

UNDERSTANDING INDIAN MEDIA

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Abstract-

Rousseau along with Voltaire, in their strife against feudalism and despotism, effectively used the media to help transform a feudal society into a modern one. In underdeveloped countries like India the media has a great responsibility to fight backward ideas such as communalism and support the population in their struggle against poverty and other social evils. With market forces at play and public investment in private companies, journalists found it sometimes lucrative to write only partially absolute stories of companies waiting to list on the stock exchanges. The need of ethical practices is important and of utmost urgency since the ever growing, ever evolving media of India will of no value to India's 1.2 billion people who may have more infotainment, sensationalism and political spin at their disposal but who will remain ignorant of the facts and analysis of events around them. In this paper, in the first section we will discuss the present state of affairs of Indian media, and in second section we will examine three inter-related aspects: freedom of speech and censorship, the press as a part of free trade and the role of press in a bourgeoisie democratic society, which Karl Marx, during his stint as a journalist dealt with in his writing, and which have a contemporary resonance in post-colonial India.

Keywords:

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;Corporate interest

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The word media signifies a mode or a carrier. Media reaches and addresses a large target group or audience. The word was first used in respect of books and newspapers and with the advent of technology; media now encompasses television, radio and the World Wide Web. In a globalized world, media becomes an essential tool of communication. With its extensive reach, media of today possesses the capacity in creating and moulding public opinion. Unfortunately, this capacity to have such a significant impact gives its handler sheer power to alter mind sets and since power is known to corrupt the one it possesses, ‘the science of the ideal human character’ or ethics can help create a system of checks and balances.

Media ethics is the application of the ethical norms in the industry. These norms are filtered through the parameters of philosophy as well as acceptable social and political assumptions. For instance, the journalistic responsibility of keeping the public informed about the wrongdoings of the state falls under the commitment of the press to a free and open democracy. The ethical code developed by the Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) shaped in the United States takes responsibility for reviewing standards and journalistic practices as a means of providing a framework to the working media professionals. According to the SPJ, the functions of the working media professionals include keeping the public informed and acting as a watchdog for abuse of power in public as well as private practices, and also maintaining a forum for free expression. The media professionals must actively seek out truth, independent of any form of influence, while avoiding harm. They must also be willing to be held accountable for their actions. Holding them accountable signifies having a clear idea of what their responsibility involves. The definition of “media ethics” can translate into the broader concept of “social responsibility”.

India has more than 70,000 newspapers in circulation as well as 1600 satellite channels and is the biggest newspaper market in the world with over 100 million copies sold per day. Many are controlled by for-profit corporations which extract revenue from advertising, subscriptions, and sale of various materials. But such robust growth comes at the cost of accuracy, journalistic ethics and probity.

Reporters without Borders, French based Non-Governmental Organization, ranked India 138 out of 179 countries in Press Freedom Index deeming it “Partly Free”¹

In the recent times the Indian media is often criticized for being controlled by businessmen, politicians, and bureaucrats, for biased, motivated reporting, selective information and sensationalized news.²

Former Supreme Court judge Markandey Katju, recently ranted at the journalists to educate themselves more, predictably provoking a sharp reaction from the media. Economist Amartya Sen joined the list of critics after being misquoted in the media a couple of times. There are at least two huge barriers, writes Dr. Sen in an article titled “The glory and the blemishes of the Indian news media”, to the quality of Indian media. One is about professional laxity which leads to inaccuracies. The other, he comments, is a class bias in the choice of what news to cover and what to ignore.³

The Centre for the Study of Developing Societies conducted a study in the year 2006 which revealed that almost 90% of decision makers in the English language print media and 79% in television were from the upper castes. There is hardly any representation of Dalits who comprise some 20% of India's population. This accounts for a serious lack of diversity in the Indian media industry.

Apart from this there exists a bigger problem. There have been growing concerns about trivialization of content and the increasing concentration of media ownership in the hands of large corporate groups. There is now the culture of non-stop breaking news which has led to the transformation of news information into a commodity.

The Indian Media has also been criticized recently for propagating paid news.

“A 71-page Press Council investigation named leading newspapers that had received money for publishing information disguised as news in favour of individuals, including senior politicians. Paranjoy Guha Thakurta, an independent journalist who was one of the investigators, says a

lobby of big publishers pushed the Press Council to water down the report. Even Vice President Hamid Ansari regretted the development, saying that the Press Council's inability to come out with the report was "a pointer to the problems of self-regulation and the culture of silence in the entire industry when it comes to self-criticism."⁴

Working Journalists should place people and their needs at the center of their stories, and allot better coverage to the rural sectors. A society that does not know itself, cannot cope. And yes, Indian states have shown to react and respond to the press, whenever the press has tried hard enough to be heard.

Answerability to the society is a duty that the Indian media is increasingly failing to deliver, but only when it does, we can hope for a meaningful development. G.N.Ray says, *"When the media is driven by no higher cause than maximization of profit, it can seldom serve the public interest. When corralled by corporate interest, journalism gets devastated"*⁵

All these necessitate a brief analysis of Indian media as a social institution and its working in a bourgeoisie democratic society.

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A Marxist theory of communication sees communication in relation to capitalism, placing in the foreground the analysis of capitalism, including the development of forces and relation of production, commodification and the creation of surplus value, social class divisions and struggles contradiction and oppositional movements'. Marxist media and communication studies are not only relevant today, but have been so far a long time because communication has always been embedded into structures of inequality in class societies.⁶

During the early phase of liberalization, there was a massive boom in the economic sector and media was part of it. Foreign investments were allowed, which resulted in media explosion. Indian media became globalized and liberalized. India adopted the New Economic Policy in 1991. This opened the floodgate for private investors to start business and media was a major part of it. This period also witnessed the boom in the field of electronic media, as private news channels, both English and vernacular started to emerge. Similarly foreign news channel which

were hitherto barred, started. During the post liberalization period certain visible changes started manifesting in the Indian media.⁷ In a word, media in India entered the realm of privatization, which has brought about gradual and crucial shifts in the structure of media house, editorial policies which are now to a large extent conditioned by the ownership and the manner of dissemination of news to masses.

A more interesting phenomenon of Indian media is the space created by competitive market forces, apart from this space is also created by the very diversity of media industry. There are different perceptions on the sources of threat to free speech in India. Sevanti Ninan feels that journalists treat corporate issues with caution, sometimes because of the advertising clout of the corporations, but often also because the journalists have internalized the neo liberal ideology. She also feels that the journalists may not see any of this as a free speech issue. Mahesh Vijapurkar says the threat to free speech in India comes mostly from the internal dynamics of the media industry. As per him, top bosses of television networks instructing their reporters to hype up news stories on lean news days and to give opinion with news, poses a greater threat to credibility of news media. He also believes that the state or the politicians do not pose much threat to free speech because the privately owned media provide a powerful platform for them, despite the occasional transgressions .It must be noted here that even if some journalists have bent to the commercial or political influences, the profession still provides for independent journalism.⁸

The journalists working at micro level have also kept the news flow from remote locations about both the activities of state and dissent groups. However they often bear the brunt of intolerance of dissent from the radical groups and repression of the state.

The commercial media are compelled to pay heed to public perceptions, if only to survive in a market, and it is this that facilitates reporting of state repressions and human rights violation. Though the mainstream commercial media provides spaces for the dissenting voices, the commercial content drowns out these voices, leading to a significant debate in recent times to rein in commercial interests in the media, the role and desirability of press laws and censorship to preserve democratic values. There was a major debate on mainstream media about the Indian

state's attempt to censor intermediaries providing online services. But a similar debate was not raised by either by the intellectual groups or by the mainstream media about the blanket censorship and blackout of information in the disturbed areas or insurgency areas.⁹

The newspapers and publications of the left parties are moulded on the 'agit-prop' mode and are largely perceived as tools of propaganda both by the general readers and the parties themselves. The parliamentary lefts are in deep ideological disagreement with radical lefts, waging a virtual war against the Indian state. This has also prevented them from opposing the censorship and draconian laws that are being used by bourgeoisie state.¹⁰ In the long run, this can severely shrink the democratic spaces that are already rapidly diminishing. The parliamentary left parties have been failed to initiate a meaningful theoretical debate on issues because of what Prabhat Patnaik in his incisive analysis calls 'empericisation'. He explains; *'what distinguishes a communist party is not that it does not soil its hands with mundane, everyday politics...but that its process of engagement even at this level is imbricated by its project of transcending capitalism informed by a consciousness of what Lukacs¹¹ had called the actuality of revolution...if this theory linking the here and now to the overall project of transcendence is absent from the praxis engaged in here and now then we have a process of empericisation of the movement.....*

In fact there has been a gap between the ideological position of Marx and the way it has so far been practiced in India .A need has emerged for the left parties of all hues to negotiate with and expand the scope of bourgeoisie freedom, much like Marx, and to create conditions for transcending capitalism and finally imperialism. If within the parties there is no scope for free speech and democratic debates, it would not carry conviction to assert rights against the state and capital when those agencies choose to limit them.

Freedom of the press is an important part of the ideological position of Marx and has been an essential instrument in Marxian praxis. Draper says *'For Marx, the fight for the democratic form of government-democratization in the state- was a leading edge of the socialist effort not its be-all and end-all but an integral part of it all.'* He further discusses what Marx refers to as *'Democratic Swindle'*. He calls the United States the model country of the democratic swindle,

*not because it was less democratic than others but for precisely the opposite reason. The fact that the US had developed the formal structure of the constitutional republic in the most democratic forms meant that its bourgeoisie likewise had to develop to its highest point the art of keeping the expression of popular opinion within channels satisfactory to its class interests...Marx analysed bourgeoisie democratic politics as an exercise in convincing a maximum of the people that they were participating in state power, by means of a minimum of concessions to democratic forms.'*¹²In India too the formal structure of democracy have been in place for long but the bourgeoisie and capital have successfully 'swindled' democracy in practice.

Another important aspect of Marxian discussion of democracy is his views on bureaucracy. He understood that a bureaucracy could own a state as its private property and that when it did, it would make a fetish out of internal hierarchy and external secrecy. The democratic right to change policy, and own the state becomes possible when the citizens and workers, without risking anything can command those who carry out technical and administrative functions, if not the bureaucracy tends to own the state as its private property . In other words, the bureaucracy acts as an instrument of 'democratic swindle'.¹³

In India, the constitutionally guaranteed right to free speech, the diversity of voices in media has provided spaces for challenging the prevailing bourgeoisie consensus primarily because political parties market their policies as 'public interest.'

On the other hand, the actual position of vast majority of people of India has made the emergence of radical politics inevitable in some parts, and sections of mainstream media misrepresent the reality, much as what Marx describes as the role of British press in war mongering during American civil war, while the people were opposed to it. The cartelization, the political ownership and the emergence of oligopolies in Indian media industry is a looming threat to free speech. In India today, though diversity of media industry aided by an independent judiciary and enabling legislations like the Right to Information act has made exposing abuse of political, bureaucratic and corporate power possible and the intervention of the media tend to evoke different responses from the state depending on the perceived power of media to influence

large segments of public opinion. When English language media with a large urban educated audience challenge the state, the state is compelled to respect the constitutional rights of the media to freedom of expression. In case of local media house working in the remote areas, the state cracks down heavily. Any transgression by the vernacular language media are severely suppressed by a slew of legislation that enable the state to suspend the fundamental rights. Many journalists have been shot dead in encounters. In fact over the years, this dual strategy has been adopted routinely by Indian state, giving India an image of vibrant democracy, while great abuse of human rights also occur in the large pockets of the country.

Conclusion

The media should take positive efforts to give the society a new direction and underline the success stories at grass root levels. A journalist had observed, “Why don’t stories on starvation and clean drinking water make it onto the front page of South Asian newspapers?” Another wrote about the “growing rift in his country between mass media and mass reality, a trend driven by increasing corporate control”. It is not that the journalists are ignorant of the calls of their duty, with the growth of capitalism; market dynamism became the aim of media professionals. Indian press during freedom struggle played a crucial role, which today it seems to have forgotten. Today most successful Indian papers are run on corporate line. Profits and advertising do not go along with socially relevant news information. The equation is sublime to understand: the more corporate a media organization becomes in its ownership and culture, the less space there is for the interest of the public. Media has the responsibility of playing a positive role in a constantly globalizing society¹² The Indian press needs to re-examine itself and provide seriousness to issues which are the need of the hour such as poverty, hunger and environmental degradation; it needs to focus on relevant issues and attract the participation of the society, being a major tool of mass communication, for the accomplishment of our developmental goals. In this situation, the parliamentary left and independent left have a greater role in challenging the tendencies of capitalistic state. The mainstream media in India have been a powerful presence in the political space of left politics, both as its critics and as its champions. The looming threat today is the consolidation of ownership, which till now has been diverse. Transcending the structural limitations of bourgeoisie democracy is task before the left. The press is the most potent

instrument for deepening democratic values and the wider and deeper engagement of the left in the critical segment of the media that are widely read, heard and seen is essential to this process.

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