

THE UNRESOLVED PARADOXES OF MASS MEDIA AND DISCONTENTS



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ABSTRACT

The impact and the influence of mass media on society are both deep and profound. It is a common sense that the role played by the so called fourth estate of democracy is crucial in the functioning of any democratic setup. In such a set up, both the visual and the print media like the television and the news papers have the social responsibility of safeguarding the public interest. Their responsible voice is crucial in directing the functioning of the government. In an ideal situation, the media shall voice the voiceless, the marginalized and the exploited section of the society. Issues which are central to the life of common people should be foregrounded in the media. Mistakes in the functioning of the elected government should be articulated by the media. In other words, the media acts as pressure group in shaping the consciousness of the government and the society.

KEYWORDS: Print Media, Radia Tapes, Fashion Week, Journalism, TV Channels.

INTRODUCTION

The famous German social theorist Jurgan Habermas in his celebrated book 'The Structural Transformation of Public Sphere', traced the emergence of public sphere and the responsibility of the media. The unwritten norms set for the media are-

equality, transparency, inclusivity and the rationality. The very functioning of the parliamentary democracy depends upon such time tested values. However as a result of privatization and globalization the above mentioned and other related values are

increasingly being compromised. If one understands the phenomenon of globalization in terms of market capitalism, then one understands the kind of representation that goes with the mass media. The onslaught of 24x7 news channels have added to the surrealistic and charged up atmosphere. In its enthusiasm to 'break' the news and garner TRP ratings the influential mass media is celebrating sensationalism, mediocrity and promoting page-3 journalistic values. The kind of representation that is done in such media ends up in strengthening the interest of the private and the corporate stakeholders. That is why Justice Markandey Katju rightly commented that 'the Indian media display certain defects. These should ideally be addressed and corrected in a democratic manner. But if the media prove incorrigible, harsh measures may be called for.' He lists the following as the main area of concern. 1. Twisting facts. 2 Issue of paid news. 3 Non-issues as real issues. 4 Tendency to brand. To elaborate this argument, Katju gives the e.g. of the coverage of Lakme India Fashion show. At Lakme India Fashion week event, there were 512 accredited journalists covering the event in which models were displaying cotton garments, while the men and women who grew the cotton (the farmers) were killing themselves at a distance of an hour's drive from Nagpur, in the Vidharba region. Except one or two journalists, nobody told that story and this is not the way a responsible media should behave. Thus, one can easily say that the issue of responsibility is conveniently forgotten by the corporate media.

DISCUSSION

The unholy alliance between media, corporate MNCs and political power is too obvious. The Neera Radia tapes convincingly

prove this. In Neera Radia scandal, highly reputed journalists were caught unethically brokering and promoting multinational companies. Therefore it is not very difficult to understand the deafening silence of NDTV 24@7 in narrating issues related to Radia tapes. This is because its senior political editor was caught safeguarding Tatas, thereby trespassing the moral foundation of journalism. Again, when P Sainath exposed the unholy paid news scandal the mainstream media was so silent about it. Though there was a talk of self regulation, the press guild of India has not done anything substantial so far. The deregulation of petroleum prices was narrated with low intensity. In all these cases the silence of the media was simply scandalous.

The main reason for this as P Sainath argues is the commercialization of the fourth estate. The unhindered commercialization has caused disconnect between mass media and mass reality in last twenty years or so in India. Since the very structure of the TV channels and news papers involves big business and corporate companies, there is a *structural compulsion to lie*. Media today has become a product. It is a part of entertainment industry. Advertisement is its soul. For entertainment industry, women are an object of market expansion. Therefore the media today does not see journalism in terms of news and information but it sees everything in terms of a corporate looking at revenue. Audience once again is nothing more than a product. The institutional structure of the media involves political managers, business managers and corporate executives. That is why mainstream media promotes news stories that serve the needs of the elite. News for them is just a story. As Noam Chomsky correctly argued consent

can be manufactured through coercion. There are all sorts of filtering devices to get rid of people who have different voices. That is why America never likes Al Jazeera tv.

Now I would like to analyze how women are narrated in popular TV serials and soap operas. In 30 minute duration TV serials only 15-18 minutes are devoted for the *story* part while the rest is reserved for advertisement. The things usually advertised include consumer and cosmetic products. First of all we should know that every serial is sponsored by one or the other corporate companies. Since most of cosmetic industry depends on middleclass women, the TV serials centre on urban families. In fact the story part is just a pretext. *Kyo ki kabhi saas* is a fine example. The setting, costume and life style of actor/actress complement and promote products which are being advertised. For e.g. the image of women character in TV serial that owns and drives a car wearing a modern sari is no different from the image of a model that appear in a promo. Like different advertisements we have different women characters in serials. As advertisement guru Alique Padamsee famously remarked that an idea of consumer goods is marketed first. The real product comes later! Urban women centric serials are a fertile ground for this. Thus the whole 30 minute soap opera is in fact a 30 minute advertisement tamasha. The so called story is an exact mirror of the advertisement. An important theatre activist K.V Akshara is right in calling TV as a tool of postmodern capital. The women characters that are represented on TV come from upper middle class, urban background. For advertisement industry urban viewership is so important. In no soap operas /serials poor uneducated working class women is represented. The absence of such characters is too obvious.

The poor can imitate and mimic the other. Economically strong women provide an opportunity for market expansion. Again, the image of women portrayed in popular films and serials conform to the rigid notion of women's identity. Either she is shown as a villain or else she is shown as meek, submissive wife. Such representations add and strengthen the existing stereotypes of women.

Visual media's love affair with sensational news and glitterati can be understood with the representation of Anna Hazare's crusade against corruption. Times now channel even claimed credit for Hazare's success. Though there can be no doubt about the personal integrity of Hazare, the IT people enjoyed live coverage of the news channels. The very people were conspicuously absent in supporting the civil activist Irome Sharmila's fight against the mighty power of the nation-state. For the sensational mainstream media she was just a footnote. The same news channels were quite eager in breaking the news of Aishwarya Roy becoming a mother. A personnel matter was made public thereby trivializing the issue. In Great Britain the Rupert Murdoch owned tabloid *The News of the World* had to close down because of the hacking scandal. Investigative journalism has become ugly and too judgmental. In New Delhi an honest lady teacher was attacked by a motivated cameraman showing her a prostitute. As a result the husband deserted her and she was suspended from the school where she was working. By the time police investigations conclusively proved her innocence her life was damaged beyond repair. The TV medium became a willing criminal partner in this horrendous saga. If we add caste/religious bias to this gender bias, mass media is as powerful as a terrorist. That is why

sensitive film makers like Girish Kasaravalli are making films which scrutinize the violence created by the media. His film *Ondu Koley Sutta* is a case in point. In this narrative, the women protagonist is unnecessarily dragged into a murder controversy and her personal life is damaged beyond repair. The whole narrative questions the practice of sensational page 3 journalism which has neither sensitivity nor sensibility towards human relationships.

CONCLUSION

This kind of embedded journalism is taking away the democratic space of the common people. By repetition of successive images media is creating visual amnesia. We have lost the capacity to remember what has happened in the last few months because of such repetition of devalued images. As post modernists would argue, there will be only images and no reality! In the name of news all sorts of garbage is entering the drawing room. Twisted, sanitized news is dished out to unsuspecting viewers. The priority of kannada news channels is shocking to say the least. Most of the scams of leading politicians of Karnataka have been exposed by individuals rather than by the media. Visual media is quite busy in airing the falsehood of astrologers and budi babas. So their priority was elsewhere.

Of course it can be argued that there are many positive aspects of the mass media. It is because of responsible media that many politicians are behind bars. Nobody is taking away the credit from it. But at the same time its association with market capital and trivialization is becoming too violent.

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