

“The Role of Media in Protection of Human Rights”

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“ ----- recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family in the formation of freedom, justice, and peace in the world”

-Preamble to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948.

The concept of Human Rights has arisen from that of natural rights of all human. The belief that every person by virtue of his humanity is entitled to certain natural rights is a recurring theme throughout the history of mankind. It can be traced back thousands of years from the Vedas to the Hammurabai Code to the Magna Carta, the French Declaration of Human Rights, and the American Bill of Rights. Time and again history shows that the existence of human rights has been recognised and accepted as a necessary component for the well being of civilisation at any given time.

In Ca.2050 BC, Ur Nammu, the king of Ur created the first legal codex: followed by several other sets of laws in Mesopotamia including the Code of

¹ The role of Media in Protection of Human Rights’ at Visakhapatnam on January 11, 2007 organised by Human Rights Council

Hammurabi (ca. 1780 BC); one of the best preserved example of the kind. Various rules and punishment on variety of matters including women's rights, children's rights and slave rights are mentioned in the code.

The Persian Empire (Iran) established unprecedented principles of human rights in the 6th century BC under the reign of Cyrus. Three centuries later, the Mauryan Empire established principles of civil rights. Religious documents – the Vedas, the Bible, the Quran and Analects of Confucius also referred to the duties, rights and responsibilities of the citizens. In 1222, the Manden Charter of Mali was a declaration of essential human rights including the rights to life, and opposed the practice of slavery.

Several 17th and 18th century European philosophers developed the concept of natural rights, the notion that people possess certain rights by virtue of being human.

The United States Declaration of Independence includes concept of natural rights and states "that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness"

The concept of human rights has undergone a revolutionary change since the Magna Charta of 1215 to the rights contained in the United Nations Convention.

The charter of United Nations which came into force in October 1945 begins with the determination of the people of member nations to save the

succeeding generations from the scourage of war and to reaffirm their faith in the fundamental human rights and the dignity of human being.

The 'World conference of Human Rights' held in 1993 marks a crucial stage in United Nation's policy in the field of human rights. The Vienna Declaration encouraged the United Nations to pursue and strengthen its activities to make respect for human rights a priority objective on the same level as development and democracy and to work for the concurrent achievements of these three objectives.

It is interesting to note that the United Nations 'Commission on Human Rights' also created in 1947, a sub-commission on 'Freedom of Information and of the Press' to report to the 'Commission on Human Rights' on what rights, obligations and practices should constitute the freedom of information. This necessarily had to be juxtaposed with the human rights. Its report on the subject, including the draft code of ethics, was a copious contribution to the charter drawn up subsequently.

I feel that bearing in mind the pace of technological advancement in the field of communication, there is need to have a permanent sub-commission that could monitor the developments and their efficacy with the change of times.

However, years after the creation of the revolutionary document, most people are still unaware of their rights. According to poll conducted recently by Amnesty International, the largest human rights organisation in the world, only

8% of adults and 4% of youth in the United States are aware of "foundation stone for human rights".

It is here that the media can play a salutary role in creating larger awareness of the concept of human rights, Basic human rights that would constitute the right of every individual to his fundamental freedom without distinction as to race, sex, language or religion.

Human society has developed from Stone Age to space age. But while some nations or societies have developed apace the others seem to be nowhere in the race. The rights which citizens enjoy vary depending upon the economic, social, political and cultural developments.

In view of the fact that there is a revolutionary change and growth in every sphere of life and mainly in the communication and media world, media today, plays a decisive role in the development of society. Thus the role of media in protection of human rights cannot be ignored or minimized. Media is a communicator of the public. Today its role extends not only to giving facts as news, it also analyses and comments on the facts and thus shapes the views of the people. The impact of media on society today is beyond doubt and debate. The media has been setting for the nation its social, political economic and even cultural agenda. With the advent of satellite channels its impact is even sharper and deeper. With twenty-four hours news-channels, people cannot remain neutral to and unaffected by what the channels are serving day and night. It is,

therefore, of paramount importance that the media plays an important and ethical role at all levels and in all parts of the country and the world.

Being the Chairman of the Press Council, it would be appropriate for me to refer to the reports of this statutory authority into the crisis that the nation faced in the 1990s in the State of Punjab and Jammu and Kashmir. When militancy was at its peak in these two states, the credibility of the media and threats to their free functioning also came under the scanner. Also inquired into by the Council were the reports of human rights violation by the Army and the para military forces in Kashmir.

In Punjab, the press was under threat from militants who had imposed a crude form of censorship on the local press by enforcing publication of their dictates so as to perpetuate the fear psychosis, the mainstay of terrorists. In a double jeopardy, the government warned the press of use of rule of the law against publication of any 'objectionable advertisements or subversive writings.

The Press Council in its report of 1991 cautioned that it would not be desirable to shut out the point of view of the militants completely as the people in a democratic society have a right to know what the militants stand for and the basis of their arguments, but there is a point beyond which the state cannot abdicate. While it counselled the press to exercise due caution in disseminating the press notes of the militant groups, equal emphasis was laid on the need for the press to be vigilant against official plants to maintain its credibility. Soon thereafter in Kashmir, human rights excesses by army and the para military

forces had invited international concern and criticism. The role and the plight of the press also came under scanner. The Council found that the threat to the freedom of the press in Kashmir came primarily from the climate of fear that the militants had generated and caused the media to abandon their post. It was felt that the newspapers must be willing to accept the risks that go with their profession. Experienced hands should be posted who would report all sides and aspects of events fairly and objectively. The result of inquiry into the report of human rights excesses were astonishing. It was found that while some excesses had indeed taken place, been enquired into and processed, the most serious instances were without any foundation. Clearly, the psychological warfare by terrorists, orchestrating human rights violation needs careful, unbiased and thorough investigation to sift the chaff from the grain.

Media can play a major role in protecting and promoting human rights in the world. It can make people aware of the need to promote certain values in the cause of human rights which are of eternal value to the mankind. Peace, non-violence, disarmament, maintenance and promotion of ecological balances and unpolluted environment and ensuring human rights to all irrespective of caste, colour and creed should be the minimum common agenda for the media.

The media can perform this role in different ways. It can make people aware of their rights, expose its violations and focus attention on people and areas in need of the protection of human rights and pursue their case till they achieve them.

Media can also give publicity to the individuals and organisations, which are engaged in securing human rights. This will encourage as well as motivate others to do the similar work.

Media can inform and educate the people of their rights and suggest ways and means by which they can solve their problems and thus empowering them to protect their rights.

Since media plays the role of communication between the state and the public, it can also play an effective role of making the authorities aware of their duties.

Media's new role today is reporting, analysing and commenting. It faces a challenge in playing the role in protecting human rights in the world. While playing this new role, there is risk of its misuse. For that self-regulation is the need of the hour. Journalists should set 'Lakshman Rekha' while reporting human rights violations. The main aim before the journalists should be to give facts but not in a manner and with the purpose to create sensation and to arouse the sentiments of the people. Projection and language should be decent and civilised. Journalists should not add insult to inquiry. Media should refrain from giving statements and pictures that are flaring. Since media is the mirror of the society, care should be taken that the mirror is not hazy.

While reporting such violation media should not get influenced by authorities. It should look deep into the problem and provide solutions. Mere reporting of the facts is not enough. It should give reasons of the problem and the nature of the violations and then give solutions.

Press has a sacred duty to focus human rights violations and then measures for protecting them.

Freedom of expression is a sacred right well accepted over the globe and journalists should respect this freedom. In Indian constitution, it finds place as a guaranteed fundamental right. The Government of India in tune with constitutional mandate professes its anxiety to protect and safeguard this fundamental right. But no right and for that matter the right to freedom of expression is absolute and unfettered in all circumstances but bound by duty to maintain peace and harmony of the body polity by exercising prudence and restraint in the exercise of right to freedom of speech. If exercise of this right is likely to inflame passion, the right to freedom of expression needs circumspection and consequent restraint for greater good of the society.

The apex court of the country in a watershed judgment in the case of Olga Tellis declared that a man has not only a right to live but to live with human dignity. Consequently all attributes for living with the dignity of a human soul namely education, shelter etc. are to be guaranteed and welfare activities of the State must be directed to ensure socio-economic condition where no one in the

country is deprived of the basic requirements to lead a dignified life. The media being the watchdog of the nation must work for guiding the people and the government to move towards such goal relentlessly and in right direction.
