

**Notes on Micro Media Ecologies. (Discussing the Unesco Declaration on Cultural Diversity.)
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Scanning through the Unesco declaration on cultural diversity I was reminded of a title song. The lyrics have been buzzing in and out of my head since. I won't sing it, but I hope to trigger off a familiar tune...

Alag alag takdeer hain sabke, alag alag hain boli...

Badi sheher ke ek gali main basa hooan he nukkad.

(Everyone has a different destiny; everybody has a different language...

In the lane of a big city sits one such corner)

It's the 80's. Saeed Mirzas oddball (Brechtian) TV series Nukkad, produced on a studio floor in Bombay, created a Television history of sorts. To begin with, it broke the golden rule of a nascent TV serial and broadcast industry: Never have more than 2-3 characters in the frame and shift often between 3-4 principal locations. Nukkad burst into small screens with a cast of 16! Often 10-12 characters occupied the frame, and the location never changed. The big city and its stage lived on this street and the romance of its dreams and desires, trials and tribulations were telecast nation-wide, to other metros, small towns and villages.

Why was I reminded of this street? Because diverse corners like these find no place in cultural policies in our times of globalization, certainly don't contend for representation under the TV industry's supposed market and TRP driven 'content code'. But also because today, with the globalised flow of media: big small and micro, with cheap and easy access to technology, with countless channels on TV and 7 movies in a DVD for Rs 30/-, with computer and cyber café, with an sms send button; with Bollywood and TV so close, (and in the case on Bombay *here*, like *in* the neighborhood,) and with talent, success, fame and creativity waiting to escape from the heart of many on a Bombay street, it's not hard to imagine my kind of culture industry.

Of course in all of this, my understanding of cultural diversity is far from national. I'm just looking at a slice, in my own neighbourhood, Khar-Bandra, Bombay. It's a ridiculously local view and its demographics are so mind-bogglingly diverse that accounting for all the cultures, traditional or contemporary, endangered or dominant, hybrid or borrowed, suppressed or aspirational would be next to impossible. Counting the mother tongues might be feasible. The list will be long.

In a recent TV experiment I did in Hauzrani -Khirkee Extn, an urban village in New Delhi, various people and homes were networked via cable TV and cheap CCTV cameras. (<http://chitrakarkhana.net/khirkeeyaan.htm> episode 4) In one such episode the workers in 4 Karkhanas: ari work, tailoring and leather work units in basement sweatshops conversed live with each other through their TV sets. More than 7 languages were spoken: Oriya, Bengali, Bhojpuri, Santhali, urdu, hindi, and 'some other' dialect. Even the broad 'Poorabiya' would fail to define these people, all of whom lived and worked within 100 meters of each other. What a great idea if they all could express their unique cultures or to quote from article 1: *Identity, Diversity and Pluralism, Cultural diversity: the common heritage of humanity* : **Culture takes diverse forms across time and space...**and then comes the more ominous line: **Cultural diversity is necessary for humankind as biodiversity is for nature.**

Can we translate that for the dexterous migrant worker from Jharkhand bonded in the basement, please?

It's in these sweeping generalisms in the CCD; the feel-good equation of culture to nature, culture as a human right, yet a culture exempt from other agreements on tariff and trade that raises doubts that are not unwarranted.

It's no irony when senior advisor and World Bank expert on water John Briscoe is invited to be part of the planning commissions consulting committee on water. He had declared at the Third Water Forum in Kyoto that it was a "fantasy" to say water is a human right. So let's forget about the rights; be it river, forest, livelihood or that thing called culture.

France can implement organic farming and safeguard its wine countries, makes sure *Le Cinema Francais est vivant* etc, but what National 'Culture' Policy could we have here? A cursory glance at the Rajiv Sethi Task Force's missive to the planning commission reveals a sappy plea to harness countless 'cultural' and creative resources as new frontiers for diplomacy and nation building. In this narrow pumped up vision of industry and culture, traditional arts and crafts appear in urgent need for someone to protect them, patent them, manage them, and market them for national good and for the preservation of national identity and national culture.

Here is the definition of cultural industries. From a UNESCO consensus meeting, February 2005 Jodhpur. (Also on page one of the Rajiv Sethi task force booklet that Pooja was passing around yesterday)

Cultural industries are defined as those industries which produce tangible or intangible artistic and creative outputs, and which have a potential for wealth creation and income generation through utilization of cultural assets and production of knowledge based goods and services (both traditional and contemporary). What cultural industries have in common is they all use creativity, cultural knowledge and intellectual property to produce products and services with social and cultural meaning.

Now let's not be cynical about the artisan worker who's lost his river and forest and now stands with his tools, both as human capital and creative resource at the bottom rung of this industry.

Let's go back to the big city and return to that one street for a moment.

Instead of DTP and computer training classes, there coaches are teaching video editing. An edit machine costs Rs. 30 per hour and you can rent and learn in a P2P environment. Many a talented one is self-publishing, shooting, mixing, and uploading. The pro is burning DVD's of her work for evening telecast of her weekly show. A compilation Dvd featuring 'Best of Nukkad TV' shorts is being sold on the street and people are buying their copy for not Rs. 30/-, but Rs. 50/- as all 500 copies are autographed by the selected artists. Soon of course they are everywhere, from Bandra to Borivli, from Bihar to Bangalore, replicated, re-pitched, repackaged, re-mixed. And all because that spoof of Dravid teaching Dhoni how to make Idlis and that slo-mo shot where the idli is bowled and Dhoni dives to catch it in his mouth his hair bouncing shampoo ad style... was so damn funny. The college girls of Chium village studying BMM (bachelor of Mass Media) at Rizvi College set up their own CCTV network with feedback on small screens at the top of lanes to monitor the goings of their parents and the comings of their proposed boyfriends. Soon these live screens begin to feature performances, expanded street theatre, and tactical protest politics. Meanwhile, the local punter is auditioning singers and songwriters, Bandra resident ghazal singer Rochna and actress Saira Bano will come to judge, it will be on local radio and later on *Nukkad TV* too.

Off-season, the *Moharam* drummers have been having copyright-busting jams on the sea-front with the *Ganpati Dhol* Foundation, and today the *Shaadi* Brass Band is joining and from the word on the street, it's not to be missed. Further the party will extend out into the sea at low tide and go beyond the 10pm loudspeaker deadline. Also this year the annual *Marriama* procession of pierced wonders from the sprawling and invisible *Bandh* area is attracting more crowds than usual; a local *Koli* boy has joined their '*madrasi*' tribe and adopted their ritual. He's pulling the rickshaw with hooks in his back.

Sounds a bit unreal... no all of this?

Much has been written about pirate modernities. How hydras of informal economies circulate information and entertainment. How cable TV brings bootleg media to homes, how software, music and movies are redistributed and global comes local. However, in our 'People's History of the Digital' success stories of local content and creative production, community media and cinema are rare. While the 'pirate' world will always be presented as the bane of the cultural industries; the fact is that declaration or no declaration, rights or no rights, a broad stratum of culture will remain 'exempt' from the creative industries. Infact, the norm seems to be that if any of these actually succeed or show the potential to succeed autonomously, as diverse micro cultural-production units, they will be shut down, often in the name of the policy that was put into place to protect and ensure them that very right.

I want to bring in here 2 small case studies from "community media".

1. **Community radio.**

The short history of community radio in India is a sad one. FM was introduced in India in the 90's. AirTime was shared and the govt. channels could be run by private parties. So we had AIR and Times FM and nothing else for years. The 1995 Supreme Court judgment declared the airwaves public property and cautiously, over years the medium was liberalized, but nothing was really happening. In 2003, a pressured I&B minister Sushma Swaraj made community radio a possibility. Actually not really, it only allowed for educational institutions to apply for licenses, at best there could be 'campus radio'. Around this time, a small community radio station set up with the tech support of some community radio enthusiasts was shut down. This was *Mana* radio in Oravakal, a small village in Andhra. And of course, just as the BBC news article that publicized *Radio Raghav FM Mansoorpur-1* in Vaishali district heralded its demise, it was an NDTV news report, coupled with the introduction of 'community radio for educational institutions only' that sealed *Mana* radio's fate. Anyway apparently from 2003-2007, nothing much happens, there are a few sporadic instances of school and college radio stations. Community media activists, civil society organizations and NGO's put up the pressure to allow for the inclusion of registered NGO's. Effective February 2007, NGO's can also apply for micro-broadcast community radio licenses. A special 'ultravires' panel has been set up to scrutinize the NGO's. This is not part of the official publicity and finds no mention in the clearance or application process. Since February 2007, 90 NGO's have applied and ALL applications so far have been rejected.

Clearly a panic moment for the Sarkar. If community radio FM stations could flourish, it would not cost much to set up the 100 watt (or less) transmitter with a 2 sq km spread. Even smaller stations could be set up for as little as Rs. 2500. In the gaps between Sarkari AIR and the big city (also big media) private radio stations, micro- FM's rural reach, with its autonomous potential could transform the way media is generated, authored and disseminated. Clearly, that's not what the State or big media wants. The broadcast bill is another such panic act. A states weak attempt at reeling in big media giants gone wild. The industry is up in arms, rejecting outright the content code and control of the state on 'private' media. Micro-media is not even in the picture. But, as always the loaded question is, what do the public want?

2. Community TV.

TV of course is supposedly more expensive, requires larger infrastructure than radio. Kashif Haq, a 25-year old creative entrepreneur from Cox town, Bangalore had a vision: Not an Urdu channel but a 'Deccani' TV channel called '*Suroor Tv*', (pleasure TV) Kashif's Dad was a retired DDG Deputy Director General of Doordarshan and he had a deep understanding of the need for media in local dialect and representation of locality and city with nuanced subjectivities. Kashif had his target audience, their needs and desires 'via media' quite succinctly mapped out. The family invested a modest sum of ten lakhs in *Suroors* start-up. Two rooms in his family home in Cox town were converted into a studio floor and edit suite. A normal PC with pinnacle edit software, a decent camera and video mixer and a series of backdrops on wire that would be pulled in to replace backdrops: the Taj Mahal for the *quawalis* and *mushairas* featuring local talent, Teddy bears and bows for the children's special hosted by his sister: *Safina didi ke saath*, A collage of newspapers for *Aapke Nazreen*, a daily print media news analysis program hosted by Kashif's father where articles from Kannada broadsheets and local Urdu press would be read out, critiqued, deconstructed and made locally relevant. Guests from the neighbourhood were invited in for discussion. *Suroor Tv* even had Comedy show, whose star actor was also their chief technician.

Safina Fazai, Kashif's 21 year old sister was chief editor and did almost all the post production. Apart from this fare, *Suroor TV* also programmed in other stuff. Old Pakistani plays, old Bollywood 'Muslim socials'. It sourced videos of other community events like Shivaji Nagar's *Mushaira* Nights in Russell square, *Badi Raat*, and other festivals. As cottage industry as all of this sounds, *Suroor TV* was 'bang on the button' in terms of its audience.

TRAI rules and the Satellite cable TV regulation Act 1995 declare that the airwaves are public and a free-to-air channel has to be broadcast. (Its still there—an embarrassing one line in the broadcast bill- the 'right' to broadcast free-to-air channels. I wont go into details of his attempts to figure out the law here, for more on Suroor TV's story download video at <http://chitrakarkhana.net/talkingtv.htm> and related text <http://recurrences.net/test/texts/WICTV.pdf>) Kashif had been through all of this in triplicate and his father has shared the irony, "these are the vague no-way laws I helped to put into place".

The only way for him to get on air, locally was via an MSO. After consultations with all of them only SITI Cable agreed to air *Suroor* after charging them a carrier fee of Rs. 1 lakh per month. But *Suroor's* immediate target audience is in Shivaji Nagar, the cable operator in control there gets his feed from the rival MSO, Hathway. He's keen to distribute *Suroor TV*, believes that local programming will be watched by all. Another 25k and a 700 metre coax is strung from a cable operator in Tasker Town who gets his feed from SITI to the *Sugandha* cable operator who provides cable to 3500 mostly *Deccani* speaking homes in Shivaji Nagar (where Hathway is the MSO).

Suroor TV is a runaway hit in Shivaji Nagar. Its popularity heralds its demise. First SITI shuts off the signal at prime time, then on weekends. The local Tasker Town operator is pressured to cut the coax. Users call cable operators not just in Shivaji Nagar but in Cox town, and even in Indira Nagar, demanding *Suroor TV* a channel they have grown accustomed to watching day after day. That seals *Suroors* fate forever. After a total run of 6 months the channel is finally cut-off much to the dismay of Shivaji Nagar residents, who still wonder why. The Shivaji Nagar's Tamil cable provider jokes, "First during Ramzaan, my MSO cut off Saudi channel, then Suroor's coax was cut!. My clients even came knocking and asked why all their programs were being removed. Was I was being anti-muslim! How do we cable operators who still have enough local autonomy and authority, explain how were slaves to this MSO monopoly!"

But by now Kashif knows that he has an audience and a formula. He knows that if he can launch a proper satellite channel for the 'Deccan' it will have a demand across atleast 4 states in the south, and perhaps even in the north. A year of lobbying but no takers. Kashif decides to make content for DD Kasheer and DD Urdu, but his programming ideas are not accepted. At present Kashif is making features on classical music and career guidance for IGNOU.

I know I have spoken about local culture specific media. But cultural diversity is not nation, it is also community. Electronic media today can actually be afforded and not seen as a crisis of equity. And the digital is not the divide, it's the bridge. If that paralegal world I imagined earlier was somehow seen as a local 'culture industry,' here's the bittersweet "global media" ending:

The funny *dhoni-draavid idli-doo* video wins the British Council young creative entrepreneur award, and Adobe funds its remake with high-end special effects. It now 'premieres' on MTV Asia. The 2 look-alike actors (who also directed it) are on their new reality TV show. Gallery Chemould commissions an 'Engendered Spaces Networked Performance Art Work' with the CCTV Girls. The singer who won the ghazal marathon goes straight to Bollywood, minus the Indian Idol *jhol* and rigmarole. The Jai Maharashtra Communal Harmony Dhol Foundation featuring Bombay Brass the *shaadi* orchestra, open for Madonna on her Mumbai concert, brought to you by Raj Thackeray's Maharashtra NavNirman Sena (just like the Michael Jackson concert was by his Shiv Udyog Sena). They subsequently go on to play with Bjork at the Hollywood Bowl where they are promptly sued for immeasurable damages for copyright infringement by Sony, Universal Vivendi and Aol Time Warner! There will always be new cultural assets to measure and manage; tangible and intangible products and wealth extraction within the global system. And Culture never was an exception and will not be an exception.

Notes from a short presentation on Global Media for: Culture Industries, Cultural Diversity and Cultural Policy in the Time of Globalization .

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