

Influence of Commercialism on the Contents of the Indian Media: An Enquiry

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ABSTRACT

No one will engage in a dispute that the media have to make profits for survival. Indian media are no exception in this regard. On one hand, it is expected that a media will be sustainable from the stand point of commerce and on the other, follow the path of the interest of commerce considering the profiteering motif only would be unsound and thoughtless for it. It indicates media's bypassing of the social responsibility and commitment to the society. The objectives of the owners of media are to run media as trade and exercise it for satisfying the interests of their other merchandizes and upholding the culture of spirit of trade and commerce. The aims and objectives of this Paper are to enquire about how commercialism has affected the contents of the media in India. The Paper has followed the Observational and Analytical Method for this enquiry. The misleading trend can be reversed by strengthening the institution of internal ombudsman, the internal mechanism of editorial freedom, formulating a code of conduct for journalists from within the profession and taking initiative to ensure that the guidelines of the Press Council of India are adhered to. Above all, journalists should always remember that media is a public utility service and they are unofficial public servants. Similarly, the fact that the primary objective of media is service and not profit should not be forgotten by the media management. While media should be economically viable, the

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profit motive should not blind owners and proprietors of the media to perform their role of the social accountability. Therefore, the success of a media-outlet is determined by a correct blending of economic interests, social commitments and professional integrity.

KEYWORDS: Influence, Commercialism, Contents, Indian, Media, Enquiry

INTRODUCTION

No one will engage in a dispute that media will be profitable for its survival. Besides, it has to reshape maintaining the balance with the advent of modern technicalities. Indian media are no exception in this regard. On one hand, it is expected that a media will be sustainable from the stand point of commerce and on the other, follow the path of the interest of commerce considering the profiteering motif only would be unsound and thoughtless for it. It indicates media's bypassing of the social responsibility and commitment to the society. Therefore, the success of a media-outlet is determined by a correct blending of economic interests, social commitments and professional integrity. The expenditure of setting up of a media outlet is increasing day by day. The media sector of the country witnesses the tough fight among various players. Besides, the ownership of the media is gradually confining within a few influential people. The objectives of the owners of media are to run media as trade and exercise it for satisfying the interests of their other merchandizes and upholding the culture of spirit of trade and commerce.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The aims and objectives of this Paper are to enquire about how commercialism has affected the contents of the media in India.

METHODOLOGY

The Paper has followed the Observational and Analytical Method for this enquiry.

Research Questions:

The Paper has raised the following research questions for the study of this enquiry.

1. Which department regulates what will encash the newspaper as far as news is concerned?

2. What are the effects of the dependency of the private television news channels on advertising revenue?
3. Has a large section of media in India witnessed bypassing and depreciating of editorial obligations to sub serve the goals of advertisers and marketers?
4. Are the problems of common mass or of the downtrodden, marginalized people matters of serious concern at all for a corporate media?
5. Has a large section of the mainstream media in the country, directed absolutely by the commercial interests, forgetting the social commitment as its elementary role?
6. Has there been a near collapse of public confidence in certain sectors of the media in the country which pursues commercial values? Have market forces influenced the trustworthiness of the media and done tremendous loss?

MEDIA ESPECIALLY NEWSPAPERS IN INDIA IN PRE-INDEPENDENCE ERA

In pre-independence era, the country witnessed two types of newspapers, journals and magazines. One kind was the supporter of foreign rule and the other was the advocators of the needs and aspirations of the people of the country. Naturally, this section of the newspapers pointed out injustice and oppression faced by the countrymen during the colonial and imperial rule. Draconian laws and other repressive measures were put in action to muzzle the voice of the newspapers. The owners, publishers, editors of the anti-colonial, anti-imperialist press were actively involved in the freedom movement of the country in several ways. Though the hindrances created by administration and technological limitations made the number of copies published or the number of newspapers limited but the effect of this nationalist press was profound, encouraging and inspirational.

MEDIA IN INDIA IN POST-INDEPENDENCE ERA

The initial years after attaining freedom, the press in India exhibited its promise to authenticity and transparency. The ownership of some newspapers transferred from the founders and editors-publishers to commercial concerns during the early years of post-independence. During those days, the editorial policies were determined by the editors. That was the time of the great editors, who dedicated themselves in setting the standards of impartiality and freedom. Objectivity and liberty were an undivided part of the print media.

As time passes, the burgeoning industry of advertising established its firm footing gradually. It poured into newspapers and magazines hefty amount of money. Today, the scenario has changed completely. Nowadays, some newspapers can circulate their copies even without cost. During the era of pre-independence, the chief revenue of the newspaper came from its sale but now arises from advertising and its amount reaches even crores of rupees daily.

A section of Critics is of opinion that marketing division is getting more priority than the editorial department as far as a section of the press is concerned. It has been observed that in some newspapers, the marketing department regulates and tells the last word about the selling of a newspaper in terms of news and how it will implement it.

Initially Television in India was under Government control but gradually it has transferred into private sectors. An exponential growth has been observed as far as the different language news channels are concerned. Private television news channels are not merely news providers. These are entirely dependent on advertising revenue. Advertisers have invested hefty amount of money into those channels based on the high T.R.P. rating. Critics have advocated that this shows dual effects. On the one hand, some news channels have bypassed the truth and on the other hand, others have taken shelter to sensationalism.

Change in the nature of ownership is a characteristic feature of Indian media in post-independence era. A television news channel or a newspaper is now viewed as a profit-making business where advertising ensures the profitability. The number of those newspapers or television news channels which view the 'packaging of news' as an essential ingredient to increase more profit appears as growing gradually. Though profit appears as a motive in the media sector, it should not be the sole criterion as far as the news and views are concerned before the nation. The rising levels of several types of content in the print and audio-visual media are a matter of concern.¹

Gandhiji, a great journalist, considered journalism as a way to serve the people. According to him, the sole aim of journalism should be service. There is widespread concern nowadays over the rising impact of market forces on media. Besides, allegations have arisen that journalism has appeared no longer a social service. In this perspective, Gandhiji's observation is significant. According to him, it is often seen that newspapers publish any matter just to fill

up the space. Most newspapers have their eyes on profits...some western newspapers are so full of rubbish that it will be a guilt even to come in contact with them.²

MEDIA'S FOCUS FROM REAL ISSUES TO NON-ISSUES

Efforts are being made to present news with a blend of entertainment and to hunt for 'Breaking News' and ratings have pull down credibility. Ultimately serious journalism faces trouble. In fact, one can see early signs of this when news gets sensational. Even the responsible and staid mainstream newspapers, regarded as one of the best across the globe, are showing signs of succumbing to this temptation.

The country has witnessed that the Kareena-Saif or the Rekha-Jaya Bachchan stories have been better headline news. Why do the media not instead produce documentaries on the effects of water shortage in the country, e-waste, child labour, oppression of women etc. that will make us a better civil society? What do the audiences view on television channels nowadays? They exhibit film stars, pop music, disco and fashion parades (often with scantily clad young women) or astrology ranging from one channel to another. Is it not an inhumane mockery and insult to the downtrodden, poor people of the country that so much time and money are being spent on these useless things? A large section of media of the country today is not performing their role with responsibility and not serving the general public in their struggle against impoverishment, unemployment and other social evils. What will be the true role of the media? This is an issue of paramount significance to Indian democracy at present. Some television channels show celebrity journalism through the whole day round the clock.

The Roman Emperors used to say if you cannot give the people bread, give them circus. In a nutshell, this is the approach of a section of media. What is important is not the price hike of the daily essential commodities or unemployment or impoverishment or lack of infrastructure of housing in the country or price hike of life saving medicines. What is significant is whether one team has beaten another in T-20 Cricket or whether a batsman has scored a century. Is this not sheer escapism? The role of the media in this today must be to help the people in their struggle against impoverishment, unemployment and other social evils and to build the country a modern, powerful and industrially developed realm.

The media have a social accountability also to monitor that the news being disseminated is true and satisfies the interest of the common mass. The media should maintain a safe distance from any sort of sensationalisation and yellow journalism. Only then media will earn the respect of the audience and will perform the proper role in a democracy. Allegations have been raised that a large section of media often upheld non-issues bypassing the real issues. Instead of focusing on these real issues, the media often try to arrest the attention of the people towards non-issues. For example, if the wife of a film actor or an actress has become pregnant, a section of media appears as curious whether she will give birth to a single child or to twins and so on. Are these the real issues at all?

Allegations have also been raised that a section of Indian media considers only about its T.R.P ratings and business. They are catering tickling entertainment in the name of covering news. Media claim special privileges time to time. In the democracy of India, it appears as the fourth pillar. Obviously the country expects some obligations and commitment from the media. But the sad picture and the bitter reality are that the social conscience and the commitment for the sake of public interest have been replaced by absolute commercialization of a considerable section of the media especially over the last two decades. For example, when Rekha took oath in the Rajya Sabha, the cameras of various television channels kept focusing on Jaya Bachchan's facial expressions. Likewise went the intros of news stories on the first pages of majority of the national dailies of the following day. Even the copies have been written and pad up with the shameless gossip about Amitabh Bachchan and Rekha to make the stories spicier and juicier. Is it an instance of social accountability of media which is expected from the fourth estate in this vast developing country? No doubt, Rekha's swearing-in makes news. But is this the proper way to cover the event?

Earlier, a large section of the media arrested the attention of its audience by providing the story of US talk-show host Oprah Winfrey. The entire Sunny Leone episode was hyped up. The story of birth of Betty B enjoyed similar hype. Are any of these events' real issues at all? According to the Critics, the real issues of the country are crisis in Indian agriculture, problem and crisis in public health and education system etc. A section of Critics is of opinion that while the mothers dying at childbirth and the children facing death at their infants in the country, a

large section of media has made the common people engaged in the non-issues, viewing them the 'Silsilas' of the Rajya Sabha.

In several occasions, a section of Indian media just parrots the opinions of the West. In many cases, a section of the Indian media blindly imitates their Western counter part. It is time for that section of the media to stop treating the common people of the country as idiots who can be fed anything trash. It is the time that the media should make the common mass more aware about the country, its democratic ethos and system and the surrounding world by providing the people the news and information that really matters.

NEGATIVE TRENDS

The negative trends of sensationalism, tabloidization, trivialization, celebrity-worship and so forth are dominant in the large section of Indian news media. Raising voices in favour of freedom without accepting obligations and social accountability would weaken the position of the media in society.³ The country witnesses war regarding price and noxious trend of the market aimed at increasing gradually the share of market and destroying the competition in the press sector. Besides, allegations have raised about the tendencies of manipulation of news, special interest-oriented analysis and information; dominance of advertising and marketing over editorial functions and an increasing trend to sensationalize, and trivialize. Trend of hyper-commercialization tackling the news and the print and electronic media more or less like any other commodity or 'product' is being noticed.⁴

JOURNALISM: A GREAT MISSION

The media's endeavours will have a positive impact on the formulation of policy for the rural economic sector and on its proper application. Besides, informing people about the various schemes and policies of the Government Journalists, especially those with the vernacular media, perform a vital role in the development of the downtrodden and backward sections and in showcasing the issues and crisis of rural India. A responsible and responsive media have a commitment to create awareness amongst the people by catering news and information. This is a necessity for the smooth functioning of a democratic structure and for the cause of good governance. The Journalists, Correspondents, Reporters should participate

in this process with utmost care and sincerity by means of their coverage and factual reporting.

Today's media, especially the mainstream uphold the issues of the urban life and the lifestyles of the exuberant and wealthy. The reflection of inclination towards urbanity is noticed in various ways ranging from print to audio-visual media. For such a corporate driven market-controlled media, the problems, issues and the crisis of the common people or of the downtrodden are not matters of serious concern at all. It is noticed that the Marketing Managers decide the policy of many media today instead of the Editors. It is a matter of deep concern. Only the silver line appears when the sensitive and committed journalists work relentlessly for the sake of public interest. Mr. P. Sainath, the Rural Affairs Editor of 'The Hindu', commented that leading media in this country should have a Rural Affairs section covering the problems faced by the unconsidered people residing in those areas.

NEED FOR CULTURAL STRUGGLE

India as a country needs to be industrialized and progressive. Then the country can earn its due respect across the globe. To achieve this aim and objective, the patriotic, modern-minded intelligentsia of the country should fight a powerful cultural struggle. This cultural struggle should be fought against the feudal and backward ideas such as casteism and communalism. Modern, progressive, scientific ideas should be generated among the common people. Media have a significant role in this struggle. But are they sincere about discharging their duties?⁵

A section of the Critics is of opinion that there is hardly a relationship between the media and the mass reality today in the country. The Rural Affairs Editor of 'The Hindu' and Magsaysay Award Winner Journalist P. Sainath delivered a Lecture in the Speaker's Lecture Series in Parliament on 6th September, 2007. In his address, he commented that rural India where more than 70 per cent of the people living is in the midst of the worst agrarian crisis in four decades and this is the reality in the country. Predacious commercialization of the rural area and transfer of all human values to exchange values have created a severe crisis showing damage or destruction of millions of livelihoods. As a consequence, lakhs of peasants have committed suicide and millions of people have compelled to migrate from the rural areas to urban for searching of jobs which are not available there. This hapless and helpless people's status lie neither 'worker' nor 'farmer'. A majority of them have turned as domestic laborers

even criminals. By means of corporate farming, farming is taken out from the hands of peasants and put in the hands of corporates. This process is not done through guns, tanks, bulldozers and lathis rather fixing the high cost of raw materials like seed, fertilizer, power and uneconomical prices making farming unviable for the millions of small peasants, marginal farmers. It is a stark reality that in the list of dollar billionaires India's ranking is fourth but the same country appears 126th position as far as human development indices are concerned. National Sample Survey says that Rs.503 is the average monthly per capita expenditure of an Indian farm household. Out of that amount, 55 per cent is spent on food, 18 per cent on fuel, clothing and footwear leaving little for education or health.⁶

MASS MEDIA AND MASS REALITY

The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) shows in one of its Report that from 1995-97 to 1999-2001, several millions of hunger-bit people were added from India than the remaining world taken collectively. An average rural based family now consumes noticeably less than what it was consuming previously. Compulsion has doubled over the past decade. The cost of cultivation has increased many times and income from farming has collapsed leading to peasant's suicides. The irony is while 512 accredited Journalists covered the 'Lakme India Fashion Week', only six Journalists were available to cover the suicides in Vidharbha. The models were displaying cotton garments in that Fashion Show where the men and women who grew the cotton were killing themselves an hour away by flight from Nagpur. No one covered that story except one or two local Journalists.⁷

Is this a proper and responsible way for the media to perform its due duty? Can the media turn a Nelson's eye to the stark economic realities that majority of the people of the country face and concentrate on the fashion show where all is glamour and show biz? Allegations have surfaced that are not the considerable section of Indian media appearing like Queen Marie Antoinette who, when told that the people did not have bread, said they could eat cake? No doubt, sometimes the media have arrested the attention of the audiences towards peasant's suicides in different states, the unnatural price hike of essential commodities and so on. But such coverage constitutes merely 5 to 10 per cent of the total coverage. The lion's share of coverage goes to cricket, film stars, pop music, fashion parades, astrology and so on. Is this

not actually trying to divert the attention of the common mass from the real issues to non-issues?⁸

OBSERVATION AND FINDINGS

The dual impact of cost and commercial competition has led to an undesirable development i.e. national and international monopoly over the media which poses a serious threat to the proper performance and smooth functioning of journalism. Critics argue that since a large section of the mainstream media in India are dominated by a profiteering motive sidelining all other parameters, instead of the Editors and the Journalists, the Business Managers have the right to say the last word. The media are considered nowadays as a saleable commodity like any other and the same commercial practices and values are practised to capture the market. The importance and stress are on design and packaging, sensational headlines and slugs, obscenity, page 3 journalism, celeb- journalism and highlighting non-issues. Allegations have risen that in the process, the media forget its role as a social service institution and its social responsibility. It has thus become lie in the grip of the proprietors, advertisers and the lobbying interests ranging from economic to foreign interests, gradually depreciating the editorial section and its role. Unfortunately, in India today, a large portion of the mainstream media is directed purely on commercial lines and business ethos forgetting that service to the society becomes its primary aim.

In fact, media is a strange business. It is a business whose chief employees, journalists, reporters and correspondents are invested in the notion that their business is not business at all. Does journalism mean mere writing copies, subbing a story, writing a cue and dispatch or piece to camera? No. In fact, the journalists answer to a far higher and loftier calling. Mr. Donald Graham wrote an op-ed in 'Washington Post' warning that Wall Street's single-minded focus on maximizing profits will kill journalism. It was an astonishing piece, considering that Mr. Graham is a businessman himself, and presumably is as interested in profits as any other businessman. But for long years, his family, the Sulzbergers and the Bancrofts all saw their newspapers more as public trusts than business, and this vision provided the quality press with security.⁹

Here, it can be referred back relevantly some of the observations and recommendations of the Second Press Commission (P. 145-146):

1. The profession of journalism is essentially a public trust. "The journalist who betrays his trust is more blameworthy than a dishonest tradesman. Journalism, as the basis of the 'newspaper industry' holds a special position because its raw material is really the public mind and it trades chiefly in moral values."
2. "The newspaper industry in the big business hands becomes involuntarily the cultural arm of other business and industries, and takes a vested interest in maintaining the existing socio-economic system. The newspapers controlled by them may be selective in their presentation of news and views in return for benefits conferred in respect of their business interests..."¹⁰

Without the readers, listeners and viewers the media have no existence. It is, therefore, the needs and interest of the audience's susceptibilities and sensitivities, which have to be catered to by the media. Those who practise commercial norms and ethics cannot claim moral authority to discipline others. The media have therefore, first to decide whether it exists to exercise the right of free speech and expression or of trade and business. To equate the media business with other business, merely because some profits are necessary to run it, is highly improper and goes against the very aims and objectives of the media.

N. Ram, the former Editor-in-Chief, 'The Hindu', pronounced an echoed note of caution in a presentation on "Media Outlook 2011" at a Plenary Session of the Conclave on "Opportunity India" held in Singapore in 2007. Addressing the session exhibiting the country's outlook through the prism of media, Mr. Ram said that the news media in India cannot afford to be complacent, because core values have faced already pressure from the tendency to crease journalism into Entertainment and Media (E & M). It is happening on every media platform, and the pressure is going to enhance. He remarked that considering the trends and pressures on journalism from other factors like hyper-commercialization, delightedness becomes the last thing our press and television journalists need. He also said that the future of Indian journalism will certainly be compromised if it agrees silently the market-driven strategy or if it were to be crease into E & M. In the present context of the news media of the country especially in this complex milieu, he commented that even if it seems, at times, that

journalism, as we have known it, is riding into the sunset, it is our noble professional and social responsibility to protect and maintain its elements. It is essential to preserve the core values and above all the soul of journalism in the country.¹¹

It is also observed that advertisements occupy greater space and time than the news content in the newspapers, magazines, radio and television news channels. The Second Press Commission had a recommendation of quantum of space to be occupied by advertisements of 40%, 50% and 60% of the total space of the big, medium and small newspapers respectively. A large section of the leading metropolitan newspapers, radio and television channels print, broadcast and telecast news on the personal affair of a Hindi film actor or actress, fashion parade, food at costly restaurants, cafeterias and lavish hotels and so on. All it is done for increase of the circulation of the newspapers and TRP rating of the television news channels and that is why endeavors are made to present the media palatable or attractive. Allegations have arisen that a large section of the mainstream media does not concentrate on the other alternative approach of increasing circulation figures and TRP rating through presenting good coverage about substantive content and focusing on the problems of the society like explosion of population, unemployment, deforestation, facility of safe and pure drinking water, addiction of drug, trafficking, illiteracy etc.

The media frame collectively a tasted and successful formula for increasing circulation, listenership and viewership stressing on crime, gossip stories, sex and scandal with boldface headlines, scoops and exclusives. They succumb to sensationalism for their commercial motive. Addressing the National Press Day Function organized by the Press Council of India at New Delhi in 2007, former Lok Sabha Speaker Somnath Chatterjee lamented the manner in which market forces had come to influence the media urging the media houses to introspect. As for television, the former Speaker said that the fierce competition for viewership and advertising was making some channels give up all scruples. He expressed alarm at the growing number of media houses which consider the 'packaging of news' as an indispensable ingredient and essential requirement to earn more money.¹²

There are many media ranging from print to electronic which for the objective of enhancing their advertising revenue accept confusing, detrimental and unethical advertisements of

cigarettes, beverages, astrology and astrologers etc. Faked and feigned advertisements often confuse the audience in the jacket of news items. They openly praise certain products and services providing them the credibility and authenticity of the media. Such biased treatment of certain products without proper experimentation, analysis and evaluation of the other competing products is unethical. A section of Critics is of opinion that several types of news are sowed for monetary or other motives. Every business house worth its name owns directly or indirectly one or more media units not only to make profit but also to promote its other business interest. This has also led to the emergence of the media barons and multi-media barons, both national and multinational. National and international monopolies in the media business are developing at an accelerating pace.

Critics are of opinion that it is because commercial values are being pursued by the media that there has been a near collapse of public confidence in certain sectors of the media in the country. The fame, credibility and trustworthiness of the media lie in its presentation of true and correct information. Sadly, a section of the media often forgets its elementary duty. Market forces have affected the authenticity of the media and have done considerable harm. Modern journalism backed by corporate sector veers more towards sensationalism and shows less respect for privacy than print media once did. A considerable section of the Critics argues that news items about social issues have gradually vanished from the mainstream media. They are of opinion that the Journalists have to oblige to re-examine their role in this noble profession which is a mission for building a healthy and egalitarian society.

CONCLUSION

The misleading trend can be reversed by strengthening the institution of internal ombudsman, the internal mechanism of editorial freedom, formulating a code of conduct for journalists from within the profession and taking initiative to ensure that the guidelines of the Press Council of India are adhered to. Above all, the journalists should ensure that they work with their conscience intact and are not swayed away by the enticements that come their way. They should always remember that media is a public utility service and journalists are unofficial public servants. These are the very rudimentary and fundamentals of the profession which should always be borne in mind, by them. Similarly, the fact that the primary objective of media is service and not profit should not be forgotten by the media management. While

media should be economically viable, the profit motive should not blind owners and proprietors of the media to the social responsibility of the media. It is essential necessary for all the stakeholders ranging from newspapers to television channels to internet news providers to social media to set a process of continuous introspection to confirm that they remain clear, lucid and honest supplier of information.

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