

LEAP FROGGING THROUGH CONVERGENCE

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Catching up with missed opportunities in the country with the help of newer technologies could be described as communication at the rate of convergence. That is "leap frogging at the rate of Convergence". It is now possible, to the extent we avail, would and expedite the very movement of convergence of communication technologies. The contradictions in the society between Bharat and India, being what they are. The country needs leap frogging.

Despite 50 years of planned economy, the country continues to be riddled with inequalities and imbalances in terms of literacy and poverty levels, development and enabling opportunities. Equity, empowering and enabling people has to be a national concern today. With convergence of IT, broadcasting and telecom, empowering should no longer be a dream. If we fail to achieve this now, the country will remain somewhere down in the ladder of ranking and miss the opportunity once again in this decade.

Benefits of convergence of communication technologies will not accrue simultaneously and matching to the tasks and challenges within the country, unless the mind set of Govt. itself changes first. We need to realise that proliferation of Ministries and governmental agencies are counter productive. They need to converge for better efficiencies. I have been advocating this for too long with a specific suggestion that Broadcast Department of Information and Broadcasting Ministry should be merged with the Ministry of Communication ; so also the Department of Electronics. And the need is one common regulatory mechanism, for telecom, broadcasting and I.T. Our national policies over the years seem to be frogging one step forward and two steps backward.

We seem to be lagging in learning from our own past and also from other's experiences. More recent approach of going about auctioning FM broadcast even without a regulatory mechanism, reminds that Gol's mind set has not changed. Now Doordarshan's air times is being auctioned formally in a hurry without coming up with a

policy. Priorities remained one of making money rather than catering to the needs and empowering people.

Secondly, the compulsions for convergence are not merely exports, the buzzword today. Exports are important and essential for India to become a global leader; which we should have by now but for our government's shortsighted and ad-hoc decisions.

What is holding India is lack of a national policy, a perspective for the future, that is a vision. Both vision and mission are missing. Nevertheless, vision has become a rhetoric these days with Ministers and Chief Ministers.

Even more urgent than exports is to expedite and extend the convergence movement to cater to the urgent needs of the country, particularly addressing to equity concerns. Three pronged efforts are needed across the country and in every state. First, we need to sustain and speed up computer literacy among a much larger section of society and much faster. Several initiatives are underway today to spread computer literacy.

Secondly, ready availability of language software much more widely, promptly and simultaneously is needed to go much beyond the present levels of penetration. Here again several initiatives are in an advanced stage. We need to expedite these experiments in every regional language.

Thirdly, Convergence between Cable TV and telephone need to be facilitated. - Converting PCOs to Cyber Cafes is a right step in that direction. A MDRA Study last year had brought out that unless PCOs are financially supported they would not upgrade. Based on MDRA finding, banks have taken the initiatives. The TV screen should become a universal terminal.

Networking PC and TV into homes and offices is what should be the mission. We need to expedite adoption of digital distribution technology by Cable TV networks. Here again, several experiments are underway today. But the big break, a more reliable and affordable one, is awaited. Think what it all means to rural India. When all that happens tele-density will go up to 20 - 25%. Leap frogging is possible only then. We need proliferation of Cyber dhabhas

(Contd. on 45)

C O N V E R G E N C E

in rural India, not television channels with more of the same contents.

Unless these enabling initiatives are speeded up, much needed empowering of people will continue to allude Bharat. Despite emphasis on rural phones and connectivity for a decade now and despite availability of more technology options, this rural challenge will not be in sight. The 1994 National Telecom Policy, for example, could not achieve the target of 6 Lakh villages with at least one PCO per village by 1997. In fact, even todate we have not and continue to lag. The distortion in our priorities and choices is too obvious.

Isolated examples of break through in the rural scene are far too few. Nothing is heard in this regard from UP, Bihar and Orissa. Ujjain district in MP is expected to be the first district where every village will have Internet connectivity before end of the year. By 2001, AP and Gujarat states plan to have Internet connectivity for all villages and schools. I hope they will be able to achieve this.

When will the rural-urban disparities in availability, access and use of communication facilities come down and narrow ? Death of distance is good but disappearance of disparities between India and Bharat is more important.

What is an info society?

Only then we could say we are frogging an information society. That is knowledge society is one where majority of people are able to access large and diverse volumes of information as and when they need and where they need. The newer technologies should help close the gaps and disparities in availing socio-economic opportunities, even more so convergence of communication technologies, making simultaneous exchange of voice, visuals and data and interactivity between people and regions. This means coming together of entertainment, mass media, software, telecom, information and education.

This shift in paradigm is what we need today. The paradigm shift does not mean mere shift from State to market. The over riding objective of convergence in India should be rapid expansion, extension and upgradation of telecom and information networks. So that larger sections of people will have access to the networks and also can afford to use them. Convergence of technologies should help India reduce demand - supply gap, information - imbalances and access - equity among its people, both of India and Bharat. **CP**