

DTH, yes, but with regulations

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IS DTH an ideal option for India? The question is critical because the investments involved in DTH are huge, technology is complex and aspiring players are big and of international standing. Also, the preparations involved for launching DTH are a lot more time-consuming and a larger network of alliances and partnerships nationally and globally are required than in the case of other mass media.

With miniaturisation of dish antennas, the concept of DTH has become a commercial proposition. DTH is barely three years old anywhere in the world. Any yet it leads to so much enthusiasm as well as anxiety. Even today not more than 25 million subscribers are there for DTH across some seven-eight countries.

DTH service enables customers to receive TV programmes directly from satellites, using high power K.U. transponders on a small dish antenna, employing their own terminal using Integrated Receiver Decoder and Remote Control — all this without the need of a cable operator. DTH, however, needs to be understood with all its peculiarities to address the three most critical issues involved: uplinking, foreign equity and such other regulations. DTH is centralised and controlled broadcasting using satellite technologies with enough provisions for manoeuvrability and manipulation as to who will receive what contents and when as well as "selective broadcasting" with implications not merely of a commercial or cul-

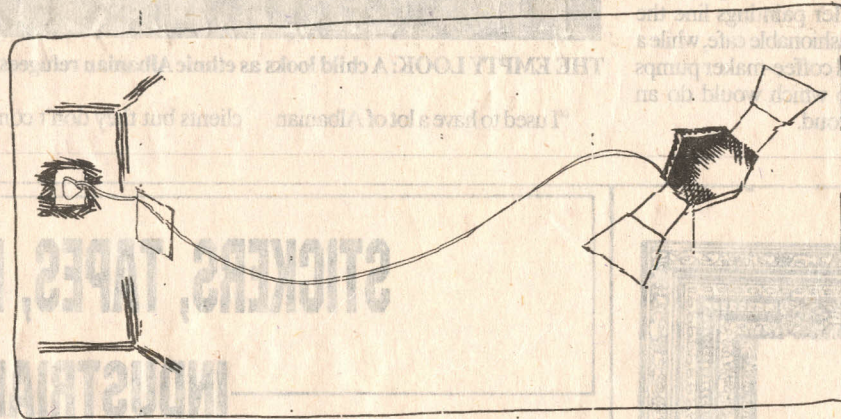
tural nature but with much larger consequences to do with national interest.

The motivation expected for migration of viewer households from cable TV to DTH includes programme options in plenty, with the possibility of nearly 200 channels, better quality of picture and sound and, of course, a lot more specialised and targeted services. The choices include a good mix of regional, national and international programmes and scope for simultaneous access with the rest of the world. DTH has not replaced cable TV anywhere in the world, nor has cable TV has become absolute anywhere. Both will coexist in India too for a long time to come.

With emerging convergence of technologies, DTH is not the end or the ultimate. We can expect a newer communica-

tion technology which would be cheaper, easier, more relevant, a lot more personalised and interactive in the coming decade, making DTH not absolute but yet another medium like cable TV. What one needs to look into today is the cost-benefit aspects of cable TV, MMDS, DTH, etc, for India, a country of contradictions and diversities.

With DTH, TV viewing time of children and adolescents is bound to increase further to the extent of becoming the primary preoccupation — unless moderated by parents at home and teachers in schools. Then, of course, there is the question whether DTH perpetuates preoccupations of TV with entertainment or offers opportunities and alternatives towards empowering and enabling people with information and skills. Considering the im-



plications of all such aspects of DTH, the educational system in the country needs to gear up to equip children for "discriminative viewership" and also to avail a wide range of options and choices that DTH offers. In fact, DTH should enable considerable value addition for our educational process in the country, particularly at primary and secondary levels.

Still, will DTH help reduce information imbalances in the country or will it add to the imbalances? Will DTH help TV become a medium of enlightenment, information and entertainment, instead of being a mere entertainment medium as it largely is now? Can we think of DTH as a means of reaching rural India more extensively, as is being attempted in China?

The task has to be how to design DTH in such a way that it meets some such desirable conditions. No government has allowed DTH without some regulations. It is in this regard that we should recall the famous judgment of the Supreme Court in 1995 declaring that air waves belong to the people and that they need to be managed by an independent regulatory authority. That being the directive of the Supreme Court, it is high time that we came up with a regulatory authority. Allowing DTH without some such regulatory mechanism amounts to abdication of the responsibility of a government to its people.

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