

THE CHANGING FACE OF INDIAN MEDIA

***Justice G.N. Ray**

Respected Shri K. Rosaiah ji, Hon'ble Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh, Dr. (Smt.) Geeta Reddyji, Hon'ble Minister for Information, Public Relations and Tourism, Andhra Pradesh Government, Mr. Amar, Chairman, Andhra Pradesh Press Academy, esteemed members of Press Council of India, and other dignitaries and panelists for today's seminar, friends of media fraternity, Ladies and Gentlemen, it is indeed a privilege for the Press Council to hold this National Press Day commemoration function first time outside the national capital of India in Hyderabad, the city of intellectuals who have contributed in no small measure to effective debates on the functioning of the instruments of governance. The State of Andhra Pradesh ranks very high, as per the latest RNI report, both in terms of number of publications as well as their circulation. The vibrant City of Hyderabad alone boasts of over 200 publications which regularly file their returns with the RNI. The electronic media in private hands is also growing by leaps and bounds. It is thus only appropriate that the media personalities assembled here today should deliberate on the changes witnessed over the past 200 years of advent of press in the country and chalk out a course for future that will ensure that even while adapting to the new technology and market forces, it continues to conform to its basic role of being an

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instrument for public advancement in political and socio-economic field.

Since the Indians enjoyed no fundamental rights in the British India, there was no question of guarantee of freedom of expression. When the Bengal Gazette popularly known as Hicky's Gazette started in the 18th century as a first newspaper published in the country the colonial rule conferred no privileges or special liabilities apart from those in the general statute. Soon, however, as is evident from the history of Indian journalism, a plethora of laws relating to media were enacted primarily to suit the interest of the foreign rulers.

Coming to post independence, even though the constitution did not make any special mention of the word 'press', the intense debates amongst the fathers of our constitution ensured that the press would create a special place for itself even without a specific mention. The need for freedom of speech and expression was well accepted by civil society of India and such freedom was also declared by Supreme Court way back in 1950 when the Constitution of India was just operative and the Supreme Court of India started functioning while deciding the question of pre censorship of newspaper.

However, since then long time has elapsed and with passage of time, there has been paradigm shift in the functioning of media. As a result, "accountability" is a word heard more often than 'freedom' in the context of today's media functioning thereby justifying a serious look to the changing face of Media.

Historical Background

The Indian national press was undisputedly the backbone of the freedom struggle for independence from colonial rule. Its historical importance and prestige it enjoyed in the society are linked to the awareness and creation of public opinion.

The modern press marked its beginning only after the advent of European Civilization in India. Portuguese were the first Europeans who introduced printing press in India. The Christian missionaries of Bengal deserve the credit in introducing printing press primarily for publishing missionary leaflets etc. Today, over the last 250 years, the press has come to occupy an undisputed position as the fourth and the strongest pillar of modern India.

Though the press in India started as an European institution the native Indians did not take long to realize its potential in socio-political communication. The Print Media, and for that matter Media as a whole owes its origin, and growth not to the government but to the individuals who had in them the courage to lead the nation. The trials and tribulation they had to encounter at the hands of foreign powers could not prevent the press from growing and becoming an instrument for fight against subjugation and to bring wide range of social and economic reforms which speak galore of their resolute determination and inherent strength.

The later years of 19th century unfolded a glorious chapter of Indian newspapers which reveals the newspapers consistently reporting on challenges ahead of the nation. Instead of reporting

societal events of the Britishers and feudal Indian society, the newspapers focused on news and write-ups on diverse social and political concerns and problems and the country saw the birth of a different kind of journalism, a dedicated journalism which stood for social reforms and public welfare, and creating opinion on issues like education, child marriage, widow marriage and sati.

The press gradually became the most powerful weapon for freedom movement under the leadership of towering personalities like Tilak, Gokhale, Gandhiji and others who stood for progressive journalism and liberal notions and believed in the strength of the press to mould public opinion, to shape the destiny of the nation and safeguard the rights and civil liberties of its citizens.

The strong belief of our freedom fighters that 'pen is mightier than sword' and the power of their pen can challenge the political establishment directed the Indian journalism with a sense of purpose that never weakened and holds ground till date. As a result, Press had always enjoyed popular support with respect and despite various lamentable aberrations in the functioning of media, even now media in India has strong popular support and the liberty which it enjoys today is founded on such popular support of the civil society.

National political struggle and advocacy of social reforms and emancipation in the years before independence contributed to the creation of the core strength of the press in free India. This included independent functioning, resistance to state oppression and censorship, firm commitment to free speech and expression and its

role as the leader and path finder of the society and protector of fundamental rights. Indian democracy has grown from strength to strength and made wide range of reforms for surging India in the sixty years of independence encountering struggles, war and insurgencies. The press has not only mirrored the march of this journey of democracy but gave valuable insights and suggestions at every step.

The media scenario of India in the last 62 years has undergone sea change. The change can be broadly divided into two categories, i.e. the positive achievements of the media and negative trends in the media. But before delving into both of these aspects, it will be appropriate to refer to the major factor which has shaped the growth of this powerful medium of communication. Globalization, the new economic order of the world, has opened the floodgates to a cut-throat competition virtually in every sphere of our activities. The media and communication industries have immensely contributed in facilitating overall globalization. The impact of globalization is not merely an economic phenomenon, dictated by the market dominated corporate capitalism but also very powerful cultural content, shaped by the inseparable intertwining of advertising, television and internet.

I would like to discuss the two perspectives as mentioned earlier in which the analysis of the Changing Face of Indian Media may be considered. First, your kind attention towards the positive developments which have brought complete makeover of the Indian

media may be drawn. To begin with, an insight into media's growth scenario is necessary.

Positive strides made by the media

The technological breakthrough in printing has brought in unforeseen structural change in the set up of print media. It has not only helped in better designing and lay out and more attractive presentation with improved colour scheme in printing of the papers but also made it feasible and economically viable to print more multi edition copies faster and at lesser cost with better get up and attractive type, thus, enabling the press to cater to more readers stationed at different locations. The developing telecommunication services and transport facilities have also facilitated news reporting even from remote and forlorn places, and quick transmission and dissemination of news resulted in prompt and wider circulation of the newspapers with better news contents. These developments in technology coupled with the growth in the newspaper readers on account of higher literacy level and higher per capita income have led to an enviable growth in the number of newspapers and their circulation. Daily circulation of some of the national level newspapers is enviable even globally. Formation of linguistic states paved the way for development of language press in various linguistic regions which in turn has made significant contribution in the developmental programmes of the government. Further, the status of language press is now well recognised and considered at par with the English newspapers. As a matter of fact, small newspaper published in local

regional language and dialects in remote areas in India are working as conduit between local rural and urban population in other parts of the country unfolding not only rich culture and heritage of the region but also various problems in such area.

Today's readers of the print media have a wide variety of options to choose from the publications devoted to specialized subjects because of diverse information easily available on account of technological development. With a click of the mouse news and happenings in every part of the globe are before you.

The growing presence of women in journalism has opened a new era for enhancement of socio-economic condition of women. The Media boom in India has resulted in need for adequate representation of women in public and private sectors of the media. This in turn has not only provided source of livelihood for women journalists but also ensured adequate and effective representation as women journalists in media. Such journalists have not only established their competence and dedication but have also proved that they have skill to analyse and handle women related issues with better sensitivity. The potentiality of today's media is required to focus on live issues with intense studies of the problems for quick growth of women empowerment. A note of caution need be made at this stage. Misleading and improper gender biased programming which are often resorted by media turns out to be counter productive. It is heartening to note that today quite a few woman

journalists are occupying responsible positions even in managerial cadre and other responsible position in journalism.

The expansion of the newspapers has led to the growth of press-related specific jobs and has boosted the profession of journalism. Even the lower level journalists in some metropolitan and district towns are drawing decent salary not to speak of the editors and persons holding managerial position of some newspapers whose salary package runs into five to six figures.

Rapid Growth of Journalism Institutes

Another consequence of Media boom is spurt in establishment of Journalism Institutes. The demand for education in journalism in universities and private Institutions have been catered to, by introduction of degree both at undergraduate and post graduate level and diploma courses and certificates in connected skills and disciplines pertaining to Journalism. With the boom in Mass Communication, new specialized courses have been introduced. More and more bright, talented and educated young men and women are now opting for journalism as their career. With money in the job and the tremendous power that journalists have come to wield, particularly in political, financial and investigative journalism, the profession is attracting large number of students. The prospect of eventually joining the Electronic media is an added attraction. It will be pertinent to mention here that many of the institutes imparting education in various specialties of Mass Communication and journalism lack in adequate infrastructure, qualified faculty members

and even proper course contents. Monitoring of functioning of Journalism and Mass Communication Institutes by authorised expert body like medical or engineering council with power to disaffiliate needs serious consideration.

The advertisement revenue has become the main revenue base of the Press. In the case of the metropolitan press, it accounts for about 70% to 80% of its total revenue. Consequently, space in the newspapers is disproportionately occupied by the advertisements. The gap between news and advertisement ratio is fast widening. The general news items are constantly shrinking and advertisements occupying more and more space. The advertisements have also made inroads in the policy and outlook of the newspapers in more senses than one. With the rapid growth of advertisements by way of corporate communication and for luring potential consumers, the revenue earning of a newspaper from such advertisements is very often quite robust. As a result, even though the number of pages have increased, the price has decreased. The circulation having gone up considerably, the profits particularly of the metropolitan newspapers, have multiplied many fold.

Investigative journalism in its present avatar as sting operation has opened a new chapter in the history of the Press. It has made the Press to acquire more powerful position and has helped to enhance the image of the Press as an active watchdog of the society. Unfortunately, investigative journalism has often been misused to settle personal score or to tarnish the image of the

individuals or to blackmail individuals and men in position. This aspect of media behavior deserves a careful scrutiny for taking appropriate remedial measures. Investigative journalism, however, has helped reporters to assert their place more prominently in the setup against editor's exclusive position so long being enjoyed. The reportage has become as important as, if not more, than the leading articles.

The Press in today's media scenario has become instrumental in setting the political, economic, social and cultural agenda of the country. From 1990s India has witnessed an explosion in electronic media, online news services. Media has acquired such great control on the mind of the masses that it now controls and shapes the liking, disliking and interest in different segments of news items to a considerable extent. Compared to the print media, electronic media has grown faster in view of advantage of visual impact enjoyed by it.

The Indian press is going through transformation because of changes occurring in today's polity of the country on account of rapid socio economic strides. Liberalization, globalization, and competition from the electronic media are impelling the print media to adapt new technologies, with more professional out look and sensitivity to the market forces. Today, the structure of India's print media maintains a product line which is amazingly diverse array of languages, management set up, topics and news contents.

The rapid challenges being faced today and to be faced in near future need dynamism and quick adaptation for the growth and

effective survival of print media. The newspapers today are compelled to delicately balance the twin challenges namely how best they can adapt to and gain from digital distribution and advertising revenue; and how to meet the role of fourth estate. Unfortunately, media is failing to play its role as fourth estate effectively. What is witnessed in today's media scenario is that instead of making newspaper rich in news contents and addressing serious issues for better governance of the country and improve socio economic disparities, the media driven by market forces and in unending urge to make more profits, is indulging in trivialisation and sensationalisation and tainted corporate communication. It is interesting to note that media is cleverly attempting to keep under wrap such deplorable design, by covertly under playing trivialisation of news contents and biased news and views sub serving interests of advertisers and corporate houses in order to remain gainfully floated with market forces. Such clever manipulation has been aptly described as 'feeding the readers spinach with the ice-cream.'

The changes in technology and marketplace are shaping the growth and development of Print India. In India, almost all newspapers are accessible through the Internet and provide up to-date news and information not only relating to India but other parts of the globe as well. Today's readers are not satisfied with traditional news contents but some thing more giving insight to what is happening all around. Unfortunately, in their anxiety to get more or more readers and particularly more and more advertisers and

corporate sector as client, the print media is by and large turning to be a commercial enterprise and the newspaper as a commodity. Journalism in today's media scenario appears more as a profession than a mission. The print media is consciously oblivious to its role as Fourth Estate. To say the least, this trend is not only unfortunate but deserves to be condemned by civil society in no uncertain term.

Negative Trends

Corporatisation of Media

In the early history of print media in our country, the newspapers were largely owned by middle class or upper middle class intellectuals. Such owners did not publish newspapers primarily for making profits like a businessman. The publication was made in the spirit of ushering in social reforms and gaining independence of the country. The circulation of the newspapers was also quite moderate in those days. But the news contents and articles published in such newspapers did not suffer from trivialism or sensationalism as in today. Slowly the print media in India has undergone corporatisation.

Today's media particularly big national level newspapers are mostly owned by the corporate houses. These newspapers barring a few are running the newspapers with an aim to derive more and more profits like commercial enterprises. More and more revenue from corporate houses and commercial ventures being targetted, news contents and articles have orientation suiting corporate houses and business community. These newspapers very often covertly

lobby the pursuits of big corporate houses from which large revenue is obtained for advertisements. The problems, concerns and the interests of the weaker segment of the society are inappropriately projected and serious national issues are not addressed properly. The Centre for Media Studies in its study of media scenario of 2004 very appropriately indicated that "the overall reach of all mass media in the country individually and even collectively is not expanding although individually the media is registering growth. The un-reached sections being at the bottom of economic pyramid are not the target of mass media both for reach as well as for concerns."

Monopoly Trends

The emergence of big media houses and corporatisation of media is heading fast towards monopoly in the media. This is a matter of concern. The small and medium newspapers particularly regional newspapers with low circulation and operating in remote rural areas are facing acute financial crisis and their survival is at stake because of rapid spreading of wings by big newspapers covering large number of cities and districts. The elimination of the rivals at any cost, through competition and acquisition is the age old device. In the interest of body polity of Indian democracy consisting of different segments in the society, sources of information should also contain voices and concerns of all segments of body polity. To achieve this, ownership of media should essentially belong to such persons or institutions who would be concerned in the voices of all segments of the society. The other news or the other side of

the news and views, will not be available and dissemination of only the specified information will be subtly ensured if media suffers from monopoly and corporatisation. Such monopoly in media is inherently not good for Indian democracy.

Malpractises and Corruption

Media, like other institutions has also succumbed to the vice of malpractises and corruption. In media, such malpractises operate in both explicit and implicit forms. Yellow journalism and blackmailing were the known forms of corruption in journalism. But in today's media functioning, subtle and implicit form of corruption is creating greater mischief. The distortion, disinformation and 'paid news syndrome' aimed to serve certain interests and suppression of news and concerns of other interests have become a usual feature in media. The promotion of certain politicians and political groups, business magnets, commercial and industrial interests, products and services, and entertainment programmes through induced news and favourable articles and in the process, maligning rivals through interviews, articles, reports, so called surveys and reviews have ushered in an era of tainted communication. It is a said commentary on today's media functioning that media entrusted with sacred duty to inform civil society and the administration correctly and dispassionately has indulged in large scale misinformation and tainted communication only to augment greater profit. Journalists are often softened on account of wooing them by liberally giving various favours in the shape of foreign trips, costly presents and other

monetary benefits. As a result, their pen becomes friendly to givers while reporting or advocating their causes and concerns even though such journalists know well that such causes and concerns advocated by them are not beneficial to the society at large.

Paid News Syndrome

In the last Parliamentary election media in general and print media in particular has indulged in nefarious monetary deals with some politicians and candidates by agreeing to publish only their views not as advertisements but as news items and not to publish the view points of other candidates and even publish news items against rival candidates as desired by the other party in exchange of specified amount of money. This paid news syndrome was so rampant that voices of concern were raised by members of various journalists' unions and also members of civil society and eminent media personalities. Shortly after election, the Andhra Pradesh Union of Working Journalists in association of others held a seminar in this very Jubilee Hall to express their concern about this malpractice. Similar seminars were organised in other parts of the country. A committee has been set up by the Press Council of India to collect inputs from various parts of the country and make in-depth study of the malady of paid news syndrome in election and to make its recommendation to the Press Council. Newspapers enjoy freedom of speech and expression as the watchdog of the nation and as a representative voice of the people with a solemn duty to inform the people and the government correctly and dispassionately They do not

enjoy freedom of speech and expression to misinform and give distorted news and project views of a particular party or group in the guise of news for monetary consideration.

Trial by Media and incorrect reporting of court cases

Of late, trial by media of sub judice matters and incorrect reporting of court proceedings have become a disturbing phenomenon. Being perturbed by this growing menace, at the initiation of the Hon'ble Chief Justice of India, the Supreme Court Legal Services Authority in association with Press Council of India, Editors' Guild of India and Indian Law Institute organised a national level seminar in Delhi to discuss this malady and to evolve remedial measures which were followed by regional conferences held in Cochin, Bhubaneswar, Mumbai and Guwahati. A training programme for reporters of court proceedings was also arranged.

Devaluation of the Office of Editor

Earlier, the editor used to control the contents of the newspaper, including the advertisements. Today, the office of editor has been marginalised and the editor has very little or no say about the contents of the newspaper. It is the manager or director in-charge of advertisement who decides what space is to be left for contents to be published other than advertisements or write-ups desired by the advertisers and corporate sector.

It, therefore, does not require imagination to comprehend that real contents in the newspaper will be consumer and material oriented thereby blatantly ignoring appropriate news need to be

focused and serious issues to be addressed for public awareness and good governance.

The representatives of media in seminars or round table concerning media functioning often assert boldly that the news contents are aimed to cater the felt need of the readers which they perceive as their duty and first priority. Such assertion, to say the least, is not only incorrect but a random statement without any basis. I am not aware of any authentic survey on readers as to what kind of content they want. To my mind, it is convenient way of assuming by erring newspapers that what contents they give to the readers suiting their revenue augmenting drive, are the contents desired by the readers. Even if it is assumed that trivialisation and sensationalisation of news and tainted corporate communication resorted by such newspapers were tolerated by the readers without protest, such practice can not be held to be proper journalistic practice consistent with well accepted media ethics. The media being most powerful mass communicator and watch dog of the nation and also a fourth pillar in democracy has a solemn duty to educate and inform people properly and correctly with appropriate news contents and not to slowly inert the urge of the readers for good and rich news contents, articles and write ups.

Before I conclude, it would be appropriate to refer to the excerpts of speech delivered by revered Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, Former President of India on the occasion of National Press Day, 2006 during an International Conference.

In the words of Dr. APJ Abdul Kalam, "It is very important for the media to be partner in national mission. They should highlight the positive aspects and provide solutions to difficult aspects through nationwide consultations".

By highlighting the needs and aspirations of the grass root level of the society the media can truly contribute to the creation of a vibrant and developing India where every citizen would be equal. With orientation for Bahujana Hitaya and Bahujana Sukhaya, [welfare of many and happiness of many] the media must relentlessly strive to remove the paradox of vulgar affluence of a few and abject poverty of many in today's polity so that the nation marches forward in real sense. We should keep in mind that in the forward leap of a nation, those who are left behind will pull back others. Inclusive economic order is well accepted goal.

Permit me to conclude with a note of optimism. The press in India has always been at the forefront of national life. Even though there has been a considerable erosion of ethics over the decades since independence, the basic values adhered to by the Indian Media over the ages, still continue to inspire. The media has always risen to the situation whenever there is a crisis. We must remember that in this new era of journalism rich with booming information and mind boggling entertainment and in the context of global invasion and competition, the need of the hour is sober introspection by the journalists and not losing the focus on the paramount duty of media to be the fourth estate without making any compromise with vested

interest. In a multi religious, multilingual and multi ethnic denominations comprising the polity of India, the social fabric is quite delicate. Journalists must be very sensitive to this delicate and fragile social structure and should refrain from doing any act which may even remotely disturb the equilibrium of the society.

I, invite the media of today to be the torch that shows the way and not the fire that destroys, although both give light.

Namaskar
