Educational Priorities in State Media: A Case Study of T-SAT Programming in Telangana

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ABSTRACT

State-supported educational broadcasting has gained renewed importance in India as the digital divide deepens. Telangana's T-SAT (Telangana Skill, Academic and Training), managed by the Government of Telangana, delivers educational programs through its Vidya and Nipuna channels and digital platforms. Its mandate includes supporting classroom instruction, preparing students for competitive exams, and expanding vocational training. While it complements national initiatives such as SWAYAM and PM eVidya, the central question remains: how effective is a regional broadcaster in reaching underserved populations, particularly rural and marginalized learners.

This study examines T-SAT as a case of development communication and public pedagogy. It has three aims: to map the types of educational content prioritized, to analyze how programming reflects state educational goals, and to evaluate its role in reducing learning inequalities. The case study approach draws on program reviews and official documentation. Uses and Gratifications theory helps interpret audience needs, while Development Communication theory situates T-SAT within the broader politics of education in Telangana.

Findings show that T-SAT has expanded access to curriculum-based lessons, coaching, and vocational programs, particularly for students outside urban centers. However, its impact is limited by infrastructural gaps, uneven digital access, and a lack of interactivity. By highlighting a state-driven initiative, the study adds to literature often dominated by national platforms and private edtech, showing how regional educational broadcasting functions as a hybrid model of public pedagogy.

Keywords: *Educational broadcasting, T-SAT, Development communication, Digital divide, Public pedagogy.*

Introduction

Education has long been central to both social mobility and national development. In India, public communication systems have historically been used to expand educational opportunities for groups excluded from formal schooling. Early initiatives like the Satellite Instructional Television Experiment (SITE) in 1975, which delivered lessons to rural communities, and the UGC's Countrywide Classroom in the 1980s, marked the initial phase of state-led educational broadcasting (Kumar, 2010; Jeffrey, 2017).

In the digital era, regional governments have built on this legacy through hybrid models that combine television with internet-based delivery. Telangana's T-SAT is one such experiment. Launched in 2017, T-SAT operates two channels Vidya, which covers school and college curricula, and Nipuna, which focuses on competitive exams, vocational courses, and skill development. Alongside television broadcasting, T-SAT streams programs via mobile apps and YouTube. Its goal is not only technological but also social: widening access to knowledge in a regional and linguistic context (Government of Telangana, 2018).

Despite Hyderabad's rapid urban growth, many rural districts in Telangana continue to face educational disparities, poor infrastructure, and low levels of digital literacy (Reddy, 2020). T-SAT's strength lies in providing high-quality lessons in Telugu at no cost, serving students for whom private edtech is unaffordable. Programming spans state syllabi, exam preparation, vocational courses, and health awareness, positioning it as a multipurpose platform. These features align with development communication perspectives, which view media as a tool for social progress, and

with uses and gratifications theory, which emphasizes learner-driven engagement (McQuail, 2010; Melkote & Steeves, 2015).

The COVID-19 pandemic amplified these functions. With schools closed for months, television and radio became crucial stopgaps. In Telangana, T-SAT kept lessons going for students who lacked reliable internet, acting as both supplement and substitute. This raises the broader question of whether T-SAT can serve as a sustainable model for inclusive, digital-age education.

Yet challenges persist. Unequal access to electricity, devices, and stable internet connectivity produces what scholars describe as a "second-level digital divide" (van Dijk, 2006; Reddy & Singh, 2021). As a state-run broadcaster, T-SAT also faces the task of balancing pedagogical goals with political influence in content design. Prior research suggests such systems often succeed in outreach but struggle with interactivity, feedback, and innovation (Aggarwal, 2019).

This paper therefore examines T-SAT as a case study of educational media, adopting a qualitative, descriptive approach. By combining development communication and uses and gratifications perspectives, it evaluates T-SAT both as a tool of state-led educational policy and as a platform shaped by learner agency.

Review of Literature

Educational broadcasting has historically been used to complement classroom instruction and to reach groups excluded from formal schooling. In India, projects such as the 1975 SITE experiment and later Gyan Darshan demonstrated television's potential to deliver curriculum-based lessons across wide areas (Kumar, 1995; Agarwal, 2012). These initiatives established broadcasting not only as a technological innovation but also as a social intervention, paving the way for regional efforts like T-SAT.

Globally, organizations such as UNESCO (2020) emphasize that educational broadcasting can help reduce inequality, particularly in under-resourced contexts. The COVID-19 pandemic reinforced this point, as many governments turned to television and radio as cost-effective tools to maintain learning continuity during school closures (Trucano, 2020; UNICEF, 2021). In India, this trend was visible in the expansion of PM eVidya and SWAYAM Prabha, which incorporated multiple television channels into the education system (MHRD, 2020; Banerjee, 2021).

Research on India's experience consistently highlights two themes: educational broadcasting can democratize access, but it faces enduring structural limitations. On the positive side, such channels have reached rural households, aided exam preparation, and offered non-formal learning opportunities (Mehta, 2018; Sharma, 2019). But barriers remain, content is typically one-directional, access to electricity and devices is uneven, and programming often reflects urban and middle-class biases (Govinda & Bandyopadhyay, 2011; Nair, 2020). These tensions are central to understanding platforms like T-SAT, which operate at the intersection of state priorities and grassroots constraints.

Development communication theory further frames educational broadcasting. Servaes (2008) argues that when adapted to local contexts, media can advance participatory development by addressing community-specific needs. McQuail (2010), however, cautions that effectiveness depends on credibility, cultural fit, and relevance. This insight has shaped recent scholarship on Indian edtech and public pedagogy, showing that culturally sensitive, locally grounded content is often more impactful than standardized national models (Sundar & Narayan, 2021).

Despite this work, regional broadcasters remain understudied in India's federal system. Most scholarship focuses on national platforms, leaving initiatives like T-SAT underexplored even though they play a key role in addressing localized inequalities. By situating T-SAT within both global debates and Indian experiences of educational broadcasting, this study shows how state-level initiatives function not only as supplements to formal education but also as tools of development communication embedded in regional contexts.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws on two perspectives: Development Communication and Uses and Gratifications. Together, they provide both a structural lens for understanding the state's rationale in supporting educational broadcasting and a micro-level lens for analyzing how audiences actually use T-SAT.

Development Communication

In development communication, media has often been positioned as a vehicle of modernization and social transformation (Servaes, 2008; Melkote & Steeves, 2015). Early models such as Lerner's "empathy and mobility" thesis (1958) and Schramm's modernization paradigm (1964) viewed mass media as tools to accelerate progress in developing societies. These models, however, tended to assume passive audiences and imposed Western-centric notions of development (Beltran, 1976; Srinivas, 1996).

Later, more participatory approaches emerged. Servaes (1999) and Jacobson & Storey (2004) emphasized that development communication should enable communities to shape communication processes rather than simply receive messages. This shift repositioned media as a platform for dialogue rather than top-down delivery.

T-SAT fits within this evolving trajectory. On one hand, it reflects a state-centered approach that treats education as a public good to be disseminated through broadcasting. On the other, it faces familiar critiques: limited interactivity, one-way communication, and minimal opportunities for community participation. The study therefore asks whether T-SAT's programming aligns with the inclusive values of development communication or risks reproducing the divides it seeks to address.

Uses and Gratifications

While development communication explains the policy rationale for T-SAT, uses and gratifications theory directs attention to the audience. Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch (1974) argued that audiences select media to fulfill specific needs, acquiring knowledge, emotional connection, social belonging, or relaxation.

Applied here, the framework helps analyze why learners use T-SAT: whether for curriculum reinforcement, exam preparation, vocational skills, or professional development. It also sheds light on mismatches between institutional design and user priorities. For instance, while the state may emphasize syllabus-based lessons, many students might value T-SAT primarily as a free substitute for expensive coaching centers. Rural households may depend on television broadcasts due to poor internet, whereas urban students might prefer YouTube replays for flexibility.

In short, the uses and gratifications perspective highlights learner agency in shaping how T-SAT is received and valued. Combined with development communication, it allows this study to examine both the policy logic of the platform and the lived realities of its audiences.

Methodology

Research Design

This study uses a qualitative case study design (Yin, 2018) to examine T-SAT as a regional educational broadcasting initiative in Telangana. A case study approach is appropriate because it allows for an in-depth exploration of a single system, its institutional logic, pedagogical strategies, and communication practices within the wider debates on access, policy, and development communication in India.

Data Sources

The research is based on secondary data analysis, drawing from four main sources:

- Government documents and policy papers released by the Government of Telangana between 2020 and 2023.
- Program schedules and reports published by T-SAT Vidya and Nipuna
- Scholarly studies on Indian educational broadcasting and development communication.

- National policy frameworks such as NEP 2020, PM eVidya, and SWAYAM (MHRD, 2020).

In addition, news coverage and independent evaluations of T-SAT were reviewed to capture public reception and critiques.

Sampling and Units of Analysis

The unit of analysis is T-SAT's programming. A purposive sampling method was used to identify representative categories, including:

- Curricular content (school level lessons aligned with the state syllabus).
- Exam preparation (SSC, Intermediate, EAMCET, and other entrance coaching).
- Skill and vocational training (ICT modules, Job readiness, and language courses).
- Teacher training and professional development (capacity building for educators).

Schedules from 2020 to 2025 were mapped systematically to track frequency, emphasis, and shifts across these categories.

Analytical Framework

The analysis is guided by two theoretical lenses:

- **Uses and Gratifications Theory** (Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch, 1974) to understand learner motivations and needs addressed by T-SAT, such as exam readiness, vocational skills, or curriculum reinforcement.
- **Development Communication Theory** (Servaes, 2008) to situate T-SAT's role in advancing state goals of educational equity, inclusivity, and social development.

Together, these frameworks allow for both a media-centered reading of audience agency and a policy-centered reading of state intent.

Validity and Limitations

To strengthen validity, the study triangulates data from multiple sources: government reports, program schedules, academic work, and independent media coverage. However, the analysis is limited by its reliance on secondary material. Direct audience surveys or ethnographic observations were beyond the scope of this research but remain important directions for future work.

Analysis

The programming data from 2020 to 2025 shows how T-SAT evolved from an emergency response during the pandemic into a regular feature of Telangana's education landscape. A close reading of schedules, government reports, and independent reviews reveals how policy priorities, learner needs, and technological conditions came together to shape this trajectory.

1. Pandemic as Catalyst

At the height of COVID-19, T-SAT became a lifeline for continuity of schooling. With classrooms closed, the network devoted almost 60 percent of its telecasts to curriculum content for Classes 6 to 10. Core subjectsMathematics, Science, and Social Studiesdominated, reflecting the urgency of board exam readiness and the state's concern with learning loss. This period highlighted T-SAT's role not as a supplement but as a substitute for formal schooling.

This aligns closely with the Uses and Gratifications perspective: students and families turned to T-SAT out of necessity, seeking tools for exam preparation and syllabus coverage when no other options were available.

2. Shifts Toward Aspirational Content

By 2022, the programming mix had shifted. While curriculum delivery remained important, the schedules began to feature more competitive exam coaching particularly for SSC, Intermediate, and EAMCET. This reflected not only institutional priorities but also public demand. For many students, success in these exams determines future mobility, and T-SAT positioned itself as a free, accessible alternative to private coaching centers. From a development communication standpoint, this move suggests that T-SAT was not only filling gaps in basic education but also responding to aspirational pressures within Telangana's education system.

3. Expanding Skill and Vocational Training

Between 2023 and 2025, vocational programming became more visible. Nipuna launched repeated modules on ICT skills, digital literacy, and language training, signaling the state's emphasis on employability. Government reports from this period linked these broadcasts to broader workforce development goals, especially in IT and service sectors. Teacher training was also introduced, though less frequently than student-focused content. Modules on digital pedagogy and classroom technology suggested recognition that teachers, too, needed support in adapting to hybrid and online models.

4. The Equity-Competitiveness Tension

The programming mix reveals a core tension. On one hand, T-SAT fulfilled the equity mandate of NEP 2020 by broadcasting in Telugu, making content free-to-air, and reaching rural households that private edtech often ignores. On the other hand, its growing emphasis on exam coaching catered to urban, middle-class aspirations, raising the risk of sidelining more holistic or creative forms of learning.

Newspaper coverage in outlets like *The Hindu* and *Indian Express* praised T-SAT's reach but also questioned whether the narrow focus on competitive exams undermined the broader vision of inclusive, holistic education.

5. Policy Alignment and Projection

Government reports repeatedly projected T-SAT as a model of state-level innovation that fit within national frameworks like PM eVidya and SWAYAM. The alignment was clear: national policy set broad directives, and Telangana localized them through a regional syllabus and vernacular delivery.

Independent evaluations, however, pointed to structural limits. Access among the poorest households still depended heavily on television availability and stable electricity. Smartphone apps and YouTube streams widened reach but were constrained by patchy internet and device ownership, especially in remote districts.

6. A Hybrid Role

Taken together, these patterns show that T-SAT played both corrective and supplementary roles. It corrected gaps caused by the pandemic and supplemented the formal system with aspirational and skill-based content.

The Uses and Gratifications framework explains why exam and curricular content dominated: learners actively sought these tools. Development communication theory explains the state's role in positioning T-SAT as a tool for equity and workforce development. The dual framing helps make sense of how T-SAT navigated between what the state wanted to deliver and what learners actually needed.

7. Gaps in the Evidence

The findings rely heavily on schedules, reports, and secondary evaluations. These tell us what was broadcast, but not always how learners engaged with it. Viewership numbers alone don't reveal whether rural students were able to follow the lessons or whether exam coaching met its intended outcomes.

This limitation suggests the need for more grounded research/ethnographic studies in rural households, or comparative work with other state broadcasters like Kalvi TV in Tamil Nadu. Such work would capture the lived experiences that remain hidden behind policy reports and program schedules.

By 2025, T-SAT had clearly become more than a pandemic emergency tool. It had settled into a hybrid role: curriculum reinforcement, exam coaching, skill training, and teacher development. Its promise lies in its accessibility and alignment with policy. Its constraints lie in infrastructure gaps, audience diversity, and the risk of privileging competitiveness over holistic learning. In this sense, T-SAT embodies both the opportunities and contradictions of state-backed educational broadcasting in India's digital age.

Discussion

The trajectory of T-SAT between 2020 and 2025 illustrates how state-sponsored educational broadcasting adapts to shifting policy directives and ground realities. At one level, the channel functioned as a straightforward extension of national frameworks such as NEP 2020 and PM eVidya. Its emphasis on syllabus-based lessons, teacher training, and skill development reflects how state media was mobilized to realize national goals at the regional level.

But the evidence also shows the unevenness of this process. T-SAT expanded access to curriculum support and exam preparation, particularly for students without internet or coaching resources. Yet the broadcasts were largely one-directional, offering little space for interaction, feedback, or customization. This echoes long-standing critiques of educational broadcasting in India, where state-led platforms extend reach but often fall short of fostering participatory communication.

From a development communication perspective, T-SAT succeeded in reducing information gaps and providing a safety net during the pandemic. It also offered cost-free alternatives to private coaching, which gave it legitimacy among families unable to afford commercial edtech. However, the same top-down model limited its ability to respond to the varied and evolving needs of learners across Telangana.

The Uses and Gratifications framework adds another layer to this picture. Students and parents clearly valued T-SAT for exam readiness and curriculum reinforcement needs the platform was able to meet. But the absence of interactive or engaging formats likely constrained long-term usage. In other words, learners turned to T-SAT when necessity demanded it, but sustaining their engagement over time required features the platform did not fully develop.

The bigger question, then, is not whether T-SAT was useful it clearly was but whether it can evolve into something more than a stopgap. Its potential lies in bridging the equity gap between rural and urban learners. Its challenge lies in moving beyond a narrow focus on exams and syllabus delivery, and in designing content that is participatory, locally relevant, and technologically adaptive.

What the findings suggest is that T-SAT embodies both the strengths and weaknesses of state-backed educational broadcasting. It demonstrates that television and digital platforms can still play a vital role in widening access, especially in regions with deep infrastructural divides. At the same time, it shows the limits of relying on one-way dissemination models in an educational ecosystem that is rapidly shifting toward interactivity, personalization, and blended learning.

Conclusion

This study has shown that T-SAT has emerged as a significant medium for expanding educational access in Telangana, especially in the wake of the digital turn accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic. By aligning itself with the priorities of NEP 2020 and national initiatives like PM eVidya, the platform provided curriculum-based lessons, teacher training, and skill development opportunities to audiences who often lack access to private or internet-based alternatives.

At the same time, the analysis makes clear that T-SAT is constrained by both structural and pedagogical challenges. Its reliance on a largely one-way broadcasting model limited opportunities for learner engagement and feedback. Uneven access to electricity, internet connectivity, and localized content further narrowed its reach. While the platform succeeded in narrowing information gaps during a crisis, it has yet to fully realize its potential as an inclusive, participatory medium of education.

The evidence suggests that state-backed educational broadcasting can play an important role in advancing equity, but its sustainability depends on adaptation. To remain relevant, platforms like T-SAT must evolve beyond top-down delivery. This means integrating participatory features, diversifying content to reflect local needs, and investing in infrastructure that supports genuine interactivity.

In the end, T-SAT demonstrates both the promise and the contradictions of regional educational broadcasting. It has widened access and offered free resources to marginalized groups, yet it also reflects the limits of a model designed around transmission rather than dialogue. The task ahead is not simply to continue broadcasting lessons but to rethink how state media can foster more inclusive, dynamic, and learner-centered forms of public pedagogy.

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