

Research Article

Democratic India and Social Responsibility of Mass Media

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ABSTRACT

India has the largest democracy in the world and media has a powerful presence in the country. The role of media in a democratic system has been widely debated. In the recent times, Indian media has been subject to a lot of criticism for the manner in which they have disregarded their obligation to social responsibility. Dangerous business practices in the field of media have affected the fabric of Indian democracy. Big industrial conglomerates in the business of media have threatened the existence of pluralistic view points. Post liberalisation, transnational media organisations have spread their wings in the Indian market with their own global interests. This has happened at the cost of an Indian media, which was initially thought to be an agent of ushering in social change through developmental programmes directed at the non-privileged and marginalised sections of the society. Though media has at times successfully played the role of a watchdog of the government functionaries and has also aided in participatory communication, a lot still needs to be done.

Keywords: media, social responsibility, democracy, Indian media, Indian democracy.

INTRODUCTION

Democracy in general terms is understood to be a form of government, which is subject to popular sovereignty. It is essentially a rule by the people that is in contrast to monarchies or aristocracies. One of the crowning glories of the democratic system is the freedom of expression and the space that is provided to views from different sections of the society. A democratic system can run to its utmost potential when there is wide participation on the part the general mass, which is not possible without people getting informed about various issues. Reliable information resources are an important constituent of any democratic society (Habermas 2006).

This is where media steps in, Mass media in its different forms has influenced human life in the present century. They have primarily provided information and entertainment to people across countries. Print media, being the

leader over a considerable period of time has now got competition from Television, which is reshaping many of the social responses. Radio apart from providing news and views has also developed a flair for entertainment, thereby getting a lot of acceptance. There is also the new media with Internet being its flag bearer. Internet has indeed made it possible to disseminate information and ideas in real time across the globe. However, among all these developments there is a cause of concern. Is media really fulfilling its social responsibility? Is a booming global mass media posing threats to the democratic way of thinking? In it posing challenges to a country like India where media has a greater role to play rather than merely providing information and entertainment?

Democracy, Media and the Public Sphere

Informing the citizens about the developments in the society and helping them to make informed choices,

media make democracy to function in its true spirit. It also keeps the elected representatives accountable to those who elected them by highlighting whether they have fulfilled their wishes for which they were elected and whether they have stuck to their oaths of office. Media to operate in an ideal democratic framework needs to be free from governmental and private control. It needs to have complete editorial independence to pursue public interests. There is also the necessity to create platforms for diverse mediums and credible voices for democracy to thrive (Parceiro 1999). It has already been discussed that media has been regarded as the fourth estate in democracy. Democracy provides the space for alternative ideas to debate and arrive at conclusions for the betterment of society. The publicly agreed norms are weighed over that of actions on the part of economic organisations and political institutions (Barnett 2004). This is close in essence to the concept of public sphere where rational public debate and discourse is given importance. Individuals can freely discuss issues of common concern (Tsekeris 2008). Media plays one of the crucial roles behind the formation of public sphere (Panikkar 2004). However, Barnett is of the opinion that in modern times the true sense of public sphere is getting eroded with the media of public debate getting transformed to mediums for expressing particular interests rather than general interests, which are universally accepted. This signifies that public sphere which is essential for a vibrant democracy can actually be channelised to serve vested interests rather than public good.

Media and Social Responsibility: The Normative Argument

The normative view of the press argues that the conduct of the media has to take into account public interests. The main public interest criterions that the media need to consider include freedom of publication, plurality in media ownership, diversity in information, culture and opinion, support for the democratic political system, support for public order and security of the state, universal reach, quality of information and culture disseminated to the public, respect for human rights and avoiding harm to individuals and the society (McQuail 2005). The social responsibilities expected from media in the public sphere were deeply grounded with the acceptance of media as the fourth estate, a term coined by Edmund Burke in England. With the formation of

the 1947 Commission on the Freedom of the Press, the social responsibility of media became a strong debating point. It was formed in the wake of rampant commercialisation and sensationalism in the American press and its dangerous trend towards monopolistic practices. The report of the Hutchins Commission, as it was called, was path breaking on its take on social responsibility and the expected journalistic standards on the part of the press. The theory of social responsibility that came out of this commission was backed by certain principles, which included media ownership is a public trust and media has certain obligations to society; news media should be fair, objective, relevant and truthful; there should be freedom of the press but there is also a need for self-regulation; it should adhere to the professional code of conduct and ethics and government may have a role to play if under certain circumstances public interest is hampered (McQuail 2005).

Media and Indian Democracy

The political system in India is close in spirit to the model of liberal democracy. In the constitution of India the power of the legislature, executive and judiciary have been thoroughly demarcated. The party system in operation is a competitive one with flexibility of roles of government and opposition. There is also freedom of the press, of criticism and of assembly (Pelinka 2003). Indian democracy has always attracted attention worldwide and has made scholars to ponder over the secret of its success amidst considerable odds. In India, diversity is almost everywhere and it is not a developed nation. The problems of poverty and inequality in distribution of income have been constant irritants. Nevertheless, till today democracy has survived in the country. The role of media in India, the largest democracy of the world, is different from merely disseminating information and entertainment. Educating the masses for their social upliftment needs to be in its ambit as well. In a country where there is large-scale poverty, unemployment and underdevelopment media has a responsibility towards developmental journalism. It has a role to play behind formation of public opinion, which can force the political parties to address the core issues haunting the country's progress. However, the public opinion can be manipulated by vested interests to serve their own goals (Corneo 2005). Media can conceal facts and project doctored ideas to influence the electorate and

thereby the voting outcome. Values like objectivity and truthfulness in presentation of news and ideas can be totally done away with.

In India, public service broadcasting was given much importance after independence. It was used as a weapon of social change. AIR (All India Radio) and Doordarshan, the public service broadcasters, in the country had the responsibility of providing educational programmes apart from information and entertainment. However, it needs to be taken note of that the public service broadcasting system in the country was closely identified with the state. A monopolistic media structure under state control has the threat of becoming the mouthpiece of the ruling elite. The scenario was bound to change with the opening up of Indian economy in a bid to integrate with the global system. It signalled the emergence of a competitive market in the field of media with public service broadcasters getting challenges from private entities. This, however, had the seeds of a new problem of ownership.

Ownership pattern of media across the globe and in India is a cause for concern. There are big corporate houses who own newspapers and television networks. A higher concentration of ownership increases the risk of captured media (Corneo 2005). Media independence in such a scenario gives way to safeguarding the interest of the owners who may not serve social responsibilities. The space for plurality of ideas is eroded sending ominous signals for democracy. Bogart (1995) opines that in many democratic countries, media ownership has reached dangerous levels of concentration. He has cited the examples of News Corporation's (owned by Rupert Murdoch) 37% share in United Kingdom's national newspaper circulation and Silvio Berlusconi's ownership of top three commercial television channels, three pay TV channels and various newspapers and magazine in Italy, which act as his political mouthpieces. Transnational powerful media organisations are in operation in India post liberalisation. These are big multinational corporations who own a chunk of the mass media market ranging from newspapers, television, radio, book publishing to music industry. Five of world's largest media conglomerates include General Electric, Walt Disney, News Corporation, Time Warner and Viacom and CBS. In India, there are big players like the Times Group and ABP who rule the roost in the media

arena. In a bid to open up the Indian market, 26% foreign direct investment (FDI) has been allowed in news publication and 74% has been allowed in non-news segments by the Government. 100% FDI is available in the film industry. 100% FDI is also allowed in television software production subject to certain government norms. Cable networks and FM Radio networks have FDI limits of 49% and 20%, respectively (FICCI and PwC, 2006). Research undertaken by PricewaterhouseCoopers has shown the FDI investment trend across mass media in India. Virgin Media Asia has a holding in HT media's foray into FM radio. Financial Times (Pearson Group) has an arrangement with Business Standard; AmeriCorpsVentures, Mauritius has a stake in Nimbus Communications, which deal in television and films and Reuters UK has equity sharing with Times Global Broadcasting, the Indian entity. Therefore, across mass media options have opened up for availability of transnational homogeneous content. The growth of media conglomerates and their powerful presence has raised fears of manipulation of ideas by a powerful few detrimental to the democratic fabric. The corporate giants have also engaged in severe competition among themselves dishing out news and content, which is primarily dominated by sensationalisation, sleaze and glitz to capture wider markets. The disturbing trend that has emerged in the present media scenario is the use of media in the battle between rival political groups (Coronel 2003). In fact, this new phenomenon is in operation in India with newspapers and news channels taking sides while presenting facts. The same event can be presented in two contrasting manners in two newspapers or two television channels. Coronel argues that promotion of hate speech in place of constructive debate and creating an atmosphere of suspicion rather than social trust has the danger of making people cynical about the democratic setup leading to its breakdown.

While discussing the dangers associated with the developments in media, it needs to be said that media in India has also undertaken roles, which have strengthened democracy. The media as a watchdog of the democratic system has unearthed its various shortcomings. Investigative reporting in print and television media has helped in exposing large-scale corruptions, which have robbed the nation. The Commonwealth Games Scam, the Adarsh Housing Society Scam, Cash for Vote Scam and

the Bofors Scam are the highpoints of the Indian media. Across newspapers and television channel voices have been raised when the bureaucracy, judiciary or other public functionary have crossed the laxman rekha. There have also been initiatives to promote community media for the citizens to air their concerns. This is a significant leap towards alternative media usage, which is distant from the dominant structure. Here the importance lies more in participatory communication right from the grassroots rather than communication, which flows top down. Various television channels have also given the space for ordinary citizens to air their views in the form of citizen journalists thereby promoting democratic participation. Newspapers have educated the masses by informing them of the developments in the field of science and technology. They have also expressed strong views against prejudices, which harm the society. Much developmental news have also been aired through the medium of radio. Its comparative low cost and wide acceptance among poorer sections have made it a potent tool for expressing ideas beneficial to the public.

Internet, a relatively newer entrant in the field of mass media, has proved to be more democratic than newspaper and television (Coronel 2003). Internet has provided the opportunity for citizens who are conversant with the medium to express their views about a number of issues. In many cases, groups have been formed by likeminded people who discuss and debate over a number of decisions on the part of the government and seek new ideas for way ahead. The power of the internet can be easily judged from the developments in Egypt in recent times. Social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter were used to garner support against the regime of President Hosni Mubarak (Kuwait Times, 2010). Internet has been used by various public service organisations and NGOs to inform people about their objectives and also to make them aware of various initiatives on the part of the government as well as non-government organisations for social upliftment. In internet, the barrier to communication is minimal, which helps in the formation of a participative environment. There is also greater empowerment of the users through higher level of interactivity and flexibility in choice of media outlets. The potential of the medium lies in its ability to be more personalised by offering user-created content (Flew 2009). Nevertheless, there

is the threat of advertising revenues influencing media outputs. Those who control considerable wealth have the opportunity to sway public opinion in their favour with the help of mass media. In the 2G scam, the Radio Tapes controversy brought in focus the journalist, politician and industrial conglomerate nexus (Jebaraj 2010). Developments like these are a threat to democracy and undermine the media fraternity. Advertisements in newspapers, television, radio and, at times, the internet have become a part of the present election campaigns. Candidates with better funds have the edge over others in being voted to office because they can buy newspaper space and considerable air time (Coronel 2003).

Conclusion

In Indian, democracy media has a responsibility that is deeply associated with the socioeconomic conditions. The present scenario is not quite encouraging and certain areas need to be addressed. Media organisations, whether in print, audio visual, radio or web, have to be more accountable to the general public. It should be monitored that professional integrity and ethical standards are not sacrificed for sensational practices. The freedom of press in the country is a blessing for the people. However, this blessing can go terribly wrong when manipulations set in. The self-regulatory mechanism across media organisations need to be strong enough to stop anomalies whenever they occur. Agencies like Press Council of India need to be vigilant to stem the rot. Big media conglomerates are a serious threat. To counter this problem, pluralistic media organisations that are financially viable need to be encouraged. Community participation is a goal that the media should strive for in a country like India.

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