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Gupta, V. S.

1995

Gupta, V. S. (1995). Influence of politics and policies on journalism values in Asia. In AMIC Seminar on Asian Values in Journalism Seminar Nilai-Nilai Kewartawanan Asia: Kuala Lumpur, 24-25 August, 1995. Singapore: Asian Media Information and Communication Centre.

<https://hdl.handle.net/10356/87291>

**Influence Of Politics And Policies
On Journalism Values In Asia**

By

V S Gupta

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Seminar on Asian Values in Journalism
24 - 25 August 1995
Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

V.S. Gupta,
Professor,
Haryana Agricultural University,
Hisar, India.

Influence of Politics and Policies on Journalism Values in Asia

Asia is on the threshold of major change of historical direction, a time when the economic and political imbalance of the last three hundred years is beginning to get corrected. Asia, and South Asia in particular, is emerging out of the long shadow of colonialism and establishing its legitimate place in the economic and political equations of the world.

The changing face of Asia at the same time presents a challenge in terms of its identity and values, accelerated economic growth as a result of economic liberalisation policies, opening up of comparatively closed societies to outside media and cultural influences, while at the same time retaining values its people hold dear, which are less easy to define: a certain human warmth, a sense of dignity, the religious beliefs and practices - all of which are clear evidence that Asian traditions are not collapsing while modernization continues apace.

The Asian countries represent an extremely varied group of nations from the world's two largest countries to its most economically productive ones, and some of the poorest and least developed countries. Languages, history, culture and ethnic origin vary widely. The systems of government show the same diversity - from socialist/communist structures to western style democracies. The Asian countries are increasingly becoming part of world communication patterns, have generally substantial populations and increasing importance economically.

Today the countries of Asia are asserting themselves and redressing the situation so that old inequality is being rapidly removed. The hesitant and tentative approach has been replaced by the determination that in the next century, the east wind, if it does not prevail over the west, will at least blow with grater vigour. In steps with these changes and contributing to them are the Asian media. The number of daily newspapers and magazines show an upward trend. The number of households with TV sets has increased by 70 per cent in the past five years, compared with 6.7 per cent in the U.S. Radio ownership has also registered phenomenal growth. But it is the satellite broadcasting, notably Asia Sat I, which has dramatically altered the Asian media landscape, leading to a deregulation of media markets, changing patterns of advertising expenditure and creativity. Space over Asia is becoming prime property. The booming economics of many Asian nations like India, China, Indonesia and Malaysia and their prosperous and demanding middle class has fueled a very high degree of interest in satellite communication services.

There are very great contrasts within the continent of Asia ranging from the most modern methods of production in print and electronic media in Japan, to the Urdu newspapers in West Pakistan and North India which are still in the pre-Caxton age. On most Urdu papers there is not even hand-setting of type; the newspapers are written by calligraphers and then produced by lithography. Whereas press in Japan is a phenomenon, even among the economically advanced nations of the world, the first two pages of an eight-page Urdu paper have to be 'composed' nearly 24 hours before press time.

Journalism in Asia has been deeply influenced by politics - which in most of the cases has been a legacy from the nationalist struggle for independence, particularly so in the major South Asian countries. Asian journals and newspapers have been catalysts in motivating and inspiring anti-colonialists and nationalist movements leading to emancipation for millions across the continent.

It is recognized that the relationship between the press and government is an extremely important relationship in the political process. As E.Lloyd Sommerlad points out, in an authoritarian system of government with a controlled economy and the mass media under official direction, the press plays a central role in propagating the governmental system and in providing "guidance" to the population. In free societies, however, the press provides a forum for the discussion of political issues. The political role of the press in developing countries is important, for, it can act as a unifying factor in a country lacking national cohesion. The press can help build a sense of nationhood and establish confidence in leadership and political processes. It can contribute to the growth of democratic institutions and political stability crucial to the national development. It becomes an instrument of education and helps influence social and cultural attitudes, establish values and develop a climate for change. It can also act as a medium for voicing community objectives and raising civic consciousness which are the basis of democracy and social advancement.

The press in India is basically a political institution. At present the press, instead of remaining a stimulant of social awakening, has increasingly become, mostly a source of news about politicians and political events. The salience to politics to the extent of being obsessed is the dominant feature of the contemporary Indian press. Many systematic studies have confirmed the notion that press on the whole today is more concerned with political development, events and personalities than economic, social and cultural issues.

In Malaysia, the development of Malay political parties would not have been possible without the support of the Malay press. The Indonesian press has its origin in political pamphlet. Not surprisingly, therefore, the pattern that

emerged was the one with strong inclination towards advocacy. The message carried by the press was essentially the message of political struggle.

The influence of politics on journalism practice has been all pervasive, all embracing. In several countries newspapers are full of politicians election speeches and the *minutiae* of electoral politics, some times even the major newspapers tend to fight the battles of individual actors in the power play. The politicians recycle their speeches times without number every day and the press dutifully publishes the same speeches day after day. Since a country's press reflects the society it operates in, and the excessive space devoted in newspapers and magazines to political parties and the doings of politicians, would it be wrong to assume that it is only the politics that excites the readers.

National and Social Policies in Asian Countries

Since most of the countries in Asia have multi-religious, multi-linguistic and multi-ethnic societies, it is imperative that their chief pre-occupation be to strengthen national unity, maintain communal harmony and preserve the plurality of character in terms of language, culture and religion.

The Preamble of the Indian constitution lays down primary objectives: to secure to all its citizens justice, social, economic and political; liberty of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship, unity and integrity of the nation and a secular set up.

The Media Commission Bill of Sri Lanka government, while aiming at the liberalization of the print and electronic media incorporated the following objectives: Ensuring the strengthening of National Unity, Ethnic Harmony and Multi-culturalism, promoting Tolerance and Pluralism, and elimination of discrimination and prejudice based on ethnicity, language, religion, etc.

The national ideology of Indonesia, *Pancasila* stresses National Unity, Social Justice, Just and Civilized humanity and Democracy.

The Malaysian national ideology, likewise is characterized by principles of National Unity, Social Equity, Progressive Thought and Traditional Culture.

It is obvious, therefore, that the policies of other governments in most of the Asian countries, enshrined in the

constitution and laws, have highlighted National Unity and Integrity, Social Justice and Secularism, Ethnic harmony and pluralistic character of society as the essential tenets for their guidance. Does journalism in Asia enhance these national policies, also the extent to which politics has had countervailing influence in shaping media practice - needs a closer scrutiny.

Journalism negating the values of Communal Harmony

Jawaharlal Nehru, whose commitment for and conviction in the freedom of press was total, felt deeply concerned that newspapers should spread communalism. He was strongly of the view that newspapers spreading communal hatred should be checked. Whereas he was in favour of freedom of opinion, he did not want newspapers, seeking to increase their circulation to spread communal hatred. He said, "It has become absolutely intolerable that a newspaper should spread utter falsehoods and incite communal passions and make money in the bargain".

During eighties, communalism in India acquired an altogether new dimension. In August 1980, a major riot broke out in Moradabad, resulting in the loss of several hundred lives in the communal riots. Rioting started when the Muslims were offering Eid prayers. Most of the people killed in the police firing that occurred, lost their lives while praying. The press tried to create an impression that there was a **foreign hand** behind the riots. One of the eminent journalists and the Editor of Times of India, Giri Lal Jain, went to the extent of alleging in a signed article there was a '**foreign hand**' behind the Moradabad riots. He reiterated this in another signed article. The '**foreign hand**' was only a segment of Mr. Jain's imagination, the government never cared to refute the '**foreign hand**' theory, despite its grave international implications.

That the electronic media in India, under the control and direction of the government, should increasingly project the image of India as the Hindu India and Conceptualize India as a Hindu country has been discussed, in detail, and with conviction by Anand Mitra in his book: *Television and Popular Culture in India - A Study of Mahabharat*. In the concluding chapter, Mitra states:

Around these practices of a Hindu-Hindi hegemony, a national identity and a nation is imagined. Doordarshan, as a state controlled medium, is able to represent these practices as the national practices. Moreover, Doordarshan is able to articulate itself with the national practices thus reproducing and circulating a limited set of practices as the preferred practices of the Indian nation. These are the practices that reproduce the image of India as *Bharat*, where the rule

of *dharma*, as embodied in the *Mahabharat* and *Ramayan*, are reproduced as natural, unequivocal and preferred. This is articulated with the emerging Hindu reawakening, where the notion of a non-secular Hindu state is becoming increasingly predominant.

This work establishes the precise conclusion that the hegemony of the Hindu-Hindi belt is being perpetuated by serials like *Mahabharat* and *Ramayan* and, in popular culture the voices of the marginalized are getting increasingly smothered (p 141).

The consequences of projecting India as a Hindu society soon manifested in the turn of events at the end of 1992 in the attack by *Karsevaks* on the Ayodhya mosque and subsequent riots in Bombay in March 1993. The chauvinism, which was produced around religious serials like *Mahabharat* and *Ramayan*, and encouraged by the State controlled media should contribute to arousing religious fundamentalism and frenzy in the country bring us face to face with the challenges we are confronted with due to the myopic vision of the political parties and politicians, in quest of vote banks on sectarian and communal basis.

While working on this paper and trying to build proper perspective on the subject, I was deeply struck as to how journalism in vernacular languages in several countries has encouraged linguistic, ethnic and sectarian passions and worked to the advantage of fissiparous tendencies. Vernacular newspapers focus on fostering religious and communal divisiveness, emphasize casteism and negative aspects of the news.

In India, perhaps, more than the English language press, the vernacular press was responsible for aggravating the communal situation. The Muslim League's declaration of August 16, 1946 as the "Direct Action Day" for pressing the Government for a separate Muslim Pakistan was well publicized by the Urdu Press. The riots which occurred during the week of August 16 to 23, 1946 in Calcutta cost 5,000 persons their lives; over 100,000 persons left homeless due to fires and looting. The Marathi press of Bombay and Pune conducted equally provocative campaign against partition. The Marathi Press made biting attacks on the weaknesses of the Congress policy of *de-Hinduising* the country and rejected and ridiculed the Congress' appeals for moderation as attempts to escape criticism.

With competing public and political interests reporting communal riots has always been a complex task - it has become all the more acute in recent times. There have been instances of deliberate and reckless spread of falsehood where media reportage has exacerbated conflict in which interest of the

nation as such have suffered. Sadly it is the latter which has become more common in significant sections of the press in recent years.

While censuring four leading Hindi dailies, the Press Council of India in its findings in January 1991 in the Ayodha case said: gross irresponsibility and impropriety offending the canons of journalistic ethics to promote mass hysteria on the basis of rumours and speculation. One paper carried the report: "Muslim doctors of Aligarh Muslim University Hospital are deliberately killing Hindu patients". This report was also brought to the notice of Press Council of India. In this context the widely read columnist, S.Nihal Singh said: This was a national crisis with passions at fever pitch over an issue that had a deep and painful past and a disturbing present in the form of recurring Hindu Muslim riots. How did the press report the crisis? Let us first look at the major newspapers in Hindi and Urdu. They were, as a rule, totally partisan. Much of the reporting on either side was tendentious, some of it highly exaggerated and it seemed that protagonists on each side were only too eager to fan the flames of the communal fire. Some of these erring newspapers later won the rebuke of the Press Council of India. Most of the English newspapers behaved responsibly although in some cases, the stores seemed to be coloured to some extent by their reporters' religion.

While writing on Media, Ethnicity and National Unity, in the context of media situation in Sri Lanka, Manik De Silva says: It could be credibly argued that the different approaches of the newspapers depending on the language in which they publish, broadly reflects the thinking and attitudes of the readership they serve. Unfortunately, not enough attention is paid by the managers and owners of the newspaper groups to the need to use their publications as instruments for educating readers on the desirability of ethnic harmony and national unity in a multi-lingual and multi-racial society. The English press has demonstrated a willingness to publish statements and articles advocating ethnic harmony. The Sinhalese and Tamil press, while not remiss in this area, have also tended to carry material that focus on differences, often publishing statements, reports and articles that could rouse communal passions. For example, an English newspaper would be less likely to report that "Tamil terrorists have massacred Sinhalese villagers", while most Sinhalese papers will have no reservation about presenting it that way. When the 1983 riots erupted, with Tamils in many parts of the country attacked by mobs in what has been generally perceived as a backlash of the separatist war in the northern and eastern provinces, the Tamil press highlighted the many atrocities that occurred but paid little attention to the many instances when victims of the violence had received protection and hospitality from their Sinhalese neighbours. In fact, there was tendency to focus almost exclusively on the negative aspects. This is also true of

Sinhalese newspapers coverage of Tamil terrorism in the norther and eastern areas of the country.

In the seminar on, 'Role of Media in a National Crisis' organized by AMIC, Fazal Qureshi, Managing Director and Chief Editor of the Pakistan Press International News Agency said:

The national press failed to play the moderating role which it should always play in the larger interests of regional peace and harmony. It is not only the Pakistan press which deserves criticism on this account. The press in India and Pakistan, with notable exceptions, have always failed to play their role as peacemaker. A look at the Indian and Pakistani newspapers will tell a similar story. Pakistan newspapers freely sensationalize the actions of the Indian army in Kashmir and the Punjab. In the Indian newspapers, exaggerated accounts of Pakistani infiltrators and saboteurs helping the secessionists in Punjab and Kashmir get the same kind of prominent display. In reply Pakistani newspapers blame Indian agents for the law and order situation in Sind. The general reporting trend in both countries is to pick and play up the negative and darker side of the picture. The press in the two countries, along with politicians and governments, can be accused of continuing to poison the atmosphere between the two neighbours. It is time we realize the dangers of such action, which is not in the interest of the two countries. The events in Kashmir, Punjab and Sind are most unfortunate and the press cannot black out news of events. However, the press should try to act more sensibly, more soberly and more maturely, pleading for sanity on all sides in its news, editorials and commentaries. It should build up public opinion against use of force and put its full weight behind solutions by dialogue.

In India, another trend discernable for quite some time is that politicians are quietly, and often insidiously buying control over the press. This is in the backdrop of press turning more and more hostile towards politicians as more and more skeletons keep tumbling out of secret closets, compromising more and more reputations. Some of the politicians have started their own newspapers, which they remote control and use it to their advantage.

The political element in the reportage has become so overwhelming that even in areas like Women's Issues, only those events are highlighted where political interests outweighed other considerations. In a detailed analysis of coverage of Women's Issues in print and electronic media, Ammu Joseph and Kalpna Sharma point out: Press responses to the Shah Bano controversy also underlined the fact that a women's issue merit front page treatment mainly when it turns political in the narrowest sense of the term. For instance when the Congress (I) in an obvious effort to woo Muslim fundamentalists for electoral gains, floated the idea of a

Muslim Women Bill, all the newspapers recognized its importance. There were numerous editorial comments on the legal aspects of the issue and its political fall out. Women's issues are taken seriously only when they enter the male spheres of politics and law.

Changing Values in Journalism

Over the years the scenario in the world of journalism in terms of ethical practices, integrity and credibility is changing very fast. Journalists performing at the command of their bosses or at the behest of the government of the day, and against their own convictions are on the increase.

In Pakistan in an insidious attempt to harness the power of the press to favour the government of the day, the National Press Trust was formed, with country's major industrial and business families as the founder members. Referring to the seminal work by Zamir Niazzi, *Press in Chains*, Razia Bhatti writes: Right from the start all the Trust papers assumed the role of official spokesman and toed the official line without any qualms.... and the watchdogs of yesteryears turned into the lapdogs of the establishment.

Equally pernicious is the practice of accepting envelopes containing gift coupons or hard cash by the press reporters in India at the press conferences where new issues are launched. Writing in the *Tribune* 'Strange Results of Liberalisation', one of the eminent columnist M.V.Kamath says: What journalists should be concerned about is the corruption of their brethren on a scale that is mind boggling. Giving a graphic account of the process of cash collection in a day in the life of a reporter, Kamath also points to an other aspect of the problem - Conformity. "Does that mean there are no honest journalists in the profession. The issue is not honesty but conformity. If the honest journalist refuses to accept the gifts given to him he falls foul of his colleagues. Every one accepts gifts. That is done thing."

Of late the concept being promoted is that selling newspapers is just like selling cakes of soap. The newspaper is a product and the emphasis is on packaging. The commercial and the business side, modern management methods and techniques, contract journalism, loss of authority of the editor to proprietor are some of the issues currently being confronted. Does an editor's freedom end where the proprietor's eyebrows begin to rise? Is an editor, the custodian of the proprietor's vested interest?, asks the media educator, P.N.Malhan and says: The value of the newspaper is of its contents, the selection of which is the responsibility of the editor.

The present position, according to S.Nihal Singh is: It is true that the traditional concept of the editor of a major established English language newspaper was of a man in an ivory tower disdainful of commerce and the lowly tasks carried out by advertisement and other managers. There was little interaction between such an editor and his circulation manager. The pendulum now seems to have swung to the other extreme in some newspaper establishments. The editor has become a non-entity. The proprietor and his managers lay down the law and enjoy bigger salaries and perquisites than members of the editorial staff.

In this brief over-view of influence of politics on journalism values in Asia - two things stand out clearly: at times the cause of ethnic and communal harmony has not been upheld by the uninhibited reporting thus threatening the fragile ethnic social and harmony, and that journalism is being driven more and more by market forces than values of ethics and integrity. This emerging trend is a disquieting development under all circumstances.

The search for solutions is not easy. The emerging situation, more or less is: A president can be impeached, a prime minister can be defeated in Parliament, doctors can be denied the right to practice, corporate officers can be removed by the Board of Directors, but print media are answerable to no one; because the Press Councils do not have enforcement powers, of course the offender can be publicly rebuked. The codes of conduct do not work. The principle of voluntary restraint, as a result of sense of commitment and social service need to form a part of journalism education. A built-in agency of critical appraisal on each individual publication, not so still voice of conscience to keep every one ethically aware, should also be one of the worthwhile steps for consideration.

In this context, we will do well to bear in mind what John L Hulteng had said: In fact, it may well be that if journalism loses touch with ethical values, it will at that same moment cease to be of use to society, and cease to have any real reason for being. But that, for the sake of us all, must never be allowed to happen.

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