

LIFE AFTER THE DELUGE



If you happened to be walking down a lane in a middle-class neighbourhood on a summer evening, say in 1988, chances were newsreader Gitanjali Iyer would be staring at you from the black-and-white television screen in every drawing room along the way. Doordarshan, like everything else in the license-Raj India, reeked of control, monopoly and *sarkari* sloppiness. And yet, the government-controlled terrestrial channel had many stars like Iyer. A brilliant student in a UP small town, his brother told me years later, would click away Salma Sultan the moment the popular Hindi newsreader with a rose in her hair came on the screen. Perhaps never again would a television soap opera draw a cult following like *Hamlog*. And stories have been told and retold of passengers of a long-distance bus forcing the driver to stop at a roadside *dhaba* on a Sunday morning for the weekly episode of the *Mahabharat*. In my one-room rented apartment on someone's mezzanine floor in West Delhi, Friday evenings brought a whiff of fresh air with *The World This Week*.

A few years down the line, cheaply printed posters at street corners made the onlookers curious: *Watch STAR TV, CNN and BBC on Cable Networks*. The boys, mostly school dropouts playing street

cricket all day, now busily pulled cables across the terrace and connected your television to a brave new world of freedom. We watched in genuine awe the Gulf War live on CNN: a ball-by-ball account of deadly fighting in Baghdad by a new hero called Peter Arnett. *How many people do you need to launch a Scud missile?* Thus went a popular joke those days. *Two – one to call the CNN crew and another to pull the trigger!* The world around us had begun to change. Hundreds of transponders borne by scores of satellites in the orbit had an amazing power to beam programmes into our drawing rooms. And the reach of their stealthy footprints? One-third of the Earth's surface!

“We need bigger colour pictures,” Aroon Purie told us during a marathon editorial meeting in the *India Today* office. With an Anjolie Ela Menon in the background, *Big Boss* explained that with the eyes getting used to sleek television images, the fortnightly magazine needed to change its look.

Things were changing faster than we realized. A relative from abroad called one day and asked for my email address. Though the internet had arrived at workplace, no one in my circles had an email ID till then. I talked to a computer engineer who said a PC, if assembled, would be cheaper than a branded one. The computer came along with a dial-up modem. Getting connected was a struggle, but now I had an email address, a password to beat all borders and barriers. Very soon the *dot com* avalanche swept us off, and after recovering from its aftershocks, we saw ourselves as part of an open world without the slightest hint of a bump on the way. Life on the Net was full of excitement. The early mail was amusing: organisers congratulated me on winning massive prize money in a British lotto, or a distressed damsel from one corner of Africa with a huge inheritance made a matrimonial proposal. Friends exchanged notes on such possibilities. Fraud, one learnt, was not just *desi*; it was sleazily captivating elsewhere as well.

A new gizmo had just hit the market and in no time became

the symbol of elitism – the mobile phone. The powerful, bold and beautiful were flaunting, speaking into it. Like Doordarshan, MTNL and BSNL too lost their monopoly opening the floodgates for the smarter, more aggressive private players. Competition brought efficiency into telecom, and your phone going dead just before Diwali or New Year was not happening any more. Not even the most far-seeing social scientist could anticipate that the cumulative impact of these innovations – satellite television, mobile telephony and the internet – would be much stronger and more radical on our culture than any social or political movement in the post-Independence India.

The country's entire population is now covered by the 825 satellite television channels. But for the 24x7 channels neither Naroda Patiya nor Nandigram would have made international headlines. With thousands of TV cameras peering out for action, there is practically nothing that can be stashed away in the backyard. No skeletons in the cupboard are invisible enough. No despot is powerful enough. Farmers in a debt trap ending lives in Vidarbha, an iconic Irom Sharmila inspiring in her long fast in Manipur, land alienation of the tribes in the forests – nothing would have become part of our everyday conversation but for the sweeping communications revolution.

More incisive and penetrating, however, has been the role of the internet. The number of the country's internet users, estimated at 125 million – third highest in the world after China and USA – will grow nearly three times by 2015, according to a projection. In other words, every fourth Indian will have an email address. Apart from causing an information explosion, the Net has given us an idea about precision and perspectives. The inexorable march of the dominant search engine evokes such a reverence that a church posted on its front lawn: *Google does not have all the answers*. So folks, they implicitly suggested, have faith in God. The search engine's response was interesting: *Truth is no longer carved in stone, or written in ink, it flickers and flashes*.

The aftermath of the 1990s Revolution was indeed breathtaking. Before anyone realized, news walked off the front pages of the dailies. They were overtaken by technology. The day Indira Gandhi was assassinated the official media – All India Radio and Doordarshan – held back the news for hours. Angry, anxious people literally fought on the street to grab an evening *telegram* brought out by most of the newspapers. Now *breaking news* chased you from everywhere – your mobile phone, car radio, the Google search engine and of course the television screen. No one wants news a day late in the newspaper at the breakfast table. *News is no longer the newspaper's business!* Incredible, but that's the reality. This reminds me of a clairvoyant author's forecast for the future.

A greenhorn in journalism in the mid-eighties, I had turned to quite a few veterans of the profession for a little bit of mentoring. One of them wrote back suggesting I read Alvin Toffler. In his 1970 bestseller, *Future Shock*, Toffler presented a future scenario where rapid advancement of technology would radically alter life. Like many others, I dismissed the book as a celebration of Western capitalism. Now, looking back, I know Toffler's prognosis about news travelling instantly around the world was pretty close to the present scenario: the fast pace of news leaving the newspaper clueless about its *raison d'etre*.

Seen closely, the current state of confusion in India seems to have something to do with the outcome of the information upsurge. A sense of symmetry and perfection conveyed by the new technologies is rebuffed by the hidebound rules and a clumsy administrative structure, resulting in chaos.

Toying with the idea of looking at the deluge in each of the three sectors, we were surprised to discover that the giant waves swamped India almost simultaneously – in the mid-nineties. Satellite television, mobile telephony and the internet are all a little under twenty now. The response of the experts to our emails is overwhelming. A distinguished newscaster from the DD days agreed to write for this issue. So did an eminent child psychologist and a noted political commentator. The writing about experiences and observations is complemented by an

offering of fiction including excerpts from a novel set in the age of turmoil. Together, they recount a revolution we have lived through, but never bothered to understand.

Bhaskar Roy