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TELEPROMPT Mannika Chopra

Coverage was adequate

It was only to be expected that 25 years after Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was assassinated, and after days of senseless rioting consumed Delhi and other parts of the country, that television would mark the occasion. Most channels put in place special programmes — *Scars of 1984, India of Indira* (CNN-IBN) and *Indira Gandhi's Legacy* (NDTV 24x7) — and interviews with RK Dhwani (NDTV India), whose loyalty with the late Mrs Gandhi remains unshaken, and even, rather tastelessly, one thought, the reconstruction of the leader's assassination (IBN 7 and News 24) by her two Sikh bodyguards on that infamous day on October 31, 1984.

While the programmes were adequate, following expected lines, there were interviews with on-tap historians, political analysts and authors who have written books on Indira Gandhi. There were thankfully also some new voices emerging. For example, the perspective from academician Jit Uberoi on *We the People*. How refreshing to hear a different viewpoint (He thought Indira Gandhi as an able leader during times of unity but a disabled one in times of diversity). But by and large it would be fair to say that the tricky areas were left out.

For instance, the faux policing that had been undertaken clearly could not prevent the killing of thousands of Sikhs. Also missing, at least in my TV viewing hours, the delayed response of getting the Army in to quell the blood-bath. Which brings me to my main point. When the anti-Muslim riots took



Twentyfive years after Indira Gandhi was assassinated, channels telecast special programmes

place in Gujarat in 2002, it is largely believed that it was the media, especially the electronic media's incessant focus on the situation that pressurised the state government to take action.

To be sure, the coverage was not exactly an example of precision journalism, but in 2002 that element of dogged reporting did manage to deliver to the viewers, and by extension to the establishment, that the rioting had the potential to go completely out of hand, and some remedial measures had to be taken. Whether it could have been done so even earlier is a matter of debate, but the argument goes that had the Army not been called in, the human loss would have been far higher. So, would the glare of television cameras, the incessant questioning of TV anchors, the images of burning truck tyres, close-ups of fear-stricken, sobbing members of the Sikh community have helped in stemming one of the most gruesome communal riots that took place in India?

Does the way the media frames a particular event have any connection with the subsequent reaction to a situation? I have to say yes, especially in such a case of large-scale communal rioting. Had television news cameras been there in the same intrusive way they are now, the death toll would, I am sure, have been much lower. The rumour-mongering that engulfed Delhi at that time would have also been downplayed. Most importantly, the culpability of the guilty would also have been clearer, and I would like to believe — to use the late Rajiv Gandhi's imagery — that instead

of big trees falling and shaking the ground, heads would have rolled.

But that was 1984, two years after the arrival of colour television, thanks to the 1982 Asian Games, and seven years before India had even heard of words like cable or satellite channels and 24-hour news networks. It was also the time that the national network was firmly an adjunct of the government, and the only medium of His Master's Voice. Which is why Rajiv Gandhi received confirmed news of his mother's death from the BBC World Service rather than through DD or AIR.

So today, 25 years later, the public managed to see, through the lens of time, what the horror must have been like. In a series that ran through the week, CNN-IBN tracked the families of some of the victims living in Trilokpuri, one of the worst affected areas of the Capital. There was a woman who lost 11 members of her family. A victim-cum-citizen journalist questioned why, despite the proof, the Nanavati Commission was unable to pin down the blame on the guilty. From Punjab there were reports on the families of Sawant Singh and Beant Singh, and how they were dealing with the idea of assassins being close relatives.

To be sure, though anniversaries can serve as timely reminders, they also can open up old wounds. One got a sense from these special programmes that the anger and discontent, which had been lying dormant for some time now, still has the potential to burst again in an explosive expression of rage.

PUNJABI ANTENNA

Randeep Wadehra

Viewers love this show ^{Fr 12}

ZEE Punjabi's Sunday morning talk show *Sohani Saver* is one of those cozy feel-good programmes which keep potatoes lolling on the couch, with rose-tinted after-effects lingering for hours thereafter. Jassi's natural inquisitiveness jells well with Balwinder's reticent gravitas, thus keeping the discussion entertaining, be it a light tête-à-tête or a cerebral give-and-take. On October 25 we had the iconic folk-singer Mohammad Sadique, along with his duet-singing partner Sukhjot Kaur.

Sadique was humility personified and, yet, he made some telling comments on the disappearance of quality lyrics from today's music. Although unwilling to accept the changing scenario that is inspired by globalisation and new technology, he was quite generous in his praise for younger artistes. He felt uncomfortable with the introduction of frivolity and vulgarity into music in the name of experimentation.

He pointed out that songs from 1950s, or even earlier, are still popular because of their poetic beauty — something that today's transient compositions cannot match. Technology has almost done away with the need for long periods of *riyaaz*. A memorable talk show.

Doordarshan's archives are known for their literary, cultural and creative richness. Its Jalandhar Kendra's repertoire of plays is one such example. Daily, at 12:35 pm, it telecasts meaningful and entertaining plays. For example, on October 23, it aired *Paagal Lok* — a trenchant satire on societal hypocrisy and intrinsic cruelty as well as injustice. An honest writer with conscience, and reformist zeal, is locked up in a mental asylum by certain vested interests in connivance with doctors.

There he organises the inmates into a drama troupe of sorts and sends out the message that the world outside the asylum has far more dangerous lunatics than the ones inside it.

Again, on October 24, one watched Gurmukh Singh Musafir's *Baghee Di Beti* that highlights contrasting



Iconic folk-singer Mohammad Sadique, along with his duet-singing partner Sukhjot Kaur in *Sohani Saver*

Sohani Saver is a cozy feel-good programme. We recently had folk-singer Mohammad Sadique on the show. He made some telling comments on the disappearance of quality lyrics from today's music. Technology, he lamented, had done away with the need for long periods of *riyaaz*

societal attitudes towards freedom fighters even when the fight for India's independence was going on. The tragic end is like a slap on the face of opportunists.

This makes one wonder at the comparatively ordinary show by DDJ on the TRP front. It has got such a wide range of high quality literary and folk productions that it can easily corner a vast chunk of audiences. A bit of marketing-oriented and viewer-friendly attitude can do the trick. For example, a viewer's suggestion that titles of the plays (and other programmes) should be displayed constantly/frequently onscreen for the benefit of late tuners was dismissed blithely with a lame excuse that all programmes are announced well in advance.

But what if some of the viewers miss the announcement? If private channels can air promos and reminders at regular intervals, which even Doordarshan's Hindi channels do, why not the Jalandhar Kendra, too?

October 22, 2009, was neither a Red Letter Day nor a watershed date, but was important enough as on this date election results from three states were announced. For the regional electronic media at least the Haryana results should have been the topic for analytical discussions. Hardly anything of the sort happened.

While Zee Punjabi preferred to air video songs, and DDJ carried on with its scheduled programmes, only PTC news extended its news slots for covering the event, taking care to invite an expert to comment on the emerging scenario and its future impact on political equations in Haryana.

The channel followed it up with news analysis *Aisa Pehli Baar Hua Hai* anchored by Radha Sahni. This reminds me to eat a dollop or two of humble pie; in this column I had carped against Ritesh Lakhi's *Straight Talk* for featuring "have-beens" like the Chautalas and the Bishnois. Well, neither of them has ousted the INC from Haryana but both have emerged as credible players. Even the BJP has captured six seats. Never take the Indian voter for granted, what?