

<i>People Power</i>

Indian Media – Great Power and Greater Responsibility

We, Indians are among the truly privileged people enjoying all liberties including freedom of speech and expression guaranteed under the Constitution. The pleasure of being able to write or say what you please, subject to laws of libel and reasonable restrictions imposed to protect the larger public interest, is indeed a rare one even in the post-war world. Not too long ago thousands were jailed in East Europe for merely saying what they believed in, or worse still for speaking the truth. Even today, the citizens of the world's most populous nation have no right to freedom of speech and expression. Sometimes it is clear that we take our blessings for granted, and do not have adequate appreciation of liberty.

Over the past 55 years after independence, the three constitutional organs of state have fallen far short of our hopes and expectations. Legislatures have become battle fields, and no serious public policy is evolved, nor accountability of the executive enforced by our elected representatives. Most legislators are content to be disguised executive, seeking and obtaining state patronage, privilege and pelf. A vicious cycle of unaccounted money power, illegitimate election expenditure, polling irregularities, abuse of public office, corruption and perpetuation of feudal oligarchies is operating, making citizens somewhat helpless. Executive office has become a private estate, and legal plunder has become the norm. Both the elected executive, and appointed public servants have become the modern-day monarchs, and the notion of public service is all but forgotten. Honesty and survival in elective public office are increasingly incompatible. The judiciary has become very much a part of the problem. Law's delay and the breakdown of rule of law have nudged our society into near anarchy. With 25 million cases pending in courts, many of them for several years and decades, a well-developed market has developed for criminals and musclemen to provide rough and ready justice.

In the face of the colossal failure of the three constitutional organs of state, the citizen is reduced to a state of abject helplessness. Cynicism and despair have become all too

pervasive; very often in far greater proportion than the situation warrants. Many of our travails are but an inevitable part of the maturing process of an emerging democracy. However, as our democratic evolution coincides with the age of technology, instant communication and rapid transformation, there is a revolution of rising expectations. As reality is well-short of expectation, there is perpetual disappointment and frustration, further worsening the already complicated situation.

Thanks to free press, India remained a democracy against all odds. In this complex environment, the one institution which nurtured, sustained and strengthened our democracy is the press. The role of media during freedom struggle and after independence has been an extraordinary and inspiring saga. Gandhiji and his colleagues always relied on the print media to propagate their message, and inspired the educated middle classes to form the bulwark of the freedom struggle. Once the message was spread, and a solid phalanx of middle classes was formed to lead the movement, mobilizing the masses for freedom was relatively easy. After independence, the early excitement and enthusiasm abated, and as institutions of state became moribund and dysfunctional, the media played an extraordinary role, with few parallels in the world. It is this fierce independence, unflinching courage and undiminished idealism exhibited by the press which broadened and deepened our democracy.

The greatest moment for the media was during the epochal period of the 70's, marked by people's movement against corruption and mis-governance, increasing state oppression culminating in suppression of liberty in the name of emergency, and the eventual resurgence of freedom with the glorious verdict of 1977 unseating the establishment and restoring the lost freedoms to people. Rarely have the people spoken so unequivocally and courageously, conquering fear and prejudice, breaking traditional barriers and resisting inducements. At a time when the electronic media were completely state controlled, the role print media played in safeguarding democracy and restoring liberty was an outstanding one. There are many less dramatic, but equally potent illustrations of the media's heroic role in confronting the establishment, humbling the mighty, defending

the citizen, and acting as the sentinel of freedom. The quality, courage, catholicity, and concern for human values exhibited by Indian media is second to none.

Post-emergency period saw a breathtaking expansion of the media. The 90's saw the rapid spread of electronic media, as the march of technology with the advent of satellite television made state control irrelevant. It is ironic that the state, which controlled all facets of electronic media for decades, is now a helpless bystander as the private channels became the authentic sources of news and views. It is also a sign of times that this is not a result of any deliberate policy or soul searching by the state, but a product of communications revolution which could not be blocked by the political class. This, more than any other event, presages the future of the media. For about 40 years after independence, the state was the dominant player in generating and propagating news, and in determining the fate of the media by its policies (newsprint), laws (emergency), control (electronic media), and patronage (advertisements). But now all that has changed. The dismantling of the license-permit-quota raj on the one hand, and the communications revolution disregarding national boundaries and state controls on the other, have created breathtaking opportunities for the media. The future role of the media is in their own hands, and is no longer dictated by external agencies.

That even in India, which still is home to the largest number of illiterates and the poor and malnourished on earth, there has been a breathtaking proliferation of mass media is evident. The facts speak for themselves: over 49000 newspapers of all kinds, of which about 20000 are in Hindi, over 13 crore combined circulation of newspapers put together, over 800 films annually with unbelievable number of audiences, 120 million radio sets with 20% of population regularly listening, 65 million television sets with half the population of India regularly watching the channels, over 35 million households with cable television connections, 21% of the population covered by FM radio, nearly 35 million telephones and rapidly expanding, over 10 million mobile phones, over 5 million personal computers and internet subscribers the list is quite impressive. The last decade has seen a remarkable expansion of media and communications network and coverage. With literacy levels increasing rapidly over the past decade, and more and

more people having disposable incomes after meeting the basic needs, media's reach and influence are only going to grow over the next decade and more.

Have this expansion and power of media been translated into greater public good? Is our democracy more mature now? Is there more informed public discourse on account of the media? Are media still a part of the solution as perceived for decades, or have they become a part of the problem? Are there signs of self-correction and growing public-spiritedness, or is there more decay and crass consumerism at the cost of rational discourse and public good? These are troubling questions which haunt all lovers of liberty and democracy. Obviously, when we are dealing with a vast country and innumerable newspapers and television channels, there cannot be any sweeping generalizations. There is much that is good and healthy, and there are parts which are perverse and sickening. But we can safely say that the bulk of the media today represents a moral force for the rejuvenation of republic and transformation of democracy. By its very nature, the press is an empowering, ennobling, invigorating and liberating force. In an open and competitive system the media act as moral instruments to hold those in authority in check, and promote public good. Healthy skepticism, irreverence of authority, a capacity for self-deprecation, fierce independence of spirit, moral outrage at egregious discrimination and injustice, and tolerance of heterodoxy and respect for diversity are the hallmarks of our media. These are also the vital ingredients of a democratic society. Happily, given our past, the maturing of our institutions, the power of the media, and the spirit of liberty pervading our people, there is no likelihood of our freedoms, including freedom of speech and expression, ever being extinguished again. There is no external threat to the media in future.

But there are certain danger signals emanating from within. A potent instrument of freedom is increasingly becoming a private tool for profit or perverse pleasure. Let us examine some of the less savoury aspects of the media today.

First, there is an ever-increasing obsession with power games. Politics, a noble endeavour to promote public good and happiness, has become a fiercely competitive exercise for

personal aggrandizement and private gain. There is intense excitement in media's coverage of politics. Power games are analysed endlessly, and endless space is devoted not to issues which effect people's lives, but on who is winning and who is losing, who is rising and who is falling, who is teaming up with whom, and splitting from whom. This approach to politics as a spectator sport, often a bloody, no-holds barred fight to the finish, has severely undermined our democracy, and retarded its evolution. Politics has now become an alternative to medieval blood sports, appealing to the worst gambling instincts, completely divorced from the lives and well-being of citizens. While the nature of political recruitment and the compulsions of a flawed process of power are largely responsible for this decline, the media have contributed heavily to this unhappy state of affairs. As a result, we have only change of players on our political scene, but the rules of the game remain unchanged. This had bred enormous cynicism about our political process.

Second, in many cases the morbid curiosity in the game of power and the natural instinct for political voyeurism have progressed further. The media, instead of playing the role of an impartial, and critical umpire, have been sucked into the vortex of partisan politics, and started taking sides. These political preferences are often not based on ideologies and policies, but are an expression of personal bonds and mutual gain. Public interest has taken the back seat and truth has become the casualty. Diametrically opposite conclusions are drawn from similar facts by the same newspaper depending on the players involved. While invocation of Article 356 in one case is strongly justified in the backdrop of certain facts, such a course is stoutly resisted in another identical case because the players happen to be different! This playing of favourites, and twisting facts and logic to suit convenience, have distorted public discourse and made sections of the media very suspect in the eyes of the people. This undermining of the legitimacy of the media, and increasing suspicion that media groups have their own private agendas, have diminished their credibility and persuasive power, even as their reach and power are growing.

Third, media business is seen increasingly as any other profit-making business. Undoubtedly financial viability is the key to sustainability, and no paper can run for long

if there are constant losses. However, while bottomline has to be kept in mind, treating newspaper as a commodity like any other is a gross perversion of the freedom of expression. There are countless other business where you can peddle consumer products and make a tidy profit. By its very nature, newspaper cannot be a very profitable business. Printing and exhibiting whatever appeals to the lurid tastes and base impulse of the readers and viewers regardless of consequences to the society is nothing short of abdication of the sacred responsibility to promote rational and enlightened public discourse. This commodification is growing rapidly with corresponding decline in the obligations to the community.

Fourth, even when the intentions are honourable, there is decline in professionalism. The more competent and conscientious journalists are doing an outstanding job. But the bulk of the correspondents are both uninformed and casual about their profession. The rank incompetence and shoddiness have been repelling many discerning citizens. Journalism has become just another job in many cases. Worse still, in many cases, particularly in regional and local newspapers, the potential nuisance value of a correspondent has its own pecuniary rewards! The bonhomie with which powerful politicians, bureaucrats and businessmen deal with pressmen is converted as a source of patronage and private gain. These unhappy tendencies are blunting the moral sharpness of media, and reducing their efficacy as guardians of public interest. If these tendencies of corruption and degradation are not checked soon, there is a real danger of this vital institution too falling by the wayside.

Fifth, the power of the media is exercised by some of the media flippantly. Reckless hedonism and unchecked narcissism have become quite common in the name of giving the readers what they want. To cite one instance, several newspapers and television channels have treated an ageing star's birthday festivities as far more important than the centenary celebrations of Lok Nayak JP! This pandering to the whims of the glitterati, and treating the general public as a source of amusement and enrichment of the privileged few is both undemocratic in principle and immoral practice. Harmony can be preserved in an inequitable society only when the privileged exercise restraint and act with deep sense

of responsibility. If the media ignore the plight of the poor and underprivileged, and indulge in theatrics and circuses as in Roman amphitheaters, the broad consensus in society for democracy can easily evaporate. Democracy is the art of elevating morally unacceptable status quo to a level of dynamic tension, and resolving potentially violent conflicts by social transformation. If hope and faith in the future are extinguished, and if a modern democracy is merely a cosmetic substitute to a feudal oligarchy, then ordinary people have no longer a stake in the preservation of democratic order. The media will ignore this at their own peril, because democracy and liberty are the basis of a free press.

Sixth, increasingly what is most noisy is regarded as news. Substance is ignored for style, and image is given precedence to reality. Decibel levels and not the weight of the issue, local arguments and not evidence, slogans and not rational logic are dominating our political and social scene. The media, in the mistaken notion that what is most strident is news, are inadvertently encouraging such tendencies. As Mark Twain said, often a hen which only laid an egg cackles as if she has laid an asteroid! If we confuse the egg for an asteroid because of the cackling, it does not speak highly of our judgment and discerning ability. A casual glance at the newspapers reveals this lack of judgment which is the luxury the lazy and incompetent enjoy. A noisy walk out in the legislature on a trumped up issue, feigned emotion for a self-serving cause, and dramatic pronouncements divorced from truth are given far too much visibility impairing rational discourse.

Finally, there is far too much cynicism and despair in our society. The press, instead of offering sensible and practical answers, is adding to these dark emotions and feelings. It cannot be anybody's case that things in India have deteriorated over the past 55 years. We are better off than ever before, and there is overwhelming evidence that things are improving steadily. However, there is increasing gulf between our potential and its fulfilment on the one hand, and expectation and reality on the other. There is moral indignation and justifiable anger an account of this increasing gap. Such anger is the moral force which can accelerate progress and improve the human condition. If, however a sense of balance is not preserved while condemning what is wrong, there is a danger of throwing the baby with the bath water. The only antidote to the ills of a democracy is

more and better democracy. There are no knights in shining armour on white horses who can resolve our dilemmas. The media owe it to the country and themselves to promote a sense of optimism by focusing on a clear destination and showing a direction. Otherwise, there is a danger of media becoming a part of the problem, instead of being the solution.

There is much that is wrong with our society and polity today. There is also much that we can be proud of. There is a lot more we can accomplish. Most of our problems are not intractable – we do not have to rediscover fire or reinvent the wheel. We are fortunate to live in an era of spectacular scientific progress and human advancement. Avoidable suffering can be prevented better than ever before, and human potential can be fulfilled in its fullest measure in today's world. Many pioneers, thinkers, scholars, activists and practitioners showed the way we can make life more glorious and society more harmonious. The media need to focus on these solutions. Mere description of what is wrong, if overdone, reduces us to being masochists. We need strong willed, optimistic, determined, sensible pursuit of those collective goals which make life worthy. The media, print and electronic, have done a lot to make life tolerable, to keep hope alive, and to sustain human spirit in the face of monumental problems our society has faced over the decades. A reasonable level of prosperity, human dignity, realistic opportunities for vertical mobility, and confidence in the fairness and justice of our political and social institutions are well within reach of all of us. Our lives and work in the next few decades will be judged by one single yardstick – have we fulfilled this promise? The media have a pivotal role in this gigantic, exhilarating and eventually rewarding task. The anticipation and excitement with which we wait for the morning newspapers, and the pleasure with which we tune in our favorite channel are testimonies to this great potential of the media in our society. There is every reason to hope, and believe that our media will play an even more glorious role in fulfilling our potential as a nation, and promoting human happiness.

Jayaprakash Narayan

The author, a former civil servant is the National Coordinator of LOK SATTA movement. E-mail: loksatta@satyam.net.in; url: www.loksatta.org