

The role the media should be playing in India

by Markandey Katju

The author, who is chairman of the Press Council of India, analyses the shortcomings displayed by the Indian media and explains why the Press Council needs much stronger legal powers.

To understand the role which the media should be playing in India we have to first understand the historical context. India is presently passing through a transitional period from feudal agricultural society to modern industrial society. This is a very painful and agonising period in history. The old feudal society is being uprooted and torn apart, but the new, modern, industrial society has not yet been entirely established. Old values are crumbling, everything is in turmoil. We may recollect the line in Macbeth: “Fair is foul and foul is fair.” What was regarded as good in earlier times – eg the caste system – is regarded as bad today (at least by the enlightened section of society), and what used to be regarded as bad – eg love marriage – is acceptable today (at least to modern-minded persons).

One is reminded of Firaq Gorakhpuri’s Urdu couplet:

*“Har zarre par ek qaiyyat-e-neemshabi hai
Ai saaqi-e- dauraan yeh gunahon ki ghadi hai.”*

In a marvel of brevity this sher (couplet) reflects the transitional age. Zarra means particle, qaiyyat means condition, e means of, neem means half, and shab means night. So the first line in the couplet literally means:

“Every particle is in a condition of half night.”

Urdu poetry is often to be understood figuratively, not literally. So this line really means that (in the transitional age) everything is in flux, neither night nor day, neither the old order nor the new. Also, in the middle of the night if we get up we are dazed, in a state of mental confusion, and so are people in a transitional age.

In the second line, saaqi is the girl who fills the wine cup, but she is also the person to whom one can confide the innermost thoughts in one’s mind. The poet is imagining a girl, to whom he is describing the features of the transitional era. “*Yeh gunahon ki ghadi hai*”, ie it is the time of sin. In this transitional age it is a “*gunahon ki ghadi*” from both points of view. From the point of view of people of the old, feudal order it is a sin to marry according to your choice, and particularly outside one’s caste or religion, it is a sin to give education to women, it is a sin to

treat everyone as equal. At the same time, from the point of view of modern minded people the caste system is a sin, denying education to girls is a sin, and love marriage is quite acceptable. Thus old and new ideas are battling with each other in the transitional age.

It is the duty of all patriotic people, including the media, to help our society get over this transition period quickly and with less pain. The media has a very important role to play in this transition period, as it deals with ideas, not commodities. So by its very nature the media cannot be like an ordinary business.

If we study the history of Europe when it was passing through its transition period, ie from the 16th to the 19th centuries, we find that this was a terrible period in Europe, full of turbulence, turmoil, revolutions, wars, chaos, social churning and intellectual ferment. It was only after passing through this fire that modern society emerged in Europe. India is presently going through this fire.

Historically, the print media emerged in Europe as an organ of the people against feudal oppression. At that time the established organs were all in the hands of the feudal despotic authorities (the king, aristocrats, etc). Hence the people had to create new organs which could represent them. That is why the print media became known as the fourth estate. In Europe and America it represented the voice of the future, as contrasted to the established feudal organs which wanted to preserve the status quo. The media thus played an important role in transforming feudal Europe to modern Europe.

In the Age of Enlightenment in Europe the print media represented the voice of reason. Voltaire attacked religious bigotry and superstitions, and Rousseau attacked feudal despotism. Diderot said that “Man will be free when the last king is strangled with the entrails of the last priest”. Thomas Paine proclaimed the Rights of Man, and Junius (whose real name we still do not know) attacked the despotic George III and his ministers (see Will Durant’s *The Story of Civilization: Rousseau and Revolution*). Louis XVI, while in the Temple prison, saw books by Voltaire and

Rousseau in the prison library and said that these two persons had destroyed France. In fact what they had destroyed was not France but the feudal order. In the 19th century the famous writer Emile Zola in his article "J'accuse" accused the French Government of falsely imprisoning Captain Dreyfus in Devil's Island solely because he was a Jew.

SHORTCOMINGS OF THE MEDIA

I believe the Indian media should be playing a role similar to the progressive role played by the media in Europe during the transitional period in Europe. In other words, the Indian media should help our country get over the transition period and become a modern industrial state. This it can do by attacking backward, feudal ideas and practices (eg casteism, communalism and superstitions), and promoting modern scientific and rational ideas. But is it doing so?

In my opinion a large section of the Indian media (particularly the electronic media) does not serve the interest of the people – in fact some of it is positively anti-people. There are three major defects in the Indian media which I would like to highlight.

The media often diverts the attention of the people from real issues to non-issues

The real issues in India are socio-economic, the terrible poverty in which 80 per cent of our people are living, the massive unemployment, the price rise, lack of medical care, education, and backward social practices like honour killing and caste oppression, religious fundamentalism etc. Instead of devoting most of its coverage to these issues the media focuses on non-issues like film stars and their lives, fashion parades, pop music, disco dancing, astrology, cricket, reality shows, etc.

There can be no objection to the media providing entertainment to the people, provided this is not overdone. But if 90 per cent of its coverage is related to entertainment, and only 10 per cent to the real issues facing the nation (mentioned above) then there is something seriously wrong with the media. The whole question is of proportion. In the Indian media the sense of proportion has gone crazy. Entertainment received nine times the total coverage given to health, education, labour, agriculture and environment. Does a hungry or unemployed man want entertainment or food and a job?

To give an example, I switched on the TV yesterday and what did I see? Lady Gaga has come to India, Kareena Kapoor standing next to her statue in Madame Tussand's, tourism award being given to a business house, formula one car racing, etc. etc. What has all this to do with the problems of the people?

Many channels show cricket day in and day out. Cricket is really the opium of the Indian masses. The Roman

emperors used to say: "If you cannot give the people bread give them circuses". This is precisely the approach of the Indian establishment, duly supported by our media. Keep the people involved in cricket so that they forget their social and economic plight. What is important is not poverty or unemployment, or price rises, or farmers' suicides, or lack of housing or healthcare or education. What is important is whether India has beaten New Zealand (or better still Pakistan) in a cricket match, or whether Tendulkar or Yuvraj Singh have scored a century. The Indian media hyped up the cricket match at Mohali between India and Pakistan so much that it became a veritable Mahabharat War!

Enormous space is given by our media to business, and very little to social sectors like health and education. Most media correspondents give coverage to film stars, fashion parades, pop music, etc, but very few pay attention to the lives and problems of workers, farmers, students, sex workers, etc.

Recently *The Hindu* published that a quarter of a million farmers committed suicide in the last 15 years. A Lakme fashion week was covered by 512 accredited journalists. In that fashion week women were displaying cotton garments, while the men and women who grew that cotton were killing themselves an hour's flight from Nagpur in the Vidarbha region. Nobody told that story except one or two journalists locally.

Media coverage of education concentrates (if at all) on the elite colleges like the Indian Institutes of Technology, but there is very little coverage of the plight of the tens of thousands of primary schools, particularly in rural areas where education begins.

In Europe the displaced peasants got jobs in the factories which were being created by the Industrial Revolution. In India, on the other hand, industrial jobs are now hard to come by. Many mills have closed down and have become real estate. The job trend in manufacturing has seen a sharp decline over the last 15 years. For instance, in 1991 the steel company TISCO employed 85,000 workers in its steel plant which at that time manufactured 1 million tons of steel per annum. In 2005 it manufactured 5 million tons of steel but with only 44,000 workers. In mid 90s Bajaj was producing 1 million bicycles, scooters and motor cycles per annum with 24,000 workers. By 2004 it was producing 2.4 million units with 10,500 workers.

Where then do these millions of displaced peasants go? They go to cities where they became domestic servants, street hawkers, or even criminals. It is estimated that there are between 100,000 and 200,000 adolescent girls from Jharkhand working as maids in Delhi. Prostitution is rampant in all cities, due to abject poverty.

In the field of health care, it may be pointed out that the number of quacks in every city in India is several times the number of regular doctors. This is because the poor people

cannot afford to go to a regular doctor. In rural areas the condition is worse. The government doctors posted to primary health centres usually come for a day or two each month, and run their private nursing homes in the cities the rest of the time.

In “shining” India, the child malnutrition figures are the worst in the world. According to UN data, the percentage of under weight children below the age of 5 years in the poorest countries in the world is 25 per cent in Guinea Bissau, 27 per cent in Sierra Leone, 38 per cent in Ethiopia, and 47 per cent in India. The average family in India is consuming 100 kilograms of food grains less than it did 10 years ago (see P Sainath’s article “Slumdogs and Millionaires”).

All this is largely ignored by our media, which turns a Nelsonian eye to the harsh economic realities facing up to 80 per cent of our people, and instead concentrates on some Potempkin villages where all is glamour and show biz. Our media is largely like Queen Marie Antoinette, who when told that the people have no bread, said that they could eat cake.

The media often divides the people

Whenever a bomb blast takes place anywhere in India (whether in Bombay or Bangalore or Delhi or anywhere) within a few hours most TV channels start showing that an e-mail or SMS has been received from Indian Mujahideen or Jaish-e-Muhammad or Harkat-ul-Jihad-e-Islam claiming responsibility. The name will always be a Muslim name. Now an e-mail or SMS can be sent by any mischievous person who wants to create communal hatred. Why should they be shown on TV screens, and next day in print (the TV news at night often sets the agenda for the print media news next morning)? The subtle message being sent by showing this is that all Muslims are terrorists or bomb throwers. In this way the entire Muslim community in India is demonised, when the truth is that 99 people people of all communities are good, whether they are Hindus or Muslims or Sikhs or Christians, and of whatever caste, region or language.

India is broadly a country of immigrants. About 92 to 93 per cent people living in India today are descendants of immigrants, and not the original inhabitants (who are the pre-Dravidian tribals or adivasis, comprising of only 7–8% of our population). Because of this there is tremendous diversity in India – so many religions, castes, languages, ethnic groups, etc. Hence it is absolutely essential that if we wish to keep united and prosper, equal tolerance and respect must be shown to all communities living in India. Those who sow the seeds of discord, whether on religious or caste or lingual or regional lines, are really enemies of our people.

The senders of such e-mails and SMS messages are therefore enemies of India, who wish to sow the seeds of discord among us on religious lines. Why should the

media, wittingly or unwittingly, become abettors of this national crime?

The media promotes superstitions

As I have already mentioned, in this transitional period the media should help our people to move forward into the modern, scientific age. For this purpose the media should propagate rational and scientific ideas, but instead of doing so a large section of our media propagates superstitions of various kinds.

It is true that the intellectual level of the vast majority of Indians is very low, they are steeped in casteism, communalism, and superstitions. The question, however, is whether the media should try to lift up the intellectual level of our people by propagating rational and scientific ideas, or whether it should go down to that low level and seek to perpetuate it?

In Europe during the Age of Enlightenment the media (which was only the print medium at that time) sought to uplift the mental level of the people and change their mindset by propagating ideas of liberty, equality and fraternity and rational thinking. Voltaire attacked superstitions, and Dickens criticised the horrible conditions in jails, schools, orphanages, courts, etc. Should not our media be doing the same?

At one time courageous people like Raja Ram Mohan Roy wrote against sati, child marriage, purdah system etc (in his newspaper *Miratul Akhbar* and *Sambad Kaumudi*). Nikhil Chakraborty wrote about the horrors of the Bengal Famine of 1943. Munshi Premchand and Sharat Chandra Chattopadhyaya wrote against feudal practices and women’s oppression. Manto wrote about the horrors of Partition.

But what do we see in the media today?

Many TV channels show astrology. Astrology is not to be confused with astronomy. While astronomy is a science, astrology is pure superstition and humbug. Even a little common sense can tell us that there is no rational connection between the movements of the stars and planets, and whether a person will die at the age of 50 years or 80 years, or whether he will be a doctor or engineer or lawyer. No doubt most people in our country believe in astrology, but that is because their mental level is very low. The media should try to bring up that level, rather than to descend to it and perpetuate it.

Many channels mention and show the place where a Hindu god was born, where he lived, etc. Is this not spreading superstitions?

I am not saying that there are no good journalists at all in the media. There are many excellent journalists; P Sainath is one of them, whose name should be written in letters of gold in the history of Indian journalism. Had it not been for his highlighting of the farmers’ suicides in cer-

tain states the story (which was suppressed for several years) may never have been told. But such good journalists are the exceptions. The majority do not seem to have the desire to serve the public interest.

MEASURES TO MAKE THE MEDIA ADDRESS THE PUBLIC INTEREST

To remedy this defect in the media I have done two things. First, I propose to have regular meetings with the media (including electronic media) every two months or so. These will not be regular meetings of the entire Press Council, but informal get-togethers where we will discuss issues relating to the media and try to resolve them in the democratic way, that is, by discussion, consultation and dialogue. I believe 90 per cent of problems can be resolved in this way

Second, in extreme cases, where a section of the media proves incorrigible despite trying the democratic method mentioned above, harsher measures may be required. In this connection I have written to the Prime Minister requesting him to amend the Press Council Act by bringing the electronic media under the purview of the Press Council (which may be renamed the Media Council) and by giving it more teeth, eg the power to suspend

government advertisements, or in exceptional cases even the licence of the media houses for some time. This, however, will be resorted to only in extreme cases and after the democratic method has failed.

The objection may be raised that this is interfering with the freedom of the media. There is no freedom which is absolute. All freedoms are subject to reasonable restrictions, and are also coupled with responsibilities. In a democracy everyone is accountable to the people, and so is the media.

To sum up: the Indian media must now introspect and develop a sense of responsibility and maturity. That does not mean that it cannot be reformed. My belief is that 80 per cent of people who are doing wrong things can be made good people by patient persuasion, pointing out their errors, and gently leading them to the honourable path which the print media in Europe in the Age of Enlightenment was following. [Ⓐ]

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