

Democracy, Parliament – Role of Media

Communication is the essence of all social interactions, and the same holds true for the relationship between a citizen and the government. The nature of communication networks that are available to citizens determines the nature of the political system. Authoritarian governments try to stifle communication networks to control the information that is available to the citizens. Fidel Castro correctly gauged the power of information when he said: “Socialism in Central Europe failed because people received more information than was necessary.” It is precisely for this reason that authoritarian regimes try to control the access, quality and nature of information by their citizens. On the contrary, continuous information flows between the citizen and the state characterize the functioning of a vibrant democracy. Media plays a significant role as it acts as a platform that facilitates the information flows between the citizens and the state. It is the media that has to continuously update the citizens with all relevant information. It is here that an element of subjectivity creeps in, as it is for the personnel of the media to decide as to what constitutes relevant news and the significance that needs to be accorded to a given news item. The quality of a media house and a journalist will be determined by the discretion that they employ in identifying the news items of significance.

The media in India has played a seminal role during the freedom struggle and after. There were many editors who boldly reported the misdeeds of the British colonial government and yet refrained from demonizing the British people. It is this restraint or good journalism that has substantially facilitated non-violent freedom struggle. Moreover the media played constructive role in social reform movement in India. Even after independence, the media was always at the forefront of protecting the rights of the people. There is no major national newspaper that ever questioned the prudence of continuing democratic framework in the country. Journalists did not allow patriotism to color their reporting of various ethnic conflicts and the role of the state in these conflicts. They boldly reported various human rights violations that are taking place in these strife torn areas. Media also carried out relentless campaigns in highlighting the misdeeds of the mighty and powerful. So much so that a charismatic former prime minister had to pay a heavy political price for alleged corruption in higher places. In spite of its strengths the Indian media is coming under the growing criticism for its acts of omission and commission.

Noted social scientist Jurgen Habermas once observed that the public sphere works most effectively for democracy when it is institutionally independent of the state and society’s dominant economic forces. Media in India today is institutionally independent of the state apparatus, yet there are many media houses that openly support one party or the other. Using the media for the partisan political gains is not something that is specific to India; well-established democracies across the world have been experiencing such problems. For example Berlusconi’s election to the office of Prime Minister of Italy in 1994 is a classic case where the media has been used for partisan political ends. Berlusconi not only owned Italy’s major television networks but also major newspapers and an advertising agency, which he used to the hilt to further his political ambitions. Similarly

in England, some of the tabloid press is known to take sides during the elections to Parliament.

Distorted Priorities

Media is also increasingly coming under the pressures of economic forces that are operating in the country. A media personality at a private party recently said: “A newspaper is like a commodity and like all commodities it must be sold and profits should be made. If its requires to titillate the public, so be it.” Then one needs to ask, “Is it the duty of a doctor to merely make money or profits for his corporate hospital and nothing else?” True, one is not expected to do charity in the media business. But to say that the business of the media is to merely make profit is an affront to human intellect, and liberal democratic values. It is this attitude that is resulting in disproportionate media coverage on irrelevant non-events. There is growing preoccupation in the media with designer-made dresses, fancy cars, fabulous jewels, extravagant weddings and huge birthday bashes. Great personalities and indeed, great achievers in any field need to be respected and admired. But the media should not lose its sense of proportion in these matters and give undue publicity to events or personalities of the celebrity circuit. The fact that Amitabh Bachan’s 60th birthday party ranked higher in our media’s sense of newsworthiness than Lok Nayak Jayaprakash Narayan’s birth centenary is a disgraceful reminder of our distorted priorities. This only leads to greater apathy in our society to the condition of the bulk of our citizens, and the future of our children.

This apathy is getting reflected in the way media covers various socio-economic issues. Take the case of reporting on drought conditions in India. As a noted journalist once pointed out, it is only in April-May when one sees dead cattle on the parched lands that the mainstream media wakes up to situation and terms it as “famine-like conditions in parts of the country.” What is often lost sight is the fact that drought or “famine-like conditions” do not appear suddenly in April or May. Rather they are the consequence of a *mélange* of factors such as bad monsoons, bad agricultural and water policies and misgovernance over sustained period of time. However, a substantial section of mainstream media does not keep track of such events or issues. They “respond” to the drought situation, only in mid-summer with photographs of dead cattle and parched landscape, which disappear from the media glare after the first monsoon showers. Rarely do we find follow up stories on issues such as drought. Jean Dreze made the following pertinent observation on the prevalent media silence on social issues and its attendant impact on public policy.

“Lack of media concern for hunger and related issues makes it that much easier for the state to get away with doing nothing. A striking example is the neglect of health matters in the media as well as in public policy. India's infant mortality rate has virtually stagnated during the last five years or so, yet the problem is barely discussed, let alone addressed. In fact, it has gone virtually unnoticed. This is a matter of supreme importance for the nation, but somehow it escapes the policy-making elite. Media interest in this matter could certainly be fostered through skilful activism, and this would

make it harder for the government to ignore the problem. As things stand, however, a deafening silence surrounds the whole issue.”

Jean Dreze’s criticism is perfectly valid. Poor public health coverage is the single biggest cause of impoverishment and indebtedness of the poor in India. Our public health expenditure is only 0.9% of GDP, which is among the lowest in the world. What is worse, out of the total health expenditure of 5.2% GDP, public expenditure constitutes only 17%, most of the rest being out-of-pocket expenditure. Even the low level of public health expenditure is very skewed, with 65% going towards curative services, and only 26% spent on preventive services. This, despite the fact that for every Re 1 spent on the poorest 20% of the population for curative services, Re 3 go to the richest quintile! As a result of this appalling state of public health, those hospitalized are forced to spend 58% percent of the annual income for a single episode of hospital stay. 40% of hospitalized persons sell their fixed assets, or borrow at usurious rates to meet the costs. And over 25% of hospitalized Indians slide into poverty. And yet, this massive public health disaster hardly receives coverage, except for a few days when several people die of Dengue or Gastroenteritis.

Anti-political Attitude

One area in which media can be proud of its record is in defending our liberty and upholding democratic values. But even here the record is somewhat ambiguous in terms of outcome. While the media has always been at the forefront of protecting the rights of the people, it has been unduly critical of the Indian democracy. We need to remember that India is struggling to deepen democratic institutions over the past 50 years in a multi-ethnic, multi-linguistic and a multi-religious society characterized by wide disparities in social and economic spheres. Pratap Bhanu Mehta succinctly summed up the context in which democracy was introduced in India:

“The creation of India as a sovereign independent republic was, in some profound sense, the commencement of a bold experiment in political affairs as significant as any that had been conducted in the history. To give two hundred million, largely unlettered and unprotected people the right to choose their own government and the attendant freedoms that come with it, was a leap of faith for which there was no precedent in human history. Certainly, no body of European social thinking at the time on the prospects of democracy would have counseled such a course, and there was no instance from the past that could be the basis for confidence that this experiment would work. No political formation that could provide an instructive example of how to make democracy work in such seemingly unpropitious circumstances: unbounded poverty, illiteracy, the absence of a middle class, immense and deeply entrenched social cleavages. Indeed, if history and social theory were taken to be any guide, the presumption would have been quite the reverse. Democracy in India is a phenomenon that, by most accounts, should not have existed, flourished or, indeed, long endured.”

In spite of many factors that are usually considered as not conducive for the successful functioning of democracy, Indian democracy survived for past 50 years and is still going strong. True, there are many aberrations in Indian democracy, but the consistent efforts to reform the political process have not received sufficient attention. Most often, the disruptions in the parliament or legislative assemblies get portrayed in the media in great detail. On the contrary, a well reasoned argument in the Parliament or legislative assembly rarely gets highlighted in the media. So, the incentive for legislators is evident – their concerns or actions will get wide publicity only if they indulge in disruptionist tactics rather than through well-reasoned arguments. Thus media is providing a reward to bad behavior and is punishing good behavior.

To cite another example, all the political parties and political leaders across the political spectrum displayed remarkable statesmanship on Delimitation Bill, which went largely unreported in national media. Many political parties that would have gained substantially from regrouping the constituencies on the basis of new population statistics also observed restraint and facilitated the passage of Delimitation Bill, which maintains the current status quo on the share of seats for each state in the Union Parliament. The failure to ensure passage of Delimitation Bill would have resulted in grave consequences for the unity of the country, with states like Tamil Nadu and Kerala losing a large number of constituencies only because of their successful efforts to control population growth. Yet the media did not deem it necessary to praise the political class for their statesmanship. On the economic front, all political parties have ensured continuity and stability in the reform process in the past few decades. In spite of fragmented verdicts and unstable coalition politics, political parties carried on with new economic policies. Indeed, there have been disagreements on various specificities of the new economic policy but the general thrust of the policies of various political parties at the Union and the state level has been to free the economy from unnecessary state regulation. This amazing political consensus in a fragmented polity deserves greater attention and appreciation from the media.

Similarly, a recent vital piece of legislation relating to political funding went largely unnoticed in media and political circles. The Election and Other Related Laws (Amendment) Bill, 2003 (Bill No. 18 of 2003) was approved by both Houses of Parliament in August 2003, and became law in September with the assent of the President. In any other functioning democracy, such a law would have been hailed as a major reform, and dominated public discourse for months. The deafening silence on the subject in India is a sad reflection of the quality of public discourse. The legislation has the following significant features.

First, it removed the loophole inserted in 1974 in respect of election expenditure ceiling in the form of explanation 1 under Section 77 of the Representation of the People Act, 1951. In a brazen display of dishonesty and political chicanery, the law was amended in 1974, and all expenditure incurred or authorised by a political party or by any other individual or body of persons or association was exempted from election expenditure ceiling. This amendment made a mockery of the election expenditure limits, and the spirit of the law was violated with impunity by most parties and candidates.

Second, a strong incentive has been provided for open contributions to political parties. Parties need money for organization and mobilizing public opinion, and to compete in the market place of ideas. For the first time, the law now provides for full tax exemption to individuals and corporates for all contributions to registered political parties. Sections 80 GGB, and 80 GGC have been inserted to this effect. Even in the US no such tax exemption exists. In fact, companies are prohibited from making political contributions, though certain loopholes allowed funding of soft money.

Perhaps the most far-reaching reform from a long-term perspective is the indirect public funding now available to recognized parties in the form of allocation of equitable share of time on the cable television network and other private or public electronic media, based on past performance.

This law is far-reaching in its consequences. If such a law were enacted in the US, the American political funding crisis would have been resolved. True, our political funding crisis is far more complex, and is closely linked to our electoral system and the politics of fiefdom practiced in most parts of India. Unlike in the US, most of our election expenditure is both illegal (unaccounted and beyond the ceiling limits), and illegitimate (for buying votes, bribing election officials and hiring hoodlums). Not surprisingly, parties and candidates are loath to disclose funding sources and expenditure. Despite these limitations, this law is a major step forward in cleansing our polity. All in all, this is a great step forward for our troubled democracy. That it received support from all parties is a source of great optimism about the future. Clearly, all major parties are alive to the need to curb corruption, and provide legitimate means of political funding. However the public discourse on this vital piece of legislation has been minimal, which compel us to ask few questions to the media: Was adequate attention paid to this piece of legislation with far-reaching impact on Indian democracy? If so, did the media follow the proceedings of various committees, when the Bill was being formulated and did it disseminate the information it collected to concerned citizens and the public? Isn't it important for the public to know how other countries have drafted similar piece of legislation? How many articles and news items have been published giving a comparative perspective of political funding in various countries? The answer for all these is a disappointing NO.

How come the media, which always took up cudgels against the corruption, ignored this vital piece of legislation that makes an honest attempt to tackle the menace of corruption? This is because, often the media sees corruption at an individual level and as unethical behavior of the few, and rarely do we find an analysis that treats corruption at the systemic level. What we, including the media, need to understand is that there are vicious cycles operating which reward bad behavior. It is these vicious cycles that are endangering our democracy.

Six interlocking vicious cycles:

In a well-functioning democracy, the political process ought to find answers to governance problems. Every election holds a promise for peaceful change. People in India have been voting for change time and again. But the political process is locked into a vicious cycle, and has become a part of the problem. There are six factors complicating the political process, perpetuating status quo. First, election expenditures are large, unaccounted and mostly illegitimate. For instance, expenditure limit for assembly elections in most major states was Rs 600,000 until recently, when it has been revised to Rs 10 lakh. In reality average expenditure in most states is several multiples of it, sometimes exceeding Rs 10 million. Most of this expenditure is incurred to buy votes, bribe officials and hire musclemen. Such large, unaccounted expenditure can be sustained only if the system is abused to enable multiple returns on investment. Rent seeking behaviour is therefore endemic to the system. Most of this corruption is in the form of control of transfers and postings, which in turn sustains a system of retail corruption for a variety of routine services, regulatory functions and direct transfer of resources through government programmes. Large leakages in public expenditure, and collusion in contracts and procurement are extremely common. The economic decision-making power of the state is on the wane as part of the reform process. But as the demand for illegitimate political funds is not reduced, corruption is shifting to the core areas of state functioning, like crime investigation. Robert Wade studied this phenomenon of corruption, and described the dangerously stable equilibrium which operates in Indian governance. This vicious chain of corruption has created a class of political and bureaucratic 'entrepreneurs' who treat public office as big business.

Second, as the vicious cycle of money power, polling irregularities, and corruption has taken hold of the system, electoral verdicts ceased to make a difference to people. Repeated disappointments made people come to the conclusion that no matter who wins the election, they always end up losing. As incentive for discerning behaviour in voting has disappeared, people started maximizing their short-term returns. As a result, money and liquor are accepted habitually by many voters. This pattern of behaviour only converted politics and elections into big business. As illegitimate electoral expenditure skyrocketed, the vicious cycle of corruption is further strengthened. With public good delinked from voting, honesty and survival in public office are further separated.

Third, this situation bred a class of political 'entrepreneurs' who established fiefdoms. In most constituencies, money power, caste clout, bureaucratic links, and political contacts came together perpetuating politics of fiefdoms. Entry into electoral politics is restricted in real terms, as people who cannot muster these forces have little chance of getting elected. While there is competition for political power, it is often restricted between two or three families over a long period of time; parties are compelled to choose one of these individuals or families to enhance their chances of electoral success. Parties thus are helpless, and political process is stymied. Absence of internal democratic norms in parties and the consequent oligarchic control has denied a possibility of rejuvenation of political process through establishment of a virtuous cycle.

Fourth, in a centralized governance system, even if the vote is wisely used by people, public good cannot be promoted. As the citizen is distanced from the decision-making process, the administrative machinery has no capacity to deliver public services of high

quality or low cost. Such a climate which cannot ensure better services or good governance breeds competitive populism to gain electoral advantage. Such populist politics have led to serious fiscal imbalances.

Fifth, fiscal health can be restored only by higher taxes, or reduced subsidies or wages. The total tax revenues of the union and states are of the order of only 15 percent of GDP. Higher taxation is resisted in the face of ubiquitous corruption and poor quality services. Desubsidization is always painful for the poor who do not see alternative benefits accruing from the money saved by withdrawal of subsidies. A vast bureaucracy under centralized control can neither be held to account, nor is wage reduction a realistic option.

Sixth, elected governments are helpless to change this perilous situation. As the survival of the government depends on the support of legislators, their demands have to be met. The legislator has thus become the disguised, unaccountable executive controlling all facets of government functioning. The local legislator and the bureaucrats have a vested interest in denying local governments any say in real decision making. The vicious cycle of corruption and centralized, unaccountable governance is thus perpetuated.

It is because of the failure to appreciate these complex linkages, vicious cycles and the systemic crisis that our political system is facing, that the media treats corruption as a spasmodic event. As a consequence the media fails to make correct assessment of the reform efforts and sometimes fails to support causes that may make a difference to the large sections of the public. Given this complex nature of the crisis that our democracy is going through, what is it that the media should do?

First, we need to show far greater appreciation of the complexities of a functioning democracy in a vast, diverse, largely poor and illiterate society. Second, we need to focus on institutional solutions, and lend aggressive support to all measures which enlarge liberty, promote accountability and transparency, and curb corruption.

Finally, the media and civil society have an obligation to be a part of the solution. Mere description of the problems, and continuous spread of cynicism and despair make us a part of the problem. Instead, we need to break free from the existing paradigms and boldly explore improved models of democratic functioning. For instance, the first-past-the-post system (FPTP) we adopted is operative in only a handful of countries – Britain and its former colonies. Two former British colonies, Australia and New Zealand, have other electoral system in operation. Britain itself has adopted proportional representation system in the elections to European Parliament and to the regional parliaments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Our insistence on FPTP has led to several problems including rise of fiefdoms, inadequate representation of scattered minorities, ghettoization and communal polarization, and denial of opportunities for political advancement for honest and competent citizens. What we need in this backdrop is not merely a change of players, but a change in the rules of the game. Proportional representation, coupled with partial FPTP system holds great promise for our democracy. Political fragmentation inherent in proportional representation can be overcome by reasonable threshold limits for eligibility for representation, of say 10% vote in a major

state. Party bossism can be controlled by democratic choice of candidates on the party lists and their order of preference through secret ballot by elected delegates in each electoral district. There are many such innovative solutions to resolve the crisis of legitimacy affecting our democracy. The media's reach and penetration are growing by the day. Indian media can now play a more positive and profound role in deepening our democracy in a way which was never possible before.

But for media to play that role effectively, the deep-seated prejudice against politicians and political process needs to be shed. In the first two decades after independence, we thought that the politician, hallowed by freedom struggle, could do no wrong. For the next two decades, as we discovered that politicians were men and women of clay, we lionized the bureaucracy, and hoped the civil servants would provide all answers. But as we recognize that bureaucracy cannot be insulated from political vagaries, we now tend to seek instant solutions to all our political and governance problems from the overburdened judiciary. The truth is, all organs of state have become dysfunctional, and all players are human and prone to error. We need to focus on institutional solutions, and we need to restore the primacy of the political process, and legitimacy of our democratic institutions. The media is the most potent tool in the citizens' armoury in this vital struggle to make our democracy work for us, and to reclaim our republic stolen from us. With all its failings, media, by nature, is a moral instrument, forever on the side of the citizen, upholding popular sovereignty. I have no doubt that the media will play a critical, perhaps decisive, role in reinvigorating our democracy and helping fulfil true potential of all our citizens over the coming years.

Jayaprakash Narayan

The author, is the National Coordinator of LOK SATTA movement and National Campaign for Electoral Reforms. E-mail: loksatta@satyam.net.in; url: www.loksatta.org