? In terms of not merely the coverage of India in the global media which, of course, is important but also in terms of the extent of participation in the media operations outside India.

Already distributing news about India outside the country apart from the own correspondents of individual foreign media positioned in India.

Except for a few sporadic efforts recently, there has been hardly any major initiative on the part of Indian entrepreneurs to go global even where India has already made inroads in one or other field. Zee TV's initiative to be on the DTH platform in the US is a step in that direction. Other Indian channels too, including Doordarshan, have been trying to be on the DTH and cable networks in the US for some time with not much success. In any case, the service being made available by these channels is neither specially aimed at the domestic viewers of that country nor is in the

route. In fact, these foreign news agencies account for a little over 1 per cent of "domestic news" of mainline Indian dailies — sometimes as high as 3 per cent and prominently placed.

Overall, country-specific news bureaus are operating in India directly representing news media of some 58 countries whereas Indian media organisations have their bureaus or have staff reporters in hardly 10 locations today. At one time Indian news agencies had 10 senior journalists posted overseas and another 12 Indians as stringers. With more and more foreign news agencies coming in to full play and foreign coverage going up once again, the trend seems to be the other way — as if Indian

a political tool for agenda setting and to bring about radical changes in the balance of power globally. President Hugo Chavez of Venezuela, during his visit to India recently, had reminded India of this potential of media with a case example of his own country. A few weeks earlier CNN's Ted Turner referred to such a potential "problem for democracy" from the news media.

In the context of Rupert Murdoch's Fox News channel in the US emerging on the top, Turner observed that "the news is dumped down leaving voters without critical information on politics." Even in the US it is being felt that media is being used to transform party politics and government operations into show business and that media swamps democratic practices.

India cannot be unconcerned about such a possibility. The least it could do is to work for reciprocal arrangements with countries whose media organisations are allowed to operate and invest into media enterprises in India. Going beyond, it should facilitate and promote overseas Indian investments into media ventures. Individual Indian players cannot be expected to make inroads into foreign media markets without joint ventures to start with.

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Apart from this, it is also relevant to understand the extent of presence of foreign entrepreneurs and their influx into India recently. The Indian government's welcoming foreign direct investments into Indian newspapers, 50 years after it was restrained by a Cabinet decision, implies a new opportunity for Indian entrepreneurs too. Even foreign news agencies, which operate in India through an Indian news agency, are being considered to operate directly in India. In fact, it is these foreign news agencies which are

already distributing news about India outside the country apart from the own correspondents of individual foreign media positioned in India.

Except for a few sporadic efforts recently, there has been hardly any major initiative on the part of Indian entrepreneurs to go global even where India has already made inroads in one or other field. Zee TV's initiative to be on the DTH platform in the US is a step in that direction. Other Indian channels too, including Doordarshan, have been trying to be on the DTH and cable networks in the US for some time with not much success. In any case, the service being made available by these channels is neither specially aimed at the domestic viewers of that country nor is in the

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Interestingly, despite increased revenues of Indian media barons, the number of their own reporters abroad has declined and that of their reliance on foreign news agencies is on the increase. In fact, a leading news daily, of late, has started devoting nearly one-sixth of its pages for its "international section," relying primarily on foreign news agencies. Over the years the intake of news agency items for foreign coverage by Indian newspapers has declined except in the case of a few mainline dailies which have recently revived and repositioned "foreign news" reprinted from one or the other foreign newspaper or news agency. The Internet has given boost to this

media is withdrawing from their overseas presence - at a time when globalisation is an opportunity for a two-way presence and for India becoming a global media player. Without such presence, how do we expect to see an "Indian century" or an "Indian miracle" to come about?

India has a lot of catching up to do in the field of mass media. A sound environment or contextual conditions cannot be build up for India without the presence of Indian entrepreneurs in the media operations in different continents and the visible presence of Indian journalists in the global news media.

The other dimension, rather compulsion, to consider in this context is political. For, media today is used as

a political tool for agenda setting and to bring about radical changes in the balance of power globally. President Hugo Chavez of Venezuela, during his visit to India recently, had reminded India of this potential of media with a case example of his own country. A few weeks earlier CNN's Ted Turner referred to such a potential "problem for democracy" from the news media.

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India cannot be unconcerned about such a possibility. The least it could do is to work for reciprocal arrangements with countries whose media organisations are allowed to operate and invest into media enterprises in India. Going beyond, it should facilitate and promote overseas Indian investments into media ventures. Individual Indian players cannot be expected to make inroads into foreign media markets without joint ventures to start with.

Even NRIs in the respective countries could be encouraged to go beyond the present concerns of their media operations to compete locally. It is not a question of mere reach but making available locally relevant contents in a competitive context. Reduced transponder costs and opportunities of DTH should be an added reason for Indian television channels to be competitive globally. Today many things are in favour for Indian entrepreneurs to go global in media too. Only then can India be truly described as being in the "big league" of nations. ■

The writer is Chairman, Centre for Media Studies, New Delhi.