

Time to join the 'global village' people

By SUMIT PRAKASH

ONE of the biggest changes I saw during a trip to India related to television.

There are satellite dishes all over the place. The terrace of my parent's flat had four dishes; even the slums of Bombay had satellite dishes on their thatched roofs.

It started with the advent of the video recorder, followed by video libraries, which in turn metamorphosised into cable TV providers.

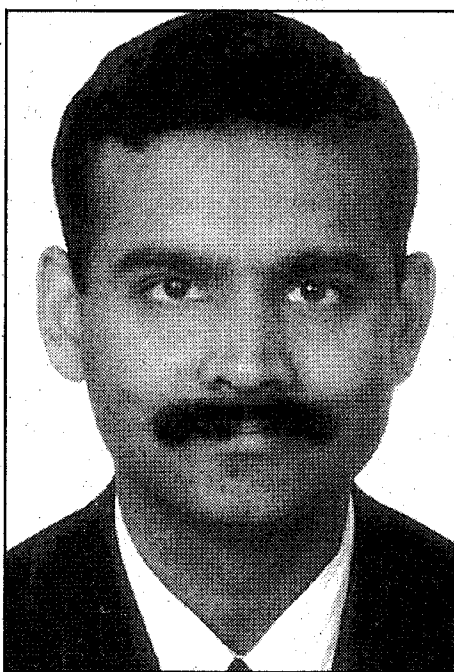
This boom was fuelled by the fact that the state-controlled television company — initially at least — broadcast some very unimaginative stuff.

Sometime in the early 1980s, a smart cookie somewhere decided to wire up a multi-storeyed residential building. He connected all the flats with copper coaxial cable, hooked them up to a central VCR and hey presto — instant cable TV.

This spread like wildfire. As you can imagine, there are some large housing complexes in Bombay, and soon housing colonies in the distant suburbs were into it in a big way.

Then in 1986, in one of those wired-up housing complexes, someone decided to try an experiment with satellite reception. I am not sure how or what, but the early operators homed into the satellites feeding American networks to the United States armed forces in the Middle East, or to the satellites broadcasting BBC to Hong Kong. Either way, the experiment was a success.

Overnight, the video libraries metamorphosised into network providers. Like this guy who operated from our roof — now not only providing a feed from



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his own bank of VCRs, but also from his satellite receivers and complementing the latest Hindi releases with the latest from MTV.

The Joe Average Public obviously thought it was a good deal for the hundred rupees (about NZ\$6) a month he or she has to pay. Put it another way, this operator has 10,000 "subscribers" con-

nected to his network. Apart from the initial start-up cost of his kit, and some ongoing staff costs, he has no other expenses.

The more enterprising operators cover local events such as festival dances in the neighbourhood with their own handheld camera crew and feed it live into the network.

Some "broadcast" test messages such as personalised birthday greetings and sale adverts on their networks with a gizmo that looked suspiciously like a ZX Spectrum... talk about ingenuity.

The satellite owners were beginning to rationalise their operations when I left. Rupert Murdoch's Star TV now has a two-pronged attack — one channel in Mandarin (for the Chinese market), and I think one in English (for the Indian market).

Rupert Murdoch was there in January this year, meeting the Indian Prime Minister, and generally donating large amounts of dollars to his favourite charity.

The owner of another channel has bought bandwidth off the Russians. He produces programmes in India and puts them on video cassettes. Someone physically flies to Moscow with the tapes on a scheduled commercial flight, then drives the tapes down to the satellite station, where they are uploaded, then beamed down over the subcontinent.

We have what we want. When I was there, I went up and asked the operator if we could watch the South Africa v Australia World Cup Series cricket match being played in Sydney. He got his crew to physically turn the dish around, we tuned in, and we watched — a game that was denied even to New Zealand only a few

kilometres away from the match. Talk about the ultimate in home shopping, video on demand and pay TV!

What next? Maybe someone will replace the copper with fibre. Maybe my folks will have home banking, true video on demand, an alternative toll carriers and full Internet access.

Currently, there are at least four providers of X.400 services in Bombay. Public access electronic mail is available, but usage is low because of the comparative low penetration of personal computers in the market. Most universities and research institutes have already been on Internet (Ernet in India) for a while, but their visibility is low because of high level of institutional "control" on the use of these tools.

IBM, Motorola, Hewlett-Packard, Intel, ANZ Bank and Citibank have software development teams in Bangalore (India's Silicon Valley) and in SEEPZ in Bombay where programming code is cut and zapped to the headquarters in the United States for worldwide distribution and implementation.

And the lesson for us in New Zealand?

Unless we get our number eight wire and do something with it, we are once again in the danger of being left on the fringes of the new global village. After all, if a highly regulated third world country can do it, why can't New Zealand?

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