ETHNOGRAPHY OF A LOCAL CABLE NEWS CHANNEL: STRUCTURE, ECONOMY AND ENTERTAINMENT OF THE NEIGHBOURHOOD

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ABSTRACT

This paper is an attempt to understand the anatomy of local cable channels in the context of Assam. Urban centers have long been the centers of cultural dissemination, while the rural has been consumers. Through the example of a local cable news channel and its functioning I try to attempt at an understanding how they are the new nerve centers of an emerging class order which establishes its identity by the content of its own. Barak Television Network is one such channel that records everything from a wedding to a local cricket match to a puja pandal and in the process stays relevant to its loyal subscribers. The economic structure of such an enterprise is not on a firm footing but survival has become synonymous with these channels.

Keywords: local cable channel, media, culture, television, news

1. INTRODUCTION

Assam today has around 250 registered Local Cable Operators (LCO) and Multiple System Operators (MSO). Every town has one or more LCO who compete with each other for the share of households. In some case, a single locality has two operators existing. Larger towns generally have MSO's and have many cable operators under them. Cable networks originated in the early 1990's, and ever since have vied for space with the state run DD. The influx of numerous satellite channels in the late 1990's saw the popularity of such network grow and every person of considerable economic and political clout opened a network. Local Cable Channels (LCC) is not a new phenomenon in India, and most cable networks have one. The most popular form of such channels is ones which plays songs and movies.

2. BARAK TELEVISION NETWORK (BTN)

Cachar district is located in the southernmost part of Assam. Administratively divided into two subdivisions viz. Silchar (Sadar) and Lakhipur, Cachar district occupies an area of 3,786 square

kilometers. Bengali is the official language in the district with majority of the people primarily speaking Bengali. Silchar, is the district headquarters of Cachar. It is 343 kilometres south east of the state capital Guwahati. It is the second largest town of the state in terms of population. As of 2011, Silchar had a population of 178,865.

3. ORIGIN

The network company and the channel were started in 2003. Pre-2003 there was three MSO's in Silchar and finally all the three merged into one company called BTN. One of those networks was called the United Cable Network and they had a local channel called UCN. After United cable Network closed down BTN came into existence. Late 1990's and early 2000's was the period of consolidation and mergers in the cable network space, across the country. Competition had become stiff, and bigger networks were gobbling up the smaller ones and forming larger networks or MSO's. BTN is also a result of such merger between rival networks.

The exact market shares of the MSOs are not available because in the analogue platform the number of subscribers cannot be accurately ascertained due to non-addressability and the lack of transparency in reporting of subscriber base. Once DAS is implemented, the cable TV services will have to be provided through a set top box and it will be possible to obtain the exact number of customers through the subscriber management system of the MSO.

4. REACH

BTN is an example of a large cable distribution network and therefore such companies harbour the hope of growing further. As in the case of another cable channel operating in Guwahati, Prag News has been one of the largest in reach in lower Assam region of the state. And recently in 2013 it succeeded in becoming a satellite television channel. Monish Das one among the two directors of BTN says "there was a lot of hope and ambition for us. We hoped to start off as a local channel and slowly and gradually grow to become a satellite channel. But being in a small town there are lot of problems. Broadcasting from Silchar, the kind of money that is required to run a satellite channel, enough revenue won't be generated to be sustainable. Thus we abandoned the plan and have stuck to local news. The geographical area that we (network) reach is covered by our news coverage. Today we reach almost 80% of the household of the Cachar district." In an era where communication technologies are becoming commonplace and information is demanded instantaneously, the idea of Guwahati as the news center seems distant. The 'local' has emerged as the site for creation and dissemination of information. (Das, 2015: 131)

For all purposes opening a satellite channel based in district towns is impractical. All the revenue comes from Guwahati and satellite channels in turn have to be dependent on cable distribution networks to reach the people across the state, which is costly. We have seen what happened to

Prime News when it failed to provide the cable networks the distribution charge. For, smaller towns that way it makes commercial sense to stick to its area of operation. The cost of channel distribution is free as such channels belong to the network themselves. The only cost they bear is the cost of hiring extra people for the news production and presentation process.

5. REVENUE

Local cable channels (LCC) such as BTN have to rely on local markets for revenue. The larger the area of coverage more is the opportunity to garner advertisements. Advertisements although is a major issue for these local networks, they are impeded by their smaller reach to get big clients. Small advertisements which include anything from coaching centers, swimming classes, birthday wishes, anniversary wishes, inaugurations, local events, astrologers, doctors etc. form the bulk of such advertisements. These advertisements are mostly in the form of banners on top and bottom of the screen, and also running tickers which are booked on normally a weekly basis. These kinds of advertisements are generally textual advertisements, and some cases may even carry smaller images. Interestingly, this sort of advertisements which are the staple of local cable channels which have become popular on the web are also seen on satellite television, especially during cricket matches. Normal advertisements that we see on television are also made and have become popular on LCC of late. With the easy availability of technology and trained people making advertisements have become easier. The LCC themselves double up as the advertisement agencies giving complete solution to the customers, right from production to equipment to distribution all in a package. These advertisements again are not sold on time slots but on weekly basis, the more the money you pay the longer it runs and the frequency increases too.

Monish Das says "there is not much profit as earlier times. You have to pay the pay channels. What has happened with advertising in BTN is that with the upcoming satellite channels from Guwahati all the big companies are giving them advertisement. Earlier in the absence of these satellite channels the advertising used to come to us, now we have lost it. You see all the companies have their offices in Guwahati where the advertisement revenues are generated. The satellite channels get all that." Although he points out to the loss of revenue from big industrial clients based in Guwahati, the clients know what they get when they advertise through BTN. The coverage area is defined by the distribution company, and whenever any company has to launch any product targeting this specific audience, BTN becomes the default choice. As Neyazi says (2010: 921) "vernacular modernity has enabled both media producers and consumers to claim cultural autonomy."

They provide a specific known market unlike the satellite channels where the target population is not defined; nobody knows who watches those advertisements as TRP is available only for Guwahati city. So, any client who wants to target specific area knows which LCC's to advertise

in. BTN is today the largest MSO in the Cachar district and its reach ensures local advertisements and revenues.

6. PROGRAMMING

The purpose of genres in LCC's is double fold. Firstly, to become conduits of entertainment, localization of the existing genre of television programming and secondly, to connect with the people and keep them hooked, audiences who are also consumers of their networks. This two pronged evolution has defined how in the initial days of LCC's it was only about bolywood song and dance videos and occasional movie screenings, and how it later evolved to interactive programming and reality shows. The LCC might be considered to be the early starters of reality programmes when they would cover local events, school functions and neighbourhood competitions.

7. THREAT FROM DTH

DTH television was introduced in India in 2003. Dish TV led by the Zee TV group was the first service provider in the country. In the initial years of operation DTH was not a threat as it was costly compared to a connection from LCO's. Dish TV as part of its marketing strategy in the initial years also stayed away from the metros and concentrated on the rural sectors where LCO were weak or where they did not reach. Analog cable service was always hindered by its limitation to reach remote area by cables. DTH could provide only 48 channels when it first started out in comparison to the average of 60 channels that any LCO provided. By the end of 2005 DTH could garner only one percent of the total television household in India. This was a dismal figure for the DTH players. But by 2013, with six big players in the fray and an average of 200 channels DTH has penetrated into 23 million household and around 23 percent of all television household in India. LCO were at increasing risk of losing out to competition that they could not take on economically.

Monish Das accepts the challenge "yes, there is competition. Earlier we could just play any song or movie through our channel, but now we have to go from street to street and make programmes to keep up the popularity of the channel. We have to visit and make programmes on *Durga Puja*[1] or say *Id* or Christmas, the coming of DTH has made us to do this sort of programmes. And due to this popularity of it (BTN) hasn't faced any threat from DTH." Survival depends on innovation and adaptation for the LCO's. During the late 1990's and early 2000's when the LCO's were at the peak of the television revolution in India, they were run on whimsical decisions. Every unemployed youth with money wanted to open a cable network, every politician wanted to invest in one and LCO's had to keep people in power happy for they had to

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[1] *Durga Puja* and *Bihu* are the two major festivals celebrated in Assam.

collect money from people and operate without any hindrance. Thus, LCO's became powerful people in society, they could hike subscription fees whenever they liked, disconnect people's connections on late payments, force people to pay up for extra channels and so on. For the most part television distribution remained extremely fragmented; cable was largely retailed by smaller independent players in the neighbourhood, which frustrated efforts to corporatize as in other countries. 'Cable television had actually grown through local ownership (local youth wired their locality and took feed from satellites), who would collect money from consumers' (Sundaram, 2005: 56). But there was no alternative to the neighbourhood LCO. Only when they started to face competition that things started to improve.

Cable TV subscribers constitute approximately 60% of the total TV homes in the country, whereas the share of DTH is about 35% (see Figure 3). Cable TV networks on the other hand operate on a regional basis and can choose channels to be supplied according to the demand in the area served (TRAI, 2013: 12).
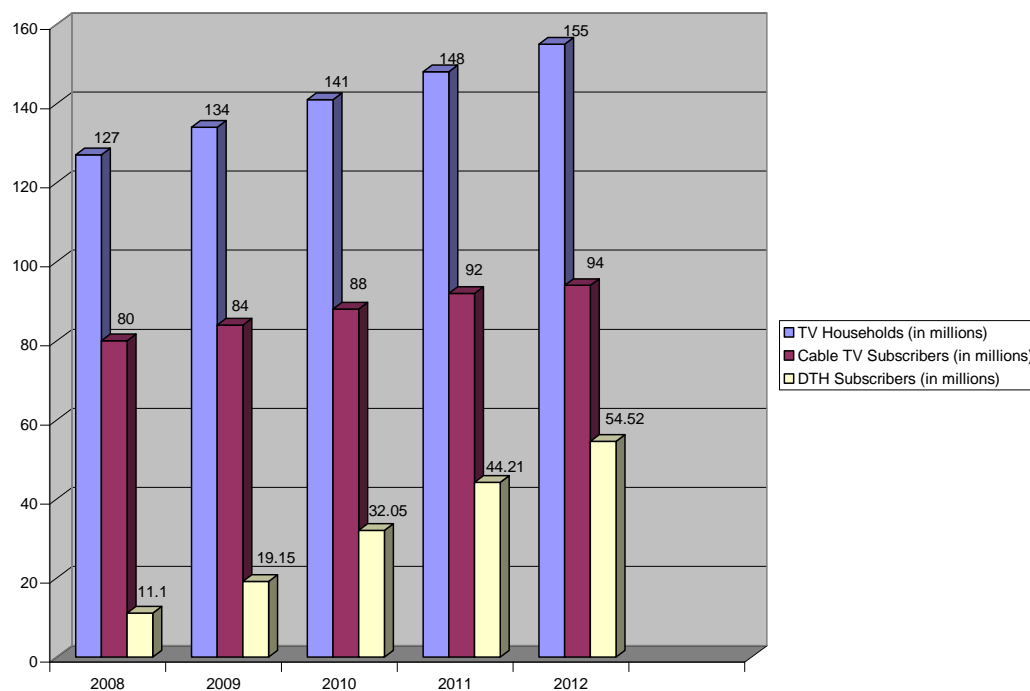
Figure 3: Growth of Cable TV and DTH Subscribers in India

Source: TRAI Consultation Paper on Monopoly Market Dominance in Cable TV Service, 2013

8. NEWS PRODUCTION PROCESS

The race to give something extra to the consumers and also the lure of advertisements led to such local channels coming up in most of the towns of Assam. In most cases it would not be full blown channels, the cost for such a set up was prohibitive, but 30 minutes to 1 hour packages that would be made daily, re-telecasted several times over the day.

BTN has a unique way of collecting news from the ground. It has a few reporters of its own who are actually videographers who are always on standby to collect news. The concept of journalists is replaced with video journalists and he/she doubles up as the reporter. But that is as much as the town area of Silchar is concerned. Outside Silchar in different parts of the district BTN depends on the LCO's for news. "We have full time reporters who report. But in places outside the town like Sonai, Dhalai etc, it is the operator in those places who collect news. In the town we also use the reporters of our sister concern the newspaper *Dainik Prantajyoti.* So even in midnight anything happens our reporters are there. Here is a flow of information from *Dainik Prantajyoti* to BTN and vice versa" says Monish Das. BTN, due to this unique arrangement, gathers news at a fraction of the cost, and without the necessity of managing numerous reporters. The LCO's who have news collectors provide it to BTN in return for the free transmission of BTN which acts like a value added service.

Infact, taking advantage of this BTN has ventured into the print sector with the publication of its Bengali daily *Dainik Prantajyoti* in the year 2009. Monish Das reveals that there is a flow of information between the organizations. Whatever comes to *Prantajyoti* is used by BTN and vice versa. As a matter of fact both the organization is housed in the same building. *Dainik Prantajyoti* is a broadsheet daily publication of 12 pages with Paresh Dutta, a veteran journalist as its editor. But unlike the streamlined process in the print daily the editorial process in BTN is elementary to say the least. The editor also acts as the anchor and the script writer. The news editor at best is a person who in the first shift acts as the local reporter too. Journalism in the process is not the important thing but putting together a package of local events and happenings becomes the motto. It's after all the purpose of the channel that is more important to BTN than the journalistic process itself. The Hindi term *jugaad,* which literally means 'getting by', 'making do', or 'improvising', is an appropriate description of the dynamics of Indian media liberalization (Roy, 2011: 765).

"First the report is brought from the field and dumped in the computer, then the script writer writes the story and then it is given voice over after editing. The Directors have no role, the editor looks after it, if there is any complicated news then they show it to us." The show that is put up is for an hour daily, except on days when there are local events to be produced live. This package is repeated twice on the same day and once the next morning, till the next package is

produced. For, all purposes the editor Moni Bhattacharjee remains an editor for the hour only, and the live streaming programmes are unedited feeds.

Thus, we can safely assume that the process of news making is largely a local affair with the idea of locality being central to all its content. The rise of regional language channels has been a slow process of evolution from this rudimentary process, some who could afford have taken the satellite plunge while others were left behind. India's television revolution indeed has surprises that is uses *jugaad* to the maximum extent possible for its survival as well as giving voice to the local community.

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