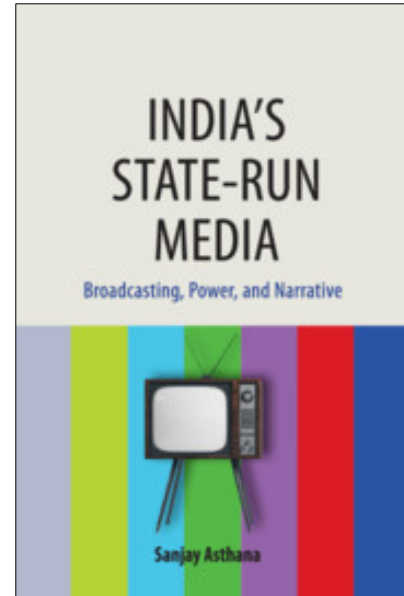


Sanjay Asthana, **India's State-Run Media: Broadcasting, Power, and Narrative**, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2019, 210 pp., \$99.00 (hardback).

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Sanjay Asthana's **India's State-Run Media: Broadcasting, Power, and Narrative** is the outcome of an ambitious project—an attempt to construct and narrate an account of public broadcasting in India through an engagement with its history, content and representations, reception, memorializations, and its shapings and depictions of key ideas of a state in formation—sovereignty, public, religion, and nation across distinct, historical time periods. The author makes a case for understanding public broadcasting as a dynamic entity whose identity is by no means static but ever-changing and shaped by the confluence of ruling ideas, by currents and undercurrents, by dominant traditions, and by multiple modalities of power. It highlights public broadcasting's embrace and engagement with the deeply contested notions of religion and secularism by highlighting its representations in period-specific dramas, serials, and other genres—a task that is aided by the application of Paul Ricouer's (1965, 1981) hermeneutics to the understanding of televisual narratives.



This book is quite easily the most theoretically sophisticated account of the media in India, drawing upon scholars such as Paul Ricouer, Michel Foucault, Antonio Gramsci, Edward Said, Dipesh Chakrabarty, and Partha Chatterjee, among many others, along with traditions of discourses such as post-structuralism, cultural Marxism, and postcolonialism, resulting in a veritable theoretical tour de force. While this engagement with theory is, for the most part, enlightening, some readers might form the view that the text is at times dense, and that the occasional asides and forays into explaining tangential aspects of the theoretical scaffolding take away from its primary focus that is an accounting for the deep history of public broadcasting in India. However, I believe that this book stands as an example of how to research the deep history of media and write a thick description of its history. The narrative has been built through an engagement with theory and the practices of public broadcasting in colonial and postcolonial India, first-hand accounts and secondary material, archival sources, and literary texts and their televisual adaptations, which have been reflectively shaped into a compelling account of public broadcasting's public window and the lens it has used to shape the very idea of India as a nation. The author's study is a fascinating account, and I commend this book for its detail and deft construction of a narrative that is based on a combination of reflective analysis and observant critique.

I would like to very briefly highlight the author's attempts to make sense of the state broadcasting's power and narrative by dealing with three core chapters—3, 4, and 5—that attempt to deal with the expressive imaginaries of state-run media. Chapter 3 focuses on the televisual representations of secularism and religion by highlighting two serials—M. S. Sathyu's (1989) *Choli Dhaman*, set in Punjab, and Ved Rahi's (1990–91)

*Gul, Gulshan, Gulfam*, set in Kashmir. Eschewing the propensity to treat religion and the secular in binary terms, the author opts to explore religion and secularism as embedded imaginaries that shape characterizations and narratives. While there is evidence of stock interpretations of both religion and secularism in line with India's constructs of nation and nationality, both serials highlight the complexity of secularism and religion—and the ways in which this is played out in the lives of people who live in context. Both Punjab and Kashmir have been sites for simmering discontent and ongoing conflicts based on disputes related to territory, autonomy, sovereignty, and control, and the play of these embedded imaginaries needs to be seen in the context of real, defining events such as the "storming" of the Golden Temple and the more recent revocation of Article 370 of the Indian Constitution, which provided limited autonomy to Jammu and Kashmir. Chapter 4, on the crafting of music videos and commercials by the state broadcaster, is characterized as announcements of the new India in the making. They highlight a cosmopolitanism at the core of what ultimately are celebrations of middle- and upper-middle-class, local-diasporic patriotisms. Highlighting three music videos—*Vande Mataram* (Hail Motherland), *Apna Desh* (Our Country), and *Kho Janne Do* (Let Me Get Lost), the author points to the explicit attempts to announce the arrival of an integrated, multiethnic global nation that is based on suturings between the past and the present, the local and the global, village and city. It highlights Doordarshan's own journey and the resuscitation of its image from being a tired state broadcaster to a national broadcaster that is firmly grounded in, and capable of, communicating the vision of a cosmopolitan India in the making. It is fascinating that these colourful, feel-good visual narratives and their expressive, Bollywood cosmopolitanisms and depictions of globalizing India were removed from the equally complex, everyday realities of "real" India with its divisions and multiple stratifications, based on caste, class, gender, and religion. Chapter 5 attempts to deal with the issue of television memories, and the ways in which Doordarshan has been memorialized and remembered through social media and sites such as YouTube. As the author points out, the specific ways that people remember broadcasting offers alternative ways to understanding the meaning of broadcasting to individuals who have experienced broadcasting, not just in terms of its entertainment value but as a medium that has shaped their experiencing of the nation as an evolving entity. The availability of these records of broadcasting nostalgia offers opportunities for connective memorializing and rememberings that are personal in nature.

The one issue that I would like to highlight is the author's interesting conversation with both Western theory and his acknowledged wanting for another Indian tradition of theorization that would allow for more authentic understandings of meanings and meaning making in India. While the author's meticulous weaving in each of the chapters, based on conversations with the past and present, needs to be commended, the narrative becomes stretched toward the end, because it attempts to, for example, in the epilogue, deal with one more critical issue—how to understand broadcasting traditions and cultures in India from within specifically indigenous perspectives that are grounded in the vernacular, locality, and living cultural traditions. While this is certainly a worthy aim, and there are many examples of attempts to interpret the experience of broadcasting by recourse to Hindi/Urdu descriptors and categories in the text, I am unsure if, in the absence of vernacular, grand narratives that allow for a "thinking within traditions," that such an approach is possible. I do not think that there are known vernacular philosophical traditions that are broad enough (and not based on explicitly religious texts) to account for the principles and practice of broadcasting in a resolutely multicultural and multireligious nation. In the absence of such traditions, the stock recourse for the hypernationalist in India today is to fall back on essentialist readings of Brahmanic Hinduism as the knowledge base to understand the "residual, dominant, and emergent" (Williams, 1977, p. 121). In this regard, Gopal Guru and Sundar Sarukkai's

(2012, 2019) attempts to theorize Dalit theory from the specificities of the Dalit “experience” of the social remains a refreshingly unique approach. While I do agree that the lack of local epistemological pathways presents a quandary for media theorists from the Global South, perhaps the better approach would be to engage with broadcasting from a variety of disciplinary and multiperspectival vantage points. This has been the case with the edited volume *Lives of Data* (Mertia, 2020), which deals with the many ways that big data can be apprehended and data relationalities made sense of in India—from the perspectives of anthropology, statistics, science and technology studies, informational science, big data, public health, and media studies.

In conclusion, I think that Asthana’s account of broadcasting in India is a sophisticated, compelling, textured, and grand conversation on broadcasting in India that throws a significant challenge to media scholars in India to write equally reflective and deep narratives. Indian broadcasting’s history is complex, since it was a state monopoly until the early 1990s that monopolized televisual narratives of the nation outside of cinema. This gave it unparalleled power to shape the imaginary of audiences throughout the entire length and breadth of India. Asthana’s study deals with the many ways in which the spatiotemporal dynamics of an evolving broadcasting are key to understanding India’s engagements with, and imaginaries of, sovereignty. It deals almost exclusively with Doordarshan, and, perhaps, a similar analysis of All India Radio will likewise contribute to an understanding of the audio shapings of sovereignty. Asthana’s account is bound to remain a classic study of the many lives of public broadcasting in India in context and shaped by temporalities.

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