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Globally connected media, ahead of its time: BBC reporting India in the 1970s and 1980s.

ABSTRACT

We are accustomed to the complaint that western media depict the developing world in a stereotyped and inadequate manner. However this article, using exclusive access to BBC archives¹, demonstrates that the way India was reported in the period 1970-1987 provides an exception to this characterisation. The material reveals that there was surprisingly, an intense care and attention shown by broadcasters and managers to the coverage of India. The factors which underlay this include the growing confidence of the Indian diaspora population, a continuing interest by individual broadcasters in Indian affairs and the influence of an exceptional correspondent in Delhi throughout this period. Moreover the Indian government and indeed many Indian individuals maintained a critical interest, bordering sometimes on an obsession, in the portrayal of Indian affairs by the BBC. The networks between India and its UK diaspora enabled pressure to be exerted on the BBC which, as the records demonstrate, broadcasters took very seriously. This ability of Indians to 'access' their coverage (and then complain about it) is an early precursor to the much more available pattern of foreign reporting which prevails today in an era of globally available media.

Impoverished and stereotyped reporting of the majority (developing) world by the media of the western world has been a recurring theme of media analysis ever since the MacBride report.² Many scholars have highlighted inadequate foreign reporting by Western media³ and provided evidence indicating that only stories involving a white or ex-colonial angle are taken seriously by media outlets in the developed world.⁴ The typical characterisation is of episodic reporting of disasters and an absence of incremental explanations or an understanding of politics so that 'news about the developing world is authorless, anchorless and impossible to understand or follow.'⁵ The overwhelming conclusion is that in the post colonial period western media lacked interest in the portrayal of developing nations. However it appears that an exception to this pattern can be found in the coverage of India by the UK media and in particular the BBC.

Although there was no longer a colonial, white angle to the story, BBC domestic services in the 1970s and 1980s were certainly concerned about their coverage of India. During this period Indian stories were reported in the British media, including the BBC domestic service on their own terms, not just when they intersected with the activities of white residents. In contrast, reports about other parts of the developing world, such as sub-Saharan Africa (with the exception of South Africa) rarely featured on the domestic BBC services or in the UK media in this period.⁶ The exception was brief appearances in news bulletins, highlighting a disaster or as the backdrop to royal or celebrity visits. Alasdair Milne recalls both as editor of *Tonight*⁷ and during his time in senior management, including as BBC Director-General, that 'We really ignored Africa'⁸. He then contrasts this with the care and attention which

the BBC paid to India during the same period; and access to the confidential papers dealing with coverage of India during this period reinforces these perceptions. It is evident that the BBC really cared about its coverage of India and was sensitive both to the reaction of the Indian authorities and audiences in the diaspora, who were in turn continually alert to the portrayal of Indian affairs.

This article suggests several factors which might explain why overall domestic news reporting of India was more comprehensive and comprehensible than other parts of the developing world. It also seeks to explain why the Indians focused so particularly on their portrayal in the BBC and why the BBC in turn appeared to devote so much attention and concern to its output on India and its relationship with the Indian authorities.

The colonial legacy still cast a shadow on the way that Indians reacted to their perception by media in the UK and in particular the BBC. For example this is how one Indian who worked with the BBC characterised the relationship

‘there was a feeling that the BBC was trying to exert its colonial past; that it felt it had a special relationship with India which was a colonial relationship and that in one sense it chose to treat India this way. And I think there is no doubt that a large part of the BBC’s managers came from the colonial service and felt that this upstart country had to be taught a lesson.’⁹

As a consequence of these historical links, senior Indian officials admitted that they cared more about their portrayal in the UK than in other Western countries.¹⁰ This close attention was bolstered by recurring physical and personal links – with continual visits and invitations on both sides – top BBC representatives visiting India and vice versa, with especially close links between the Indian High Commission and the BBC authorities.¹¹

It is evident from the archives that the Indian government took the question of how it was reported abroad (especially in the UK) very seriously so for example the granting of filming permission became a highly sensitive matter. According to a report to the weekly BBC News and Current Affairs meeting when Morarji Desai was Prime Minister of India (in the 1970s), he addressed a seminar on media issues saying that he intended to keep *personal control* over which filming projects were allowed to go ahead in India. For example he would not allow filming on the subject of the Untouchables (later referred to as 'scheduled castes') and announced in this speech that he had recently rejected an ATV proposal to make a film about caste. Desai 'defended the right of developing countries to restrict filming, eg where it was thought it might cause a riot.'¹² Nevertheless it is remarkable that the Prime Minister of a nation of 750 million people should wish to retain personal involvement over which foreign filming projects were permitted. It is a clear indicator of how sensitive the Indian government was in the post colonial period to its portrayal abroad,

Watching from the Diaspora

A significant legacy of this colonial relationship was the presence of an immigrant Indian population in the UK. As a growing and increasingly active diaspora audience they were becoming a key consideration in the way that the BBC approached reporting the subcontinent. The Indian diaspora in the UK in the 1970s and 80s was emerging as an articulate and vocal political grouping, which politicians and other institutions were obliged to take notice of. In the 1970s both Labour and Conservative parties were beginning to appreciate the dynamic of the newly emerging ethnic vote. Mrs Thatcher made regular trips to India from when she

became party leader in 1975. James Callaghan too was alert to the domestic political benefits that accrued from visiting India. The BBC in turn was naturally aware of these connections which arose from the electoral significance of the Indian diaspora. When Callaghan visited India in 1978 (prior to the anticipated General Election) David Holmes BBC political editor commented at an internal meeting that the justification for the Prime Minister's visit was 'electioneering for the benefit of the Asian community in the UK.'¹³ He was referring to the fact that Indians in the UK still identified closely with their home country. One way this manifested itself was in their sensitivity to its portrayal, especially by the BBC.

In the contemporary media landscape it is common for audiences everywhere to have access to output and to be able to react to it, whereas prior to late twentieth century this a rarity. Without internet, satellite or even VHS recordings it was very difficult for a foreign audience to access what had been reported about it.¹⁴ Yet as this article will demonstrate the close links in this period between the local UK audiences of Non-Resident Indians and their country of origin were significant in the response to coverage of India, acting as a form of global network in an era which preceded a fully global media.

The role of the diaspora underpinned a series of interrelated political, institutional and personal relationships between the BBC and India. Beyond that there were the myriad links between many BBC staff and India. Throughout the corporation there were personnel with long standing attachments to India; this did not just include those in the Eastern service of Bush House, but went much wider, mirroring much of UK society at that time, where so many families had prior connections with the

subcontinent. Alasdair Milne, (DG between 1982 and 1987), was born in India to a surgeon based in Kawnpoor. Mark Tully himself was born in Calcutta and as BBC correspondent he went on to play a pivotal role in the relationship between India and the corporation.

There was of course, particular interest within the External Services in the coverage of South Asia. Both the head and the deputy head (William Crawley and David Page) of the Eastern Service during this period had higher degrees in Indian history. They presided over extensive output which reached wide audiences on the sub-continent. The Eastern Service was a divisions of the BBC External Services, funded by the UK Foreign Office and responsible for the vernacular services on the subcontinent (Hindi, Bengali, Tamil, etc). During this period it employed around 60 staff¹⁵ on the various local language sections, which was similar to the other regional services across the world, but it had a much greater audience reach. Internal BBC surveys reported that up to fifty million listeners tuned in regularly to one or other of the various Indian language services and the reach of the Hindi service alone was estimated at thirty five million.¹⁶ According to Audience Research the regular audience figures in India, both in local languages and to the BBC Overseas English service were twice as high as anywhere else in the world.¹⁷ The Times of India in 1981 reported that there was a daily audience of up to fifteen million listeners to the Hindi service which at that time broadcast for two hours a day.¹⁸

This expertise within Bush House also infused the domestic radio and television services output on India. The depth and extent of this relationship was not the case with other parts of the developing world, where domestic services were unaffected

by the concerns of the World Service. Sometimes this relationship manifested itself in particular concrete outcomes. For example during the Indo/Pakistan war in 1971 Bush House broadcast daily late-night news bulletins on Radio 4, providing vital information for Hindi, Urdu and Bengali speaking communities in the UK, via the domestic network. And around the same time regular vernacular programming, including news originating from Bush House, went out on local radio stations across the UK, which later developed into community ethnic radio and eventually TV services.¹⁹

Graham Mytton, a producer in the African Service and also for Radio 4 during this period, remarks how special this relationship was 'There was for example no such cross-fertilisation at all between the African service and domestic news services'.²⁰ And he observes how the domestic service of the BBC just 'lost interest in Africa' after the euphoria of independence, along with the majority of the UK press.²¹ In contrast to this Mytton observes how Mark Tully 'served as a bridge between the two services and thereby brought a great deal of understanding into the domestic news operation.' This article will also demonstrate how a similar interplay occurred between the diaspora audiences, Indian authorities and the BBC hierarchy.

Influence from afar

The local NRI population in the UK exerted their influence on the BBC in several ways. They would 'deluge'²² India House in London with complaints about programmes that they judged biased and unfair representations of their 'home country.' At the same time they would exercise powerful connections back in India, contacting MPs or government officials to inform them about programme output

that they disapproved of. These local viewers were typically the catalyst which caused a row to explode in Delhi (where no one would have seen or heard the output). This dynamic demonstrates how the presence of a diaspora population can act as spur to news coverage, provided of course that they are well organised and articulate.²³

The same pattern of strong complaints originating from London and then amplified in Delhi occurred on many occasions. One of the foremost examples was at the start of the period in 1970 when there was a huge row between the BBC and the government of India arising from transmission of a seven part documentary series about India (*L'Indie Fantome*) by the distinguished French filmmaker Louis Malle. The Indian government asserted that the films portrayed the country in a negative light, focussing upon topics such as caste and poverty. The documentaries were scheduled for the summer period and after the first two films in the series the Indian government asked the BBC to withdraw the remaining Malle programmes, issuing dire threats. The BBC refused and so their entire operation in India was shut down and the correspondent, Ronald Robson, was expelled.²⁴ In fact the films were not even a BBC production but originated with French television and had already been transmitted in France. The Indians were oblivious to this. S.K.Singh, head of information in the External Affairs Ministry, and responsible for the expulsion, argued that

sensitivities were much more marked in India about the British press and media...hundreds of senior businessmen, commentators, members of Parliament and ministers keep flitting between Delhi and London ...Whatever is said in the British press does not get conveyed merely by the High Commission's reports or from the news items inflicted on the Indian press by the Indian press men posted to London...

He went on to admit that it was the depth of the Indian community in the UK which made the difference.

It's a kind of a conglomerate impression which involves business and commercial relations as well as diplomatic relations. So the Indian Parliament finds it very difficult sometimes to ignore it. This kind of thing does not happen in Bonn or Berlin or even in Paris. It does happen in London.²⁵

Angry words were exchanged on either side about the Malle transmission.²⁶ The BBC insisted that the films should be seen in the context that it 'transmits many programmes each year on India – including (in 1970) a feature on experimental work on brain psychology ... a documentary on a remarkable arts academy and feature films by Satyajit Ray.'²⁷ But the Indian government and S.K. Singh were unmoved and determined to expel the BBC. Yet as in so many similar incidents the programme in question was never broadcast or seen in India and in fact as Prakash Mirchandani who worked in the BBC office points out 'the problem was that of all the people who complained against the series, only about 1% actually saw it. Quite typical of the way issues arise in India between broadcasters and the Indian government.'²⁸ Mark Tully refers to this familiar pattern whereby an Indian in the UK saw something on the BBC and passed on his displeasure to a relative or contact with political connections back home. A row would blow up over something that the person complaining in Delhi (in pre-VHS days) had usually never seen; questions were raised in Parliament precipitating an open season on attacking the BBC.²⁹ According to a Hindi service presenter from that period who had good contacts within the Indian High Commission, even the High Commissioner himself admitted privately that he never actually saw the Malle films, but felt he *ought* to make a fuss because of the letters he received from the Indian diaspora community.³⁰

The Long term View –

The Malle films were an extreme case resulting in expulsion, but many other BBC programmes in this period also prompted complaints. The person who had to manage these sensitivities more than anyone else, was the BBC Delhi bureau chief Mark Tully. Eschewing the normal foreign correspondent routine of moving on after three or four years, he remained in post in the Delhi bureau for thirty years, declaring that ‘my passion was India’.³¹ In this way he developed a key role; for Indians he was the personification of the BBC and for listeners and viewers in the UK he represented India. Indeed Tully became almost an institution within India during this period – Alasdair Milne recalls that accompanying him around the country felt like travelling with the Pope. There is little doubt that one of the reasons for the quality and depth of the BBC coverage of India during this period was down to Tully. His wide and long standing knowledge of the country in turn enhanced the level of reporting of Indian stories.

Tully’s determination to make sure that his contributions were accepted and broadcast by the BBC obviously yielded results. A correspondent who was less committed would not have had such a strike rate. Being well known within the corporation was an asset here. Tully remembers for example meeting Brian Redhead the legendary presenter of the Radio 4 flagship *Today* programme when he came on a visit to Delhi. After that, if Tully was having a difficulty getting a story onto the programme he used his direct contact with Redhead rather than arguing with a producer. A lowlier correspondent would not have had such clout. Similarly during the first half of the 1980s, Tully was in direct contact with Alasdair Milne, when he was Director General. Milne recalls that Tully would phone him on a fairly regular

basis to discuss issues arising from the BBC coverage of India. There was no other foreign correspondent who had such a link to the top of the BBC and so this became a 'unique relationship.'³²

Charles Bruce, special assistant to the Assistant Director General Alan Protheroe, was sent to India to assess the wider consequences after the controversial transmission of an interview with a Sikh separatist on Radio 4, in 1984. He produced a comprehensive and confidential report on the overall state of relations between the BBC and India, lavishly praising Tully's vital role in managing relations with the Indian government and in 'shielding the BBC from much of resentment' reflecting 'that he will be a hard act follow'.³³

Tully argued strongly to widen the agenda for the way India was perceived, sensitive to the notion that developing countries are only ever shown in the context of disaster and war, so he managed himself to present documentaries as well as encouraging others to make features and longer programmes about India. He emphasised again in later years that the selection of stories was a continuing problem with TV coverage, 'Disasters inevitably reinforce the image of India as poverty stricken and disaster prone.'³⁴ Meanwhile externally he often pointed out to the Indians the rich range of coverage well beyond the news bulletins that the BBC broadcast about India, such as the arts and documentary features. The problem was that the prickly nature of the Indian bureaucracy sometimes made such material very hard to produce.

Recurring Tensions – News and Other Programmes

The original difficulty was that when the BBC was readmitted to India in 1972 the Government conditions included a strict division in the treatment of news and other programmes. Whilst news reporters were allowed to operate with few restrictions, there were complicated procedures and permissions required by all other genres, from arts to wildlife. Even when permission was granted, the crew had to be accompanied by an official minder. And even more controversial was the insistence by the Indian authorities that they had a right to view material before transmission. This was reluctantly conceded by the BBC and a representative from the High Commission was sometimes allowed to attend a viewing. The Indians interpreted this as a right to make changes, but the BBC insisted that it was only a right to view the material and make representations about any factual errors. The BBC was adamant about retaining editorial control. Inevitably these conflicting interpretations led to disagreements. For example in 1975 there was mutual antagonism about a programme on the Dalai Lama after it was shown to High Commission staff, who then objected to the tone of the commentary. They insisted on the need 'to refer the script and the commentary to Delhi before giving the go-ahead signal,' as if they had final editorial control over the programme. The BBC firmly resisted these objections.³⁵

Three years after the Malle affair there was another explosion in relations between the Indian Government and the BBC. This time it arose in the context of the Emergency when all foreign reporting came under tight restrictions. After the imposition of censorship the BBC was forced to withdraw from India, because Mark

Tully refused to sign the draconian new code and the Delhi bureau was again shut down. It was not reopened until January 1977 after negotiations at the highest levels. At one point Charles Curran as DG reported to the Board of Governors that there was a struggle going on inside India between the government and the parallel government, (ie the Nehru family). The decision to let the BBC back into India without requiring the news correspondent to sign impossible undertakings about censorship meant that on this occasion the official government had won over the parallel.³⁶

Shortly before the BBC office was reopened, a new British High Commissioner, John Thomson arrived in Delhi. Prior to his posting Thomson met senior BBC officials in London to discuss reopening the bureau. He had a special viewing of recent programmes about India – including one of the Malle documentaries- where according to one BBC official Thomson apparently

gained the impression... that our programming on China was 'softer' than that of India. I said there could well be truth in this since the way one treated an ageing relative with whom there had been some disputation and the way one treated a fascinating stranger tended to be slightly different. Nevertheless, it was clear that from an Indian viewpoint that inequality of treatment between China and India would be regarded by India as the ultimate slap in the face.³⁷

This was reinforced at a discussion in the regular News and Current Affairs Editorial Meeting, when the Editor of News and Current Affairs urged that it was important that programmes about China should not be too 'soft' because of 'the close attention that India paid to Chinese affairs.'³⁸

This awareness of a double standard between coverage of India and China was observed elsewhere in the BBC. The sheer exotic quality of China at this point, which

had for so long been completely closed to foreign news reporting, meant that it was not subject to the same level of knowledge, analysis and criticism as India. Graham Mytton who was in the World Service in that period recalls hearing the broadcast after the death of Chairman Mao when the BBC correspondent in Hong Kong 'broadcast a hagiography about the Chinese leader..it was not at all critical. We were so kind to the Chinese because of our inadequate understanding at that time of what Mao had done...there was a romanticism about China.'³⁹

Post-colonial Africa was a developing society that was scantily reported largely because of indifference and disinterest. China was also inadequately reported in this period, but in this case it was attributable to widespread ignorance on the part of western reporters. Even if journalists wanted to cover China it remained a tightly closed society; hence the ill-informed nature of the reporting. Meanwhile India was a third developing society, which not only inspired interest but about which there was a high level of knowledge and reasonable access. This worked in both directions. British journalists, in particular the BBC, knew about India and many influential Indians knew and cared about how they were being portrayed. As a result in the 1970s and 1980s, India, even though it was also a developing society, was reported more comprehensively than either Africa (except South Africa) or China. However this more substantive reporting naturally included critical observations where India was held up to account, which entailed continuing sensitivity on the part of the Indians.

According to the Indian authorities the reason for the distinction between news and other programmes was because the material which caused offence was in the longer documentary programming, obliging anyone who wanted to make these programmes to jump through multiple hoops. Nevertheless there was always a long queue of producers keen to make films in India and the BBC office in Delhi did its best to smooth the way. It is ironic that the non-news programmes were generally able to give the deeper and more nuanced coverage which provided a fuller picture of India than the news diet of doom and gloom. Mark Tully argued that the best way of countering the narrow and disaster-dominated news agenda, which Indians periodically complained about, was by pursuing all the other kind of programmes like features or arts – although these were the items that the Indian authorities were most wary about. The greyest areas occurred in Current Affairs which was technically not news, but where the timetables of seeking prior permission were untenable. Sometimes there were complicated efforts made to bend the rules. *Newsnight* spent several weeks filming in India in 1980 and the result was a series of shorter filmed inserts which were linked by commentary from the studio, so that they appeared as a series of news items. The Indians were not pleased and there was a fractious correspondence, questioning whether this had ‘broken the concordat’.⁴⁰

The restrictions provoked strong feelings. Tony Isaacs, a senior producer, obtained permission in principle for a film about national identity and statehood in India in January 1984 to be broadcast within the *Third Eye* anthropological strand. Yet further into the project after £10,000 had been spent, the Indians withdrew consent. Isaacs wrote a furious memo saying that the replacement film in the series would be an alternative project in Argentina and it was ‘ironic that we could film in a

country where Britain was still at war (after the Falklands) and in Chile where there is an effective dictatorship, more easily than in 'friendly' India.'⁴¹

Managing the Relationship

This continuing sensitivity by the Indian authorities may not have influenced editorial policy, but it meant that there was then considerable care and attention given to the way India was covered by the BBC. On numerous occasions Programme Review Board, the regular News and Current Affairs meeting and even the Board of Management discussed coverage of India. Mark Tully reported to them regularly on his UK visits. Over the years the DG and Chairman's Offices dealt with a wide range of Indian matters, in particular through the Indian High Commission in London, devoting considerable time and attention. Surendra Kumar former Head of Press at the High Commission commented that in his three year term during the 1980s the BBC Chairman visited the High Commission five times which he thought must be 'unprecedented...not shown to any other mission in London in recent times'.⁴²

Alasdair Milne recalls that during his time as DG there were regular complaints from the Indian authorities towards the BBC. 'They would often take offence and it was a relationship that needed continually cosseting.'⁴³ The senior ranks of the BBC were frequently braced to receive an onslaught of criticism from the High Commissioner. For example when B.K. Nehru, a relative of Mrs Gandhi, occupied the post he sent regular letters objecting to aspects of BBC coverage of India to the DG Charles Curran. In one long letter itemising various complaints, in 1975, Nehru began by saying that 'I myself am not a great TV or radio fan and do not often watch or listen.' He then went on 'I do not wish to bore you with a lot of examples,...but if you look

through some transcripts you will share my views that the BBC seem to have cast itself in the role of an Opposition Party to Mrs Gandhi.⁴⁴ In replying to comments like this the BBC appears to have taken immense trouble and care – through internal consultation and many drafts – to give a reasoned and careful response. Whether or not the periodic attacks on the BBC by the Indian government were justified, the archives demonstrate that they were significant in forcing the BBC to think hard about its coverage and make strenuous efforts to allay Indian sensitivities.

High level contacts between the BBC and the Indian Government were not just in London. In the 1970s and 1980s every DG and Chairman(except Stuart Young) went at least once, if not more, to India visiting officials, broadcasters and senior members of the government including usually an audience with the Prime Minister. These visits were planned in great detail; when Ian Trethowan as DG visited in June 1980, there were briefing notes on recent programmes about India – including those that ‘could be seen as positive from India’s point of view’. There were also notes on ‘possible controversies’ itemising a range of sensitive matters which had caused difficulties between the BBC and the Indian Government. ⁴⁵

On one occasion when Milne visited India and called to see Mrs Gandhi, accompanied by Tully, he broke the ice by telling her about his Indian origins. She apparently smiled and asked the two men ‘whether it was a qualification to work for the BBC that one had to have been born and lived in India?’⁴⁶

Despite this good humoured incident Mrs Gandhi was generally hostile to the BBC. In one incident 'a freelance reporter from Radio Leicester mentioned the BBC to Mrs Gandhi she exploded and said "The BBC is a dishonest and disgusting organisation."'47 Aside from the particular disagreements she had a general criticism of Western news values. As leader of the non-aligned movement and a key figure in the developing world during this period she voiced the resentment felt by these countries in the post colonial period that the overwhelming coverage by the western media concentrated on disasters and failures and ignored achievements.⁴⁸ This sensitivity was the background to the more specific and often bitter rows with the BBC over individual programmes. In 1980/1 these rows were escalating as one programme after another caused offence. 'The BBC's name has been in the press far too much recently,' warned Tully in one telex, referring to persistent hostility in articles by the Press Trust of India reporter in London on BBC coverage of India.⁴⁹

The rows had begun with the BBC coverage of Sanjay Gandhi's death in 1980. *Newsnight* had transmitted footage from an old *Panorama* film showing images of Muslims in India calling for Sanjay's death, in the aftermath of his highly unpopular role during the Emergency. Four years previously at the height of the Emergency, police had broken into a mosque in a village in Uttar Pradesh and there had been shootings, as a result of Muslim resistance to the forced sterilisation programme. This was the background to the hostility in the film towards Sanjay Gandhi, who was identified with the policy of compulsory sterilisation. Nevertheless there was a furious reaction by the Indian government to re-showing this material in the aftermath of Sanjay's death and much agonising and debate within the BBC about the

footage.⁵⁰ Mark Tully was duly called into the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to hear the complaints.

Another angry and long running row was over a *Worlds Apart* film on the Muria tribal people. A scene that involved some nudity had caused major offence and the Indian Government put pressure on the BBC to drop the film. There were clearly differences in the understanding of taste and decency and a clash of value systems whereby the Indian authorities were deeply upset at the idea of transmitting pictures on television of virtually naked tribal inhabitants. Mark Tully feared that he would be expelled and the office shut down again, such was the tone of the Indian government's objections. There were protests in Parliament and complaints from the Ministry of External Affairs.⁵¹ Around the same time there was another bitter row involving a film about forestry in the Himalayas. In the latter case there were serious accusations about the apparently offensive behaviour of a BBC crew whilst filming on location, which led to the BBC taking legal action against the magazine 'Surya' that had made the allegation.⁵²

In the middle of 1981 the Indian Government attempted to tighten the restrictions on visiting film crews. They issued an 'undertaking' which all documentary teams were expected to sign. This time the team not only had to accept the advice of a liaison officer throughout filming, but to agree to 'show a final rough cut to a representative of the Government of India with a full transcript of the commentary' and to 'abide by such advice as may be given by the representative with regard to alteration in or excision of such parts of the film and the commentary as may affect a balanced and accurate presentation.' A senior BBC delegation including the Director

of Public Affairs was despatched to Delhi to meet the Minister for External Affairs and a mutual compromise was negotiated.⁵³

In early 1982 the BBC decided that it should actively seek to defuse the bad feeling with India by commissioning some programmes specifically to please the Indian government. Adam Clapham an Executive Producer in documentary features was allocated funds outside normal budgets from the DG's reserve fund. According to a confidential memo this was agreed by Alasdair Milne as Managing Director of Television 'as a result of representations by the Indian government' in order to 'ease the Indian problem.'⁵⁴ Milne recalls that it had become a priority to reassure the constant anxiety in relations between the BBC and India so that 'money when required – had to be found'.⁵⁵ Clapham wrote that he would visit the Ministry of External Affairs in Delhi to 'consult and see exactly what they would like to see made ...obviously we cannot go along with their views but a gesture of consultation could save the making of unnecessary programmes' and would 'score much needed Brownie points for the BBC.'⁵⁶

This decision to placate Indian feelings in such a way is an exceptional attitude on the part of BBC management. It is difficult to think of another country that would have been given such special treatment. The programme suggestions included a film about the Potters of Puddakotai, a music/dance programme and a film by Mark Tully on the achievements of India. In the end the most significant result was a documentary by a talented filmmaker Jonathan Steadall, which Tully presented, focussing upon the relatively prosperous state of Gujarat. It had the desired effect; the Indian government was satisfied and as Tully later discovered, even Mrs Gandhi

herself approved . However the 'good news' element was not universally appreciated. Peter Ackroyd writing a review in the Times commented that the programme 'lacked sharpness or edge.. it was a thinking man's travelogue... worthy but rather dull.' ⁵⁷ However it fulfilled its political purpose.

Home and Abroad

Mark Tully's role was not only significant on the domestic services but also on the World Service. His high visibility there amongst Indian listeners was crucial to his celebrity status but it also meant further pressures . In pre-satellite days a foreign correspondent whose words were never heard or seen on his patch – which was so often the case – could afford to cut corners and even take liberties. However if the material is simultaneously being heard not just back at base, but by those all around (as is now regularly the case), then the reporter needs to tread more carefully.⁵⁸

Tully is very forthright about this.

My God it kept you on your toes in India – countless times I had to answer for what I had broadcast to Indians – I was on a tightrope – writing for an Indian audience but not to please them – in that case I would have had the World Service on my back – so I had to justify what I said locally .⁵⁹

He felt very keenly that,

I had to be well informed – if I said something which caused offence I made bloody sure it was right. It was a very good discipline as a broadcaster. If I was only worrying about the audience in the UK the prime concern is in making the story interesting. All the minute checks by the Eastern service meant that it had to be well informed and the desire was only to get things right – they were not concerned if a story was sexy ... their only interest was accurate, hard news.⁶⁰

This influence of the senior staff at Bush House was also significant. According to Tully the Eastern service in that period was 'led by people who really knew their

stuff.' Tully claims that 'I cared more about what Bush said than elsewhere. If the domestic service complained that something was boring I did not really mind but if Bush said you got it wrong, as I did sometimes, then I cared very much.'⁶¹ This care and attention to the way that stories were told which originated in the World Service also informed the domestic news service since in the case of reporting India they were so closely intertwined.

Indeed the matrix between the domestic and overseas services operated in several directions. Never was the BBC more indivisible than in the case of India. On the one hand there were the links through the correspondent, the Indian audiences and the way that this informed his overall coverage. At the other end there were the sensitivities of the diaspora audience in the UK. They would see or hear something which then quickly had repercussions back in India. Tully referred to the magazine which India House produced for NRIs that included a section on the press/broadcasting coverage of India. 'Local Indians would pick up on that – sometimes objections were from just a few people but in India it took very little to light a bonfire...for example if someone knew an MP who could ask a question then all manner of trouble would start.'⁶² Occasionally this interaction between programmes never seen in India and the eventual reaction to them took on extreme proportions. During the Sikh unrest in 1984 when the Golden Temple was stormed and Mrs Gandhi confronted the Sikh leader in the Punjab, Bindrawale, the lunchtime Radio 4 programme *World at One*⁶³ broadcast an interview with a London based Sikh spokesman Dr Jagjit Singh Chauhan. Formerly deputy speaker of the Punjab Parliament, he was now self-styled President in exile of Khalistan, the Sikh militants'

name for their homeland. Chauhan called for Sikhs to rise up against Mrs Gandhi, in response to the storming of the Golden Temple.

When news of the Radio 4 interview with Chauhan reached Delhi there were a series of twenty two, often violent, demonstrations outside both the BBC offices and the British High Commission, some of them involving over two thousand participants.⁶⁴ On one occasion Mark Tully's home was attacked, 11 windows were smashed and he fled over the wall.⁶⁵ The unrest continued for several weeks, over a radio news item that no one in India had heard. Austen Kark then the Head of the World Service commented that the extraordinary reaction 'underlines the indivisibility of the BBC in Indian eyes.'⁶⁶ Inside Bush House there was great annoyance at the decision to broadcast the interview and the implications this had for the wider BBC. A series of strong memos criticised the values and judgement of the domestic radio news service, emphasising that the World Service would never have broadcast such an item.⁶⁷

Some months later in the aftermath of Mrs Gandhi's assassination by her Sikh bodyguard sensitivities were further compounded. On the day of her death, 31st October 1984, BBC Radio London broadcast another interview with Dr Chauhan, where he expressed his satisfaction at the Prime Minister's murder. Once again there was an angry reaction from India even though the interview was never heard there and was only ever broadcast on one UK local radio station. In the aftermath of the assassination there were also news pictures shown on BBC TV bulletins of Sikhs in Southall, West London, rejoicing at Mrs Gandhi's death. Mrs Thatcher wrote a letter of complaint to the BBC, expressing

‘the Government’s concern about the platform which the BBC has provided for a very small minority of Sikh extremists in this country. this is not only damaging our relations with India, but endangering the security of British citizens..... the reports are totally unrepresentative and outweighed by the condemnation of murder and violence by Government and people alike.... I do not question the BBC’s editorial independence, but I would be failing in my duty if I did not remind you of the responsibility that goes with that independence.’⁶⁸

Even the Queen made known her concern at a private lunch attended by a BBC natural history producer. He reported later in a confidential note that she was ‘very critical’ of the transmission of pictures of jubilant Sikhs, describing the decision to show this on television as ‘wicked’.⁶⁹ By now it was obvious that the concerns expressed by Bush House were something that should be taken seriously. The Assistant DG eventually issued a warning that under no circumstances should Chauhan or anyone sharing his opinions be used as an interviewee without strong reasons and not without reference up the editorial hierarchy. There would have to be ‘irresistible editorial reasons’ for permission to broadcast the voice of Chauhan.⁷⁰

The Chauhan interview was not the only occasion where the external services disapproved of how the domestic services approached a story about India. When the TV Religious Affairs series *Everyman* was planning a programme about the Sikhs in 1987 entitled ‘The Turban and the Sword’ William Crawley offered any possible assistance plus a word of caution in how the subject was treated. There were multiple viewings and even the Director General was involved in previewing the programme. Nevertheless the final transmission still caused considerable dissatisfaction in India – including angry questions in Parliament. A number of World Service staff wrote an open letter to their BBC superiors complaining about how misjudged the *Everyman* programme had been in showing, ‘total ignorance of the

subject and incredibly feeble interviewing.....demonstrating one rule for the IRA and another for terrorists from a far off country of whom we know nothing...the BBC risks bringing its reputation into disrepute.⁷¹

Yet despite these conflicts there is evidence of how seriously the BBC took the reactions of Indian audiences to their coverage. For example a 16 page report was compiled and circulated in 1984 on the letters sent by Indian listeners to the Eastern (vernacular) Service and World Service.⁷² The average number of letters to the Hindi Service alone at that point was usually 4000 a month, a high proportion of the total received in Bush House, reflecting the generally high audience figures. However in mid 1984 this rose to nearly 7000 a month in response to the Sikh crisis and the report quotes (in translation) and analyses the response of the Indian audiences to the BBC output. It is interesting that several of the letters were under the mistaken apprehension that the controversial Chauhan interview had been transmitted to India via the External Services (not just broadcast on Radio London) and also that some correspondents are criticising the BBC TV coverage of the Sikh affair, which of course they would not have been able to view.

The overall pattern of relations between the BBC and India during this period is one of continual tensions and disagreements. The Indian Government was frequently unhappy with the way that the BBC behaved and the way that programmes or news reports portrayed their country. This in turn lay behind the BBC's strenuous efforts to make sure that its coverage of India was of a high standard. The criticism, frequently filtered via the diaspora audience, kept broadcasters alert and attentive to the way that India was reported. This combination of factors led to an unusual

relationship. Prakash Mirchandani who had managed the BBC Delhi office remarked, 'I don't think that this sort of unique relationship between broadcaster and country or group of countries exists anywhere else in the world.'⁷³

Model Reporting

Despite all the difficulties and recriminations, indeed because of them, the BBC did report India in a comprehensive and informed way in the 1970s and 1980s. There was a wide range to the coverage, including the various documentaries and arts strands. And the news and current affairs material broadcast over domestic channels demonstrated a real understanding and engagement with the underlying politics. Many of the reasons behind this were particular to India – the diaspora community, the web of connections by those with attachments to India, the role of the World Service and the unique contribution of Mark Tully who became almost synonymous with India in this period. These were conditions which did not exist in the way the BBC reported other parts of the developing world and were a key part of the explanation for the different nature of the coverage.

The BBC archival documents emphasise the pressures which were being felt by those responsible for the output and how the corporation was held to account in an anxious tension by Indian audiences within and outside the UK.⁷⁴

What is most interesting about the way that the BBC responded to covering India was that it already had to exhibit the caution and care that is characteristic of a post global media, where there are no secrets.⁷⁵ In the pre satellite and internet world it was common for foreign coverage, especially on TV, to exhibit double standards. In

most cases reporters and editors assumed that the subjects of the coverage would never see the output. They could film their reports, leave the country and the results would be shown only to their own domestic audience.⁷⁶

Contemporary reporting has to take account that the subjects of the coverage are able to access everything, no matter where they live. Broadcasters know that they will face scrutiny from the most remote parts because technological advances mean anyone can now potentially access their material.⁷⁷ With the growth of satellite and the internet there are many examples where there will be a reaction to media coverage far away from the immediate area of transmission.⁷⁸ Yet what makes the coverage of India so interesting is that this kind of scrutiny was already apparent in a much earlier period, during the 1970s and 1980s, long before the technology of new media. It was not just that the local population within India could access the World Service and hold the BBC to account. But beyond that the networks and connections filtered through diaspora audiences meant that BBC domestic output was subject to far greater scrutiny than reporting from other parts of the world. The multiple connections between Indian viewers and listeners in the UK with powerful voices back in the sub continent, ensured that the corporation was kept, in Tully's words, 'on their toes'.

Suzanne Franks

¹ This access to material was permitted in conjunction with research for volume 6 of the official BBC History, forthcoming from Profile Books.

² Sean MacBride *Many Voices. One World* (Paris, UNESCO 1980)

³ Roger Wallis & Stanely Baran *The Known World of Broadcast News*. (London, Routledge 1990)

- ⁴ Tami Hultman 'Dateline Africa: Journalists Assess Africa Coverage' in B. Hawk (ed) *Africa's Media Image*. (New York, Praeger 1992).
- ⁵ Ian Smillie, *The Alms Bazaar*. (London: ITP 1995) p 133
- ⁶ Robin Palmer, (1986, December 12). Out of Africa. Out of focus. *Times Higher Educational Supplement* .
- ⁷ For many years this was the flagship BBC TV current affairs show, replaced in 1979 by *Newsnight*
- ⁸ Interview Alasdair Milne June 2007
- ⁹ William Crawley ed *A Broadcasting Partnership India and the BBC 1932-94* Indo-British Review 20 No 2 Madras, 1994 Interview with Prakash Mirchandani p39
- ¹⁰ See for example note 22 xx below
- ¹¹ See note 39 xx below
- ¹² BBC Written Archive Centre (WAC) DNCA report to NCA Meeting 12/09/1978 Minute 462
- ¹³ BBC WAC: Discussion over David Holmes remarks, NCA meetings 10/01/78 Minute 9 and 17/01/78 Minute 23.
- ¹⁴ Suzanne Franks, 'Globalising Consciousness. The end of Foreign Secrets.' *Ethical Space. The International Journal of Communication Ethics* , 2010 7 (4), pp39-47
- ¹⁵ BBC WAC Annual BBC Staff lists
- ¹⁶ BBC World Service Registry, D210-4-5 *Liaison India 1980-3*. Briefing Note for forthcoming visit to India by Stuart Young 1/12/81, Notes on the vernacular services sent to the incoming British High Commissioner to India Sir Robert Wade-Gery 23/6/82.
- ¹⁷ BBC WAC R 87/44/7 *External Services Finance: General Report* to the Board of Governors. External Broadcasting Audience Research 1979. Across 8 Indian (Hindi speaking) states the total regular listeners numbered 10.5 million over the period 1975-79, whereas the second highest figure was for the Hausa service in Nigeria, with a total of 5 million.
- ¹⁸ 'Get-together of BBC Hindi service listeners' *Times of India* 17/1/81
- ¹⁹ Interview Kailash Budhwar, formerly BBC Hindi service, June 2009
- ²⁰ Interview Graham Mytton, formerly BBC Africa service, July 2006
- ²¹ Palmer Op cit
- ²² Alasdair Pinkerton, 'A New Kind of Imperialism? The BBC, cold war broadcasting and the contested geopolitics of South Asia.' *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 2008, 28 (4)pp 537-555.
- ²³ Thomas Winship & Paul Hemp. (1992). *Changing Policy: An Editorial Agenda*.in Hawk Op cit p 238
- ²⁴ Pinkerton Op cit
- ²⁵ Crawley Op cit 'Imposing Sanctions' Interview with S.K.Singh p80-81
- ²⁶ Pinkerton Op cit
- ²⁷ BBC RAPIC 10151372 *India BBC and Media Portrayal 10/69-10/82*. Briefing Note by BBC spokesman 'BBC Operations in India' 25/8/70 circulated to main news agencies and newspapers.
- ²⁸ Crawley Op cit Interview with Prakash Mirchandani 'Holding the Delhi Fort' p31
- ²⁹ Interview Sir Mark Tully June 2005
- ³⁰ Interview Rajni Kaul, BBC Hindi presenter May 2009
- ³¹ Interview Tully Op cit
- ³² Interview Milne Op cit
- ³³ BBC World Service Management Registry B 673-022 *India Impartiality/Criticism* 'The BBC and India' A note by SA to ADG 10/10/84
- ³⁴ BBC WAC Nehru Memorial Lecture by Mark Tully 14/11/91 Concert Hall Broadcasting House.
- ³⁵ BBC RAPIC NO764 *India, High Commission Correspondence with the High Commissioner G.V. Shukla* 21/10/75.
- ³⁶ BBC WAC Board of Governors BOG 23/09/76 Minute 687.
- ³⁷ BBC WAC R78/1, 190/1. *India* Internal memo to DG and others from Robin Scott, Controller Development Television 25/11/76.
- ³⁸ BBC WAC NCA 3/12/76, Minute 1032.
- ³⁹ Interview Mytton Op cit
- ⁴⁰ BBC WAC R78/1, 190/1 1971/81 *India*. Lengthy correspondence on this subject and the extent to which the Indians required editorial control. See also BOM Minutes 13/4/81 316g and NCA Minutes 7/4/81 Minute 177.
- ⁴¹ BBC WAC R 78/2 332/1 *India* Internal Memo from Anthony Isaacs, Executive Producer Travel and Exploration Unit 1/02/84
- ⁴² Surendra Kumar, 'Liaising in London' in Crawley (ed) Op cit p71-76
- ⁴³ Interview Milne Op cit
- ⁴⁴ BBC RAPIC NO764 *India, High Commission of* Letter from BK Nehru to DG Sir Charles Curran 17/7/75
- ⁴⁵ BBC WAC R78/1, 897/1 *DG's visit China/India 1980*. Undated note on 'Possible Controversies'.

- ⁴⁶ Interview Tully Op cit
- ⁴⁷ BBC WAC NCA Meeting 22/01/80 Minute 28.
- ⁴⁸ BBC WAC Report by Mark Tully to NCA Meeting (Part 2) 15/09/81
- ⁴⁹ BBC World Service Management Registry D210-4-5 *Liaison India 1980-3*. Telex from Mark Tully to Anthony Isaacs 27/4/81.
- ⁵⁰ BBC World Service Management Registry B673-022 *India –Impartiality/Criticism* and BBC WAC R78/1.*India*. Memos and extracts from Board Minutes in 1980 dealing with the Newsnight footage used after Sanjay Gandhi’s death.
- ⁵¹ BBC WAC R78/2, 332/1 *India* contains extensive correspondence on the Muria Tribals film, the objections over the filming of nudity and arguments about transmission despite strong Indian protest.
- ⁵² BBC World Service Management Registry D210-4-5 *Liaison India 1980-3*. Article from *Surya* ‘The BBC rampage through the North’ June 1981 and ensuing correspondence.
- ⁵³ BBC WAC R78/1,190/1 *India*. Memos and telexes on proposed new Indian ‘Undertaking’ on filming regulations in 1981. Eg letter from Alasdair Milne as DDG to Indian Foreign Minister. 29/8/82.
- ⁵⁴ BBC WAC R 78/2, 332/1 *India*. Memos from Adam Clapham to Head of Documentaries 22/3/82 and The Secretary 26/3/82
- ⁵⁵ Interview Milne Op cit
- ⁵⁶ BBC WAC R 78/2, 332/1 *India*. Memos from Adam Clapham Op cit
- ⁵⁷ Peter Ackroyd ‘Dull But Worthy’ *The Times* 13/11/82
- ⁵⁸ Franks (2010) Op cit
- ⁵⁹ Interview Tully Op cit
- ⁶⁰ *ibid*
- ⁶¹ *ibid*
- ⁶² *ibid*
- ⁶³ 12/6/1984
- ⁶⁴ BBC World Service Management Registry B 673-022 *India Impartiality/Criticism* ‘The BBC and India’ A note by SA to ADG 10/10/84.
- ⁶⁵ Eric Silver ‘Indian Mob attacks BBC in revenge for Sikh broadcast’ *Guardian* 2/7/84.
- ⁶⁶ BBC World Service Management Registry B673-022 *India Impartiality/Criticism*. Memo from MD BBC External Services ‘Hindi Service Listeners and the Punjab Crisis’. 14/9/84.
- ⁶⁷ *ibid*. Eg Jim Norris as Head of the Eastern Service wrote a strong memo about the interview with Chauhan, 21/6/84.
- ⁶⁸ Exchange of letters between the Prime Minister and BBC Chairman Stuart Young, 2/11/84.
- ⁶⁹ *Ibid*. Note of phone call from Mike Andrews Senior Producer at NHU Bristol to DG, after attending private lunch with the Queen, 2/11/84.
- ⁷⁰ *Ibid*. Memo circulated from ADG on Chauhan interview 16/11/84
- ⁷¹ BBC RAPIC B405 -5 (J) *India Current Affairs*. Letter to William Crawley Head of Eastern Service from Members of the Eastern Service 01/12/87.
- ⁷² BBC WAC R78/2,332/1 *India* ‘The Situation in the Punjab and the BBC’s Coverage of it, as seen through the eyes of Hindi Service listeners.’ August 1984
- ⁷³ Crawley Op Cit. Interview with Prakash Mirchandani p. 39.
- ⁷⁴ Alasdair Milne in his interview recalls that as DG he never issued a single invitation to an African High Commission, because in contrast to India ‘it was simply not a priority’. He reflects that ‘Africa was a distant land that never troubled us.’ African governments or expatriates in this period never complained and the domestic BBC radio and television services, with rare exceptions in the wake of the various independence stories, rarely covered sub-Saharan Africa.
- ⁷⁵ Suzanne Franks, (2007). ‘India’s Angst: It’s Access all areas.’ *British Journalism Review* 18(2) pp59-64 .
- ⁷⁶ Anand Giridharadas, ‘These Days No Reporting Behind a Nation’s Back.’ *New York Times* 15/3/2009.
- ⁷⁷ Franks (2010) Op cit
- ⁷⁸ A good example was the reaction to the *Celebrity Big Brother* series in 2007, (in which Jade Goodey was alleged to have made racist remarks to Indian actress Silpa Shetty.) There were street demonstrations in India protesting against the Channel 4 programme broadcast in the UK.