

Asia satellite TV successes prompt local response.By **Chaitanya Kalbag**

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TOKYO, Dec 28, Reuter - Satellite and cable television is approaching rice status as a staple in the Asian diet but some governments feel threatened by the foreign encroachment.

Viewers across Asia are tuning in to a cornucopia of information and entertainment. Millions of Asians now know American newsmen more than their local newsreaders and American soaps are widely followed.

But not everyone is happy about such access to the airwaves.

Several governments in the region have had their tight grip on information rudely broken by "free-to-air" satellite TV.

Free-to-air is when individuals pick up satellite signals with their own dish, rather than signals picked up centrally, then distributed by cable or terrestrial means. This means it is harder for authorities to control what is received.

This was illustrated earlier this month in India, long fed exclusively by two state-owned channels, when satellite television beamed pictures of savage Hindu-Moslem rioting straight into Indian homes, angering politicians.

Hong Kong-based Star TV, which now includes a channel in the Hindi language called Zee TV, reaches an estimated 1.5 million Indian households.

Both Malaysia and Singapore, which tightly oversee the flow of information, ban private ownership of satellite dishes. Singapore allows financial companies to have them, while Malaysia restricts them to government ministers and royalty.

"We need to tread carefully...to keep out broadcasts which may purvey values and lifestyles which may be harmful or offensive," said a Singapore Information Ministry spokesman.

The Malaysian government recently told hundreds of private owners to take down their dishes or face stiff penalties.

Cable television is officially banned in Taiwan but the island has a flourishing underground industry.

Some 300 unlicensed cable TV stations, most of them very small, serve about 350,000 of Taiwan's four million households.

Police sporadically raid the illegal stations, cutting wires and confiscating equipment but operations are soon resumed. Taiwan has three state-influenced channels.

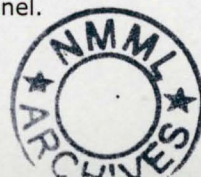
Pakistan allowed satellite dishes last year for the payment of an annual fee, but conservative Islamic clergymen fear easy access to satellite TV will spread obscenity. But there is less alarm in two of Asia's largest Moslem nations.

Bangladesh has only 350 dishes in its three major cities but officials estimate there will be over 1,000 by June 1993.

State TV beams six hours of Cable News Network (CNN) a day.

Indonesia, with the world's largest Moslem population, has its own state television and three private TV stations, which can be received by viewers across the country by satellite. Last year Jakarta allowed foreign broadcasters to use its Palapa satellites for regional beams.

A state-owned Singapore subscription TV company started a commercial service in April that offers a 24-hour CNN-based news channel, a movie channel and a Chinese entertainment channel.



The company has about 10,000 subscriptions and aims to raise the number to 100,000 in five years.

In Taiwan, use of large satellite dishes has been legalised. Also the cabinet approved a bill to legalise the cable TV industry and it is expected to go into effect next year.

Predominantly Moslem Malaysia, which restricts air time for foreign programmes, recently approved its first pay TV and has invited bids to set up a second private television station.

Pakistan's information ministry has asked state-run television to improve its programmes to meet the outside challenge.

Meanwhile, richer Asian nations set the pace in a region that offers massive advertising potential.

Japan's first wave of satellite broadcasting began in 1989, with two channels from NHK public television. At end October, NHK had 4.5 million official viewers and an estimated 1.9 million more non-paying viewers. Also the country's first private pay channel has 1.1 million subscribers.

This month, Australia approved the sale of six licences for microwave pay television channels. It plans to sell 10 satellite pay TV channels -- four to new media operators, two to the state-run Australian Broadcasting Corporation and four to existing media operators.

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