

# Communication development and human rights : an Indian perspective

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**Communication Development And Human Rights :  
An Indian Perspective**

**By**

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I

The concept of Human Rights as presented by its classical, liberal protagonists is confronted with serious anomalies when it is placed in the context of countries like India, where the right to human conditions of livelihood for the overwhelming bulk of people has to come along with the assertion of Human Rights, if not to be their pre-condition. This problem brings out the age-old question: the conflict between Bread and Freedom.

There is of course the danger of getting diverted by the question - Bread or Freedom - ~~where~~<sup>which</sup> first? In other words, could there be Bread before Freedom? Actual experience in countries like India show that freedom, at least democratic liberties, become necessary even for the establishment of an order that could ensure Bread.

The historical experience of the Indian people brings this out very clearly. The central theme of the Indian national movement for independence from British rule always stressed that the unredeemed poverty of the Indian people is the direct result of foreign rule. And so, the struggle for freedom must be won if the claim to better living was to be realised. It is important to note here that the basic characteristic of the Indian movement for independence, as designed by Gandhi and Nehru, was<sup>n</sup> to inform and educate, to raise the consciousness of the masses, to make them realise that they, the common humanity of the great country that was India, were strong enough to get rid of foreign rule. The leadership of the national movement

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strove to rousing the poverty stricken millions through a tireless endeavour at mass communication. Indian independence was achieved not by engineering a revolt in the armed forces or by a violent upheaval but a sustained and determined mass movement participated in by millions. This experiment, perhaps unique in history, demanded that the common people of the country would have to be informed and awakened to the significance of India regaining her independence. It was an unprecedented endeavour at mass communication of every form and at every level, which promoted the very first principle of Human Rights -- the right to independence.

It is this great heritage of the freedom struggle in India that left its mark in the realisation of many Human Rights in the years since the attainment of independence. There was hardly any long-winded argument in India's Constituent Assembly to introduce universal adult suffrage and <sup>the</sup> setting up of democratic institutions. The very first general election after independence was conducted on the basis of universal adult suffrage and this has continued ever since without a break.

Under the Constitution of independent India, all citizens are guaranteed <sup>the</sup> right to equality including equality before law, prohibition of discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste or sex, equality of opportunity in matters of employment: the right of freedom of speech and expression; assembly, association, or union; movement; residence; right to practice any profession or occupation; right against exploitation, banning all forms of forced labour, child labour and traffic in human beings; right to freedom of conscience,



and free profession and propagation of religion; right of any section of citizen to conserve their cultura, language or script and right of minorities to their own educational institution<sup>s</sup>.

Another important landmark was the redrawing of the map of India by which the former provinces of British days (now called States) reflected the linguistic feature of a particular region. In practice it meant that public affairs in a state including the running of administration and judiciary could be conducted in the mother-tongue of the people in a particular region. In effect, it ensured that a person with the limited knowledge of his or her mother-tongue could aspire to leadership of public affairs -- an undoubted extension of democracy and to that measure, of Human Rights.

On the political plane, the state structure and mode of governance ensuring the human rights embodied in the Constitution, carried on without a break till the year 1975 when the Government at the Centre imposed Emergency all over the country which meant the drastic ~~curtailment~~ <sup>curtailment</sup> of many civil liberties and human rights.

The Emergency touched off unexpected developments. As it took away the established Human Rights, such as the right of freedom of expression, the rule of law, the freedom of the press, trial by jury and ~~curtailed~~ <sup>curtailed</sup> even the powers and immunities of the Parliament and State legislatures, it also made the public aware that there could be no room for complacency if the acquired human rights are to be retained. In other words, the need to be vigilant in defence of human rights was intensely felt.

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Ironically therefore, the Emergency experience of 1975-1977 provided a fillip to the movement for defence and extension of human rights. Since then, there has come up a new awareness in India about the need to uphold human rights in a sustained and organised manner and in this movement, the media of communication undoubtedly <sup>has</sup> played an important role - a role acknowledged by all.

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In India, there has been a sort of remarkable synchronisation between the sudden spurt of human rights activism and rapid development of communication. As noted above, the awareness about the need to defend and extend human rights got a noteworthy spurt after the experience of the repressive period of the Emergency 1975-1977. Broadly speaking, the tempo of human rights activity has steadily risen in the last ten years.

Because of a totally different set of circumstances, this is the very period which has seen the expansion of communication and also of the level of consciousness about human rights in the media world. This is the period which has seen the striking expansion of the print media, the growth in the circulation of newspapers, the rise in importance and circulation of newspapers in various Indian languages - a process which had started much earlier, but got a strong impetus in the last decade. A significant feature in the development of the print media has been the sudden mushrooming of magazines and periodicals both in English and other Indian languages. From the point of view of the struggle for Human Rights, <sup>this</sup> has been a significant development, because many of the highlights in the campaign for Human Rights were covered and popularised by some of the leading magazines.

The introduction of new technology in the field of communication -- from the electronic typewriter and the word processor to photo-offset, the computerised printing processes -- meant the speeding up of the media and also the wider dissemination of the message of the media. The use of the cassette both audio and video, the high-speed photography, faster means of

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transport -- all these have brought many facilities to the communicator unknown before, and also provided more powerful visuals of human rights campaign including the focus on the deprivation of human rights to the underprivileged sections of society. The Indian experience makes it abundantly clear that the development of communication technology has enabled the media to sensitise public opinion much more effectively than before about the struggle for human rights. In fact many of the human rights violation, perpetrated with impunity before, could be checked, at least brought down, thanks to the technological revolution in the field of communication.

At the same time, it is to be noted that the development of communication has not always helped the upholding of human rights. The expansion of the mass circulation newspaper establishment with up-to-date machinery requires heavy financial outlay. Since this involves heavy capital investment, the natural instinct on the part of the proprietor not to risk it leads him to be careful not to earn the hostility of powerful vested interests, some of whom are the main perpetrators of the <sup>violation</sup> ~~violation~~ of human rights. In the period of the Emergency it was noticed that very few of the big newspaper establishments dared to defy government's repressive measures including drastic censorship imposed by the government: rather they felt it safe and profitable to fall in line with the Government, thereby weakened the struggle for the defence of human rights. On the other hand, it was found that most of the cases of defiance of repressive press laws involved small and medium-size newspapers, in which the quantum of resource investment



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is very much lower. Apart from the fact that the ownership pattern of the small and medium-sized newspapers shows that many of those with firm commitment to human rights campaign belong to these categories, the fact that the extent of loss and damage in the event of repression could be much less and therefore within manageable limits helped their owners to a large measure to stand up to government repression. Dedication to human rights are often in inverse proportion to the investment outlay in the media of communication. The Indian experience brings this out in the case not only of the print medium but also in the case of film production. Any film depicting acute social conflicts or carrying a message of resistance against any form of government repression ~~can~~ by its very nature can be a big-budget enterprise in the condition prevailing in India, while a film with a human rights message has to be produced with a small budget, because the big-money producers would, as a rule, avoid risking their investment in a risky adventure as they would regard the human rights movement to be.

There is a further aspect of the reverse linkage between the development of communication and the struggle for human rights. In India, the electronic media -- both the radio and the television -- is owned and run by the Government. The state monopoly in these two most powerful media, acts as a brake or a counter-force to human rights campaign. Obviously, in many cases of human rights violation, the Government has to bear responsibility since it is the Government which has under its command the police and other agencies of enforcing repression. Such

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cases of resistance to government repression can certainly not be covered by the radio and television, and to that measure the State monopoly of these two media acts as a deterrent for the dissemination of information and knowledge of human rights activities and activists.

While this is true as a general rule, there are certain categories of human rights, such as assertion of women's rights and women's position of equality in society, which are covered by both the radio and the television in India. In other words, police repression and other forms of direct violation of human rights by Government agencies are blacked out by the state-owned radio and television, while other forms of human rights particularly involving society are generally covered by radio and television. Though it is widely accepted that in these two arenas, the radio and television, when prodded, respond, it is found that the extent of the coverage of such issues depend to a large extent on the level of public vigilance, whose constant pressure helps to alert these two important media about the cases of human rights violation.

An important aspect of the development of interaction between human rights activism and the development of communication is that the effective projection of the <sup>former</sup> ~~latter~~ through the <sup>latter</sup> ~~former~~, helps to expand the army of human rights crusaders. The coverage of a human rights case in whatever medium -- press, radio or television -- inspires many others who might so long have been indifferent or dormant, to actively take up the



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cause of human rights and thereby strengthen the crusade itself. There have been many a case of social activist groups joining the human rights movement as a result of the information about such struggles by other such groups conveyed through the media of communication.

It will however be a mistake to think that the development of communication per se has helped in the extension and consolidation of human rights. The expansion and development of communication technology has enormously strengthened the machinery of state oppression whenever the human rights crusader has had to assert these rights vis-a-vis the authority of the government. Faster means of communication, electronic surveillance, faster transport system -- all these have become more effective lethal instruments at the hands of the State than what it had twenty or thirty years ago. Similarly, powerful organs of vested interests, both economic and social are today equipped with more powerful means of communication which they can harness in any offensive against those who may be asserting their human rights which offends those vested interests.

It is thus clear that while the development of communication has considerably contributed and is still contributing towards rousing mass consciousness about human rights and also to consolidate them, the very same advanced means of communication have strengthened the mechanism of oppression and exploitation and thereby contribute towards the constriction of human rights. This dialectical process is an important feature that needs to be taken into

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account in any objective appraisal of human rights in the context of the modernisation of communication in the Indian State.



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### III

What are the different types of struggle for human rights in India in which modern means of communication have played a significant role? The list is a long one but ~~encompassed~~ <sup>the more important items</sup> in the list needs to be touched to get a clear picture.

A rough estimate brings out eleven categories of human rights struggles in which the media have been playing a significant, if not a decisive role. The fight in defence of women's rights; against communal tension; the fight against caste oppression; the fight for the rights of the dispossessed and underprivileged in the agrarian sector; the rights of labour; the fight against the hazards of industrial activity; the fight for better health and propagation of family planning; popularisation of science and environment; the fight for freedom of press and publication.

A brief explanation of each of these categories and the role of the media in each may enable one to get an over-view of this important subject.

1. The fight in defence of women's rights: while the media as a rule have become alert in recent times about the importance of the defence of women's rights such as equal work and equal pay, there have been some outstanding questions about the life and status of women that have come up in recent years, and in each one of them, the communication media have played a very significant role. The practice of giving dowry by a bride's parents to the bridegroom and

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his family is not permitted by law, but it is widely practised in many parts of the country. In recent years, reports have appeared of a large number of cases of young married women being killed on the ground that they did not fetch adequate dowry to satisfy the greed of the husband and his family. Torture of such hapless women and their death have been reported <sup>in the press</sup> prominently, leading to action by social action groups and the police. As a result of this agitation in which the press and the non-official organisation have played a decisive role, sometimes jointly sometimes along parallel lines, the punishment for such heinous crimes has been made more drastic under the law.

In some of the impoverished areas in the country side, the practice of selling young girls still prevails. The press has taken up the campaign against this barbarous custom. In a noteworthy case, a journalist actually went through the motion of <sup>purchase</sup> ~~purchase~~ of such a girl to expose the racket: this attracted nationwide revulsion and the police had to take prompt action in the concerned area. Although this evil custom has not yet been weeded out, the media has created greater awareness in the public of the need to combat it.

Recently, the press exposed the occurrence of the practice of sati, the primitive custom by which the widow of a man just died is cremated with the dead husband. This heinous practice had been banned more than 150 years ago because of the strong protest of early social reformers. Its



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occurrence in recent times is an indication of what may be termed as revivalism, sometimes passed off as fundamentalism. It is the Indian press which boldly put the spotlight on this murderous custom, and this <sup>has</sup> touched off a very powerful movement by many sections of the public with the result <sup>the Parliament</sup> has strengthened the provisions of the legal ban through fresh legislation.

2. Fight against communal tension: In modern India, Hindus ~~form~~ <sup>form</sup> the majority community, and the Muslims constitute a substantial minority. For various complex reasons and because of the interplay of various forces, sometimes communal tension break out leading to violence - murder and arson. While a section of the press gets entangled in the passions that come in the wake of such communal tension, a significant section of the press not only campaign against it but also exposes the perpetrators of such fratricidal violence. Journalists' organisations have on their own initiative made objective investigation of such ~~some~~ incidents of the involvement of a section of the press in such communal violence and have condemned such abdication of secularism. There are also cases of individual journalists having to face hazards and even threat to ~~their~~ their own lives while trying to put down communal passion.

3. Fight against caste oppression: Caste system prevails among the Hindus ~~society~~ who constitute the majority community in India. While the exposure to modern living conditions and industri-

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alisation have to a large measure weakened the rigidities of the caste system, it is still very strong in the rural area. As part of the caste system, there persists untouchability, although under the Indian Constitution, untouchability is banned. In this case too, the exposure of caste atrocities in the village has helped to stir social action groups, while the work by social action groups has turned out to be a powerful impetus for the demand for executive action by the press. In some cases, caste animosities have been mixed up with class ~~and~~ antagonism, particularly where one caste may belong to the class of big farmers while another is composed of poor peasants or the landless. Unlike in the past, such cases are highlighted by the press, and many journalists have faced serious risk to their own lives in covering them. Modern media technology has helped in sharply focussing public attention on such atrocities particularly through press photographs and occasional video coverage.

4. Campaign against bonded labour: Under feudal relations prevailing in the Indian countryside, the oppressive institution of bonded labour persists in many areas. By far the largest number of bonded labour are because of high rates of usury which ends up with the debtor being reduced to the status of a serf to the person lending him money: such persons are either practising moneylenders or rich farmers giving out loans in times of distress. Although by law the practice of bonded labour is banned, it still prevails in many areas. There have been several drives by



the Government to abolish this feudal practice, but this has been subverted in many cases by the police being hand in glove with the village rich. In this sphere the press and social action groups at many places have combined to expose the practice and have helped in the liberation and even rehabilitation of persons in debt bondage.

5. Struggle of the landless for land: In many parts of India, the struggle for land for the landless has been intensified in recent years. This struggle has in some places taken the form of general propaganda and pressure on the government to enact legislation in which the press has played a significant role. At some places, however, there has been forcible occupation of land by the landless under the leadership of peasant organisations, but this has in many cases been followed by forcible re-occupation of such land by the big farmers. There have been other pockets where the landless ~~have~~ under the leadership of militant organisation have <sup>resorted to</sup> ~~backed~~ armed struggle, which have come into conflict with the Government. Recently a group of government officers were kidnapped by one such group in Andhra Pradesh. The tremendous press publicity on this case helped to prompt negotiations which ultimately led to the release of the kidnapped officers. Throughout, there has been full scale press coverage about the incident, and the bias in favour of the dispossessed pea-

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santry could be disarmed in the majority of the newspapers.

On the issue of bonded labour and the land hunger of the landless, the spotlight has been effected mainly through the print media. The television and the radio being government-owned have taken up this subject in a general way largely through discussions among economists, social scientists and journalists. By the rule followed by the government any reference to specific cases of atrocities are not publicised over the government-owned radio and television; they only deal with the subject as a social problem to be tackled ~~with~~, but not always as a human rights issue. However, the effective focussing on this problem by the print media along with the activities of the social action groups has succeeded in getting the government recognise the urgency of the problem: on one side, there has come more severe administrative action against the practice of bonded labour, and on the other, the government has committed itself to provide house sites for the landless.

6. The problems of industrial labour: ~~The~~  
to a large measure<sup>is</sup> interlinked with the struggle for human rights, particularly in a developing economy. There is a long tradition of the Indian press to campaign against inhuman conditions of labour wherever

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these were found. Even before independence, the Indian press campaigned against inhuman conditions of labour engaged in indigo cultivation and in the coal mines, as also against government attacks on trade union rights. This tradition has continued until this day. Industrial workers' actions for better pay, for better <sup>working</sup> condition, for housing and social amenities have always received widespread support in the print media, but radio and television being government owned, such support to trade union movement ~~are~~ <sup>is</sup> missing in these two media.

An important feature of the press campaign in recent years has been to expose the severe semi-human conditions of unorganised labour. This is particularly noteworthy in the case of agricultural labourers, who seldom get statutory rates of wages. The press campaign on this issue has led both the parliament and the government taking up the question of how to make the law effective on this score.

Specifically, the press has effectively highlighted in recent years ~~an~~ the use of child labour in match-making industry, and of small-scale enterprise without proper wages and ~~exposed to~~ serious health hazards entailed in such occupation.

By and large, it may be said that the relationship of the print media with the trade union movement is cooperative in India. On all major issues affecting the working people such



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as conditions of work, wages, unemployment, automation, the press has readily taken up the campaign of the trade unions for improved conditions -- an extension of the struggle for human rights.

7. Defence against hazards of industrialisation: With the growth and experience of industrialisation, the focus of the communication media has had to include not only the life and living conditions of the working people as part of a new perception of human rights, but also the new threats to life of the community as a whole from the hazards of industrialisation. Pollution due to the proximity of factories to human habitation, has been quite often spotlighted in the Indian press. In this endeavour, the media interacts with the scientific community and this has raised the level of public vigilance against the hazards of industrial waste which is perhaps higher <sup>in India</sup> than any other country of the Third World.

However, the campaign for effective legal remedies against such hazards of industrialisation is yet weak in the Indian media, though it is the Indian press more than any other agency that has taken it up. There is a rising movement against the hazards of nuclear fall-out: this movement depends very largely on the support extended to it by the Indian press. While there is general support for the programme of peaceful uses of nuclear power, vigilance against radioactive fall-out is built largely through the communication media in India. There is no mass

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movement for this outside the media.

The most significant on this count has been the powerful role played by the Indian press in defence of the victims of the poison gas to leakage at the Union Carbide plant at Bhopal<sup>in 1984</sup> - acknowledged to be the biggest of such a tragedy - in which over 2500 people lost their lives and thousands more were maimed. The press took a leading role in making the public aware of the magnitude of the devastation in Bhopal. The nationwide condemnation of the outrage as also the massive campaign for relief for the victims could be possible only because of the alert and extensive support that the media rendered to the cause. In the campaign for compensation for the Bhopal gas victims, the press has played a decisive role. This can be claimed by the media in alerting the public at every stage of the legal battle for securing compensation for the gas victims. In short, it can be categorically stated that both in exposing the horrors of the Bhopal gas tragedy and in mobilising world public opinion, the communication media has played a great role.

An interesting upshot of the press campaign in the Bhopal gas tragedy has been the realisation by the media of the need to equip personnel competent to cover the complexities of a modern industrial set-up. Although as yet ~~at~~<sup>at</sup> an incipient level, the media is being made aware of the need at specialisation of different aspects of industrialisation on the part of the media professional. The experience of covering the Bhopal disaster has made the media aware of its own inadequacy in

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taking up such an issue as part of the promotion of human rights. The press has begun raising demands for safeguarding against the hazards that disasters like the one that took place at Bhopal poses for the entire country.

There are no doubt shortcomings in the media's record in handling the diverse type of problems thrown up by a disaster of such a magnitude as took place in Bhopal. Apart from compensation for the victims there is need for studying the intricacies of a modern industrialisation. The defence of the interests of the individual is recognised at least formally, and towards this, the contribution of the media is being conceded by all sections.

8. The problem of children as part of the wider question of the assertion of human rights is gaining in importance in India. Child care is being stressed by the activities of agencies like UNICEF. However, looking at it from a wider dimension, there are some specific features about the welfare of children in which the development of communication has been playing an important role. Putting it briefly, it may be noted that on one hand, the media both print and electronic, have in recent years helped in spreading awareness about the distressing condition in which the bulk of child population have to live in this country and thereby crippling the future generation. This has led the



On the other hand, the communication media have been playing an important role in helping the work of both government and non-government agencies towards better conditions of life and living for the child population in the country. The mass vaccination program of the health authorities, to prevent the spread of polio, cholera, small-pox and other killer diseases, all these have received wide support from the media. The campaign for mother's milk in place of baby food -- a <sup>WHO</sup> ~~UNICEF~~ mandate -- has received considerable support from communication agencies: however on this score, a section of the media (including television) has been remiss in publicising advertisements of baby food, which goes directly against the accepted official policy.

9. The government's Health <sup>Programme</sup> ~~progressive~~  
harnesses communication as one of its main  
instruments for its implementation. Apart  
from the combat against all forms of communi-

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cable diseases, the media have given a tremendous fillip to the massive family planning programme in the country. In fact, it can be safely claimed that without the cooperation of the media the Family Planning Programme in a country like India could never have taken off the ground.

The elimination of the scourge of malaria and cholera that the health authorities claim has received constant support of the communication media. At the same time, it is through the communication network -- from the modern to even inter-personal communication -- that the care and education of health could be achieved in India.

10. Popularisation of Science: If acquirement of knowledge is to be counted as one of the human rights, there has been a unique experiment recently in India to communicate to the common humanity mainly in the villages an understanding of science in everyday life. There are non-official organisations in many parts of India engaged in popularising science in villages. Last year, <sup>28 of</sup> these organisations joined together to undertake cross country marches lasting over a month covering millions of people. In these marches hundreds of scientists, teachers, artists and social workers participated. Their message says: "Victory over disease, a clean and decent <sup>habitat</sup> ~~habitat~~ production of basic necessities of life are all achievable using existing knowledge and technology... The belief that the <sup>people</sup> ~~people~~ large are incapable of

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understanding the implications of science and technology, is a myth fostered by the elite in order to preserve their own control." This emphasis on the liberating forces of science. This remarkably<sup>e</sup> project of inter-personal communication has created a real stir in the areas covered by it and a new consciousness among the common people about their right to knowledge is discernible.

In this connection, it needs to be noted that in India a very powerful mass movement for the protection of forests has made significant strides. The campaign against deforestation has combined with the initiative for the development of wasteland. All these ~~have~~<sup>have</sup> made a deep impact on public awareness so that the government has had to respond by setting up a Ministry of Environment.

11. Freedom of the press: As noted earlier, freedom of the press has long been one of the cherished rights upheld by the national movement for independence. One of the Fundamental Rights in the Indian Constitution is the Right to Freedom, under which Article 19(1)(a) says: "All citizens shall have the right to freedom of speech and expression."

It is to be noted that the freedom of the press is not specifically guaranteed, but the Supreme Court has ruled that the freedom of the press is implicit in the guarantee of freedom of speech and expression. There is however a body of opinion that <sup>feels that</sup> the freedom of



the press should be specifically mentioned in the Constitution. Besides, the press as the private property of the owner is protected under the law, and as such, there is an anomaly about the role of the press as distinct from the right to property of its owner.

The freedom of the press in India is constrained by the interests and the wishes of the proprietor; the pressures of the ~~advertisers~~<sup>advertisers</sup> and the finally by the official restrictions.

The interests of the proprietor sometimes come in the way of the press acting as a champion of human rights. In India this becomes a more sensitive issue, as many of the big newspapers are owned by persons or private corporations involved in other business enterprises. Anything that may affect the interest of such business establishments can hardly get into the newspaper. This aspect of the ownership pattern of Indian press has been shown up recently when two private corporations in rivalry with each other are found to be attacking each other as proxy for the two business houses with their respective political alignments.

The pressure of advertisers is to be seen in the fact that no newspaper or journal can survive without the support of advertisements, such is the economics of the Indian press, as it is many other countries.

As for the government pressure on the

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press, this is both overt and covert. News-print in India is not available except through the State Trading Authority, and each newspaper gets a quota for the purpose. Secondly, the Government's own advertisement can be given or withheld at the discretion of the government authorities. There are also open restrictions under extra-ordinary circumstances. The very article of the Constitution which guarantees freedom of speech and expression, enjoins that this freedom is subject to the interest of the sovereignty and integrity of India, the Security of the State, friendly relation with foreign states, public order, decency and morality or in relation to contempt of court, defamation or incitement to an offence. In areas which are under abnormal conditions, the press freedom is controlled, as it prevails in the State of Punjab where terrorist acts by a group of political extremists have enabled the government to assume extraordinary powers by which restrictions on the press have been imposed. The proceedings of Parliament are by law protected for publication, that is, nobody can be prosecuted for quoting from the proceedings of Parliament. This right was however taken away during the Emergency. A new type of threat on the freedom of the press has surfaced in recent times. An exposure of a powerful vested interest, social, economic or political, invites attack from the concerned vested interests. There have of late been a number of cases in which <sup>pressmen</sup> ~~pressmen~~ have been physically threatened, and

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in some cases killed. Intolerance of powerful political elements has led to attack on newspaper office or even moves to boycott of particular newspaper.

By and large however, it may be said that the freedom of the press is maintained in India and vigilance in defence of the press has been heightened after the brief spell of two years of Emergency regime in 1975-1977.





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IV

This rapid over-view of the different aspects of the problems does not however cover each and every episode in the interaction between Human Rights and Communication in India. The two major organisations fully engaged in furthering the cause of Human Rights in India are the People's Union of Civil Liberties and the People's Union of Democratic Rights. Their activities bring out very serious exposures of Human Rights violations committed in India against which these organisations have been constantly striving to sensitive public opinion about the need to defend and extend human rights. Both these organisations work very closely with the people in the media.

While it is not possible in this short compass to catalogue the entire range of activities of these two and other organisations, it is worth noting here some of the highlights of their activity in conjunction with the press.

A common occurrence in the case of militant political groups some of them armed, is that when captured <sup>their supporters</sup> were shot in police custody, the explanation given by the authorities has been that these got killed when trying to escape or they were killed in encounter with the police. A number of these cases were thoroughly investigated by the civil liberties organisations and with the help of the press <sup>which</sup> exposed that such political prisoners had been killed in fake encounters: in fact, there was no encounters at all in most of the cases.

Such exposures received in some cases, severe judicial strictness on the police and to that measure, such cases are understood to have been reduced, although not totally eliminated.

Another type of human rights activism undertaken with the help of the media was to focus attention on the plight of the villagers dispossessed from their habitation by the government undertaking some new projects, irrigation or industrial, for which their land might have been acquired. In many such cases these hapless people are left at the mercy of the local contractors and petty officials who cheat them. The intervention of social action groups and the exposure of such injustice by the media have in many cases helped to redress the injustice - at least to secure adequate compensation for them.

The right of legal defence is very often denied to undertrials particularly in circumstances where emergency regime prevails. In some of the areas in north-east India where a state of insurgency may have been declared, legal defence for those imprisoned or arrested is hard to get. Here too the intervention by social action groups coupled with their publicising in the media have considerably helped to restore the basic human right to the victims.

In the rural areas, particularly in the interior of the tribal belt, the unlettered inhabitants are totally ignorant of their basic rights under the law. In many areas all over India, social action groups have been helping them to get what is due to them under the law. However, it has been found from experience that very often

social action groups have to face the combined mischief of the police in league with the local vested interests. In most such cases, intervention has been effective only when the media could be mobilised for the exposure of injustice.

In recent years, the Indian media can claim a proud record of investigation into cases of injustice and inequity and exposure of blatant violation of human rights. Outstanding among such investigative reporting has been the case of prisoners in custody at Bhagalpur in Bihar who were found to have been deliberately blinded by the police and prison authorities by coldbloodedly destroying the eyes of the prisoners. This discovery made by painstaking and determined investigation by the press shocked and the entire country and public outcry led to the punishment of the guilty and whatever relief and compensation could be possible for the victims.

Human Rights groups in conjunction with the press have undertaken thorough investigation into some major incidents of persecution and killing of the landless and the dispossessed by the village rich, sometimes assuming the complexion of conflict between the higher caste and the outcastes. Such powerful exposures have stirred public conscience and to that measure have furthered the cause of human rights.

In India today, many social action groups have taken up the cause of women's rights - these extending from the exposure of the killing of women



for dowry or in extreme case the revival of the barbarous practice of "sati" in which a widow is cremated live with her dead husband - and all these get the powerful support of the media which makes the campaign effective. In many cases, it is the investigation by the media which brings such violation of human rights to the notice of the social action groups.

The press in recent years <sup>has</sup> ~~have~~ brought to the notice of the public as also of the judiciary the shocking practice of keeping people under trial in prison for years because of the continued delay in the disposal of such cases by the courts. There were cases exposed by the press in which a person spent in prison more years as an under-trial than what he would have ~~to~~ if sentenced in time.

In the last ten years, a new development in the field of human rights has been what is termed as "juristic activism". With ~~the~~ the encouragement and active support of some of the enlightened judges, the Supreme Court of India permitted any member of the public or a social organisation to move the court by just writing a letter to the court to seek relief on behalf of a person in custody or for enforcement of legal rights of a person belonging to a disadvantaged section of society. This has come to be known as Public Interest Litigation and has developed as a powerful arm of the human rights struggle.

The significant role played by the media in this new avenue for human rights enforcement has been very clearly pointed out by the



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then Chief Justice of India in course of an address before the Columbia University School of Law in October 1984:

"It is an interesting feature of Public Interest Litigation in India that it has received considerable impetus from the press. The press has tried consistently and fearlessly to expose governmental lawlessness, social tyranny and economic exploitation through investigation journalism which, barring a few aberrations, has been of a fairly high order. The exposes and revelations of the press have provided the substance of Public Interest Litigation. Social action groups have brought diverse actions in the courts by way of Public Interest Litigation on the basis of information provided by the press through investigative journalism. This has also enabled activist groups to elevate what were regarded as petty instances of injustice and tyranny at the local level into national issues, calling attention to the pathology of public and dominant group power. Social action groups thus have found in the press a new ally in their struggle for social development and change, and the relationship between social action groups and the press has provided a fertile ground for the growth of Public Interest Litigation."

A proud testimony indeed for India's communication medium in its commitment to upholding Human Rights.



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This brief survey of Indian experience of interaction between mass media and the struggle for human rights underlines the fact that the realisation of human rights is depended in the context of a developing economy on the realisation of human needs. It is not certainly a question of contraposing one against the other; at the same time, in the ultimate analysis the achievement of human rights for the greatest number can be possible and sustainable only when the basic human needs are met, whatever be the social system. In a country where there exists the <sup>a</sup>harrowing coexistence between five-star affluence and slum dwelling impoverishment, where conspicuous consumption is permitted next door to hungry mouths searching for morsels from dustbins, where the super-rich extravaganza is legitimate in a society where millions are unemployed, where 300 million are officially acknowledged as living below the poverty line and roughly two out of every three citizens are unlettered - in such a dehumanising condition, human rights can be sustained only when the right to be human is recognised.

Concomitant with that comes another question which is very much under discussion in the circles committed to the promotion of human rights in India: can human rights be claimed by those who resort to violence to achieve social objectives? The debate is on-going. One of the most perceptive champions of human rights in India, Upendra Baxi, Professor of Law at Delhi University and Director of Research at the Indian Law Institute, has presented this question in a recent article:

"It is clear, from even a bare perusal of real

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history -- that history which records the struggles of the impoverished masses to assert their right to be and remain human -- that violence has been a progenitor of new human rights and struggles to safeguard these. The liberal human rights model has great difficulties in even acknowledging this great historical truth. To do so will inevitably raise most discomforting theoretical issues: can violence by one man against another, one class against another, ever be justified? If it can, should there be a right to violence, a right to revolution recognized as human right? If so, how are we to articulate the conditions, circumstances and context of justification of the right to violence, to revolution? How does one conceptualize proletarian violence as inherently more than just the bourgeois violence? From the late medieval natural law discussions on whether, and when, tyrannicide is justified till the furtive discussions on the right to revolution in social contract theorists -- and that is probably all that we have as lineage in liberal thinking -- we find the liberal intellect arresting its potential for growth. In some kind of cognitive aminocentesis, the entire problematic is aborted. This, however, provides no justification for thinkers in the Third World to follow their mentors even in stillbirth. "

(India International Centre Quarterly)  
Vol 13, No.3-4, 1986

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All this questioning is not meant to belittle the importance of the struggle for human rights in India. Rather these are meant to reinforce the foundations of human rights and to enrich their contents. Experience has borne out that in India with its rich diversities within it and intense social tensions, interface between mass media and human rights is continuous and the growth of one strengthens the other.





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INDIA: BASIC DATA

Area: 3,287,590 sq. km.

Population: 732,256 million (1983 Census)

Density of population per sq.km.: 223 (1983 Census)

Literacy Rate: 36.23 per cent (1981 Census)

PRESS

Total No. of Newspapers and periodicals: 21,784 (1984)

Total Circulation: 6,11,47,000

No. of dailies : 1334

Aggregate circulation of dailies: 14,847 million

No. of English newspapers and periodicals (1982): 3,689

RADIO (ALL INDIA RADIO)

Reach of AIR: 95 per cent

No. of Broadcasting stations: 91

No. of medium, short and F.M. transmitters: 167

Total No. of radio sets: 50 million

TELEVISION (DOORDARSHAN)

Reach of Doordarshan: 70 per cent (1985)

No. of transmitters: 190

Total No. of receiver sets: 9.3 millions

CINEMA

No. of Feature films certified by  
the Central Board of Film Certification: 741 (1983)

No. of permanent cinema houses : 7522 (1983)

No. of touring cinemas : 4754

Total No. of cinema houses: 12,276

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COVERAGE OF HUMAN RIGHTS ISSUESAN ANALYSIS OF SELECTED ENGLISH DAILIES IN  
INDIA AND ALL INDIA RADIO AND DOORDARSHAN  
(TELEVISION) COVERAGE.

(The following report has been prepared with the cooperation of the Research and Publication Centre, Namedia Foundation, India)

For ascertaining the extent and type of coverage being given to human rights issues, four English dailies were content analysed, for one week each of September and October 1987. The dailies included:

Daily	Place of Publication	Circulation (in thousands)
1. Times of India	New Delhi	235
2. The Hindustan Times	New Delhi	295
3. The Telegraph	Calcutta	120
4. Deccan Herald	Bangalore	144

The Telegraph and Deccan Herald primarily cater to the Eastern and Southern regions respectively while the other two dailies have a nation-wide coverage. The Times of India is published from six towns; the Hindustan Times has two editions. The two weeks selected for analysis were: 6-13 September 1987 and 4-11 October 1987.

For ensuring an in-depth and reliable content analysis, the following aspects were studied:

1. Categories of items covered on the subject: categories were developed on the basis of human rights envisaged in the Constitution of India and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.
2. Format of coverage; whether it was a news item, article editorial etc.

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3. Source of coverage; whether the item came from a national news agency, a foreign agency, own correspondent or any other source.
4. Contents of items; items contained factual details only or it was informative/educative.
5. Placement of coverage; whether the item was carried on the front page, editorial page, prominent page or other not so important pages.
6. Context of coverage; whether it was in the national context or foreign context.

Besides these qualitative aspects of analysis, the size of the coverage was measured in column centimeters to ascertain the extent of space devoted to human rights issues.

EXTENT OF COVERAGE:

- In terms of percentage of news space: The Telegraph and The Hindustan Times provided a fairly adequate coverage to the human rights issues - 2.37 and 2.20 percent respectively. The Times of India devoted only 0.97 percent of the total news space while the Deccan Herald provided the lowest with 0.59 per cent.

- The Hindustan Times carried 70 items on the subject while The Times of India carried 34 items. The Telegraph with just 24 items devoted a much larger space as compared to the Times of India and Deccan Herald.

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EXTENT OF COVERAGE ON  
HUMAN RIGHTS ISSUES

Daily	No. of Items (Sept 6-13, 1987 and Oct 4-11, 1987)	Space in col.cms.	%age of Total News Space
1. The Times of India	34	804	0.97
2. The Hindustan Times	70	1839	2.20
3. The Telegraph	24	1375	2.37
4. Deccan Herald	32	441	0.59



TABLE I  
CATEGORYWISE ANALYSIS (TABLE I)

- Out of the four dailies examined The Hindustan Times carried the maximum number of items on human issues and also devoted the maximum space to the subject (1832 col. cms). Though Telegraph carried only 24 items on human rights in terms of space it emerged to be the second highest.

- Categorywise analysis shows that all the four papers laid emphasis on a variety of aspects of the question of human rights. For example, The Hindustan Times and the Deccan Herald carried 22 and 9 items under the category 'equality' (category 7) while The Times of India and the Telegraph had no items under this head. However, Category 12 (others) uniformly figured in all the papers because of the incident of Sati in Deorala (Rajasthan) was placed under this category. Since the period chosen for the study was 6th-13th September and 4th-11th October, and the incident of Sati took place on the 4th of September a bias in the findings could have emerged. But a point to be noted is that, the newspapers and other media did not take up the incident, immediately. News coverage and articles and comments started coming in after a lapse of a couple of days.

TABLE I

Number of Items and Space covered by Human Rights Issues

Categories	Times of India		The Hindustan Times		The Telegraph		Deccan Herald	
	6-13 Sept 1987	4-11 Oct 1987	6-13 Sept 1987	4-11 Oct 1987	6-13 Sept 1987	4-11 Oct 1987	6-13 Sept 1987	4-11 Oct 1987
1. Individual Liberty	-	-	-	4 (169)	-	-	1 (5)	3 (78)
2. Security of the Person	2 (43)	1 (8)	3 (73)	2 (47)	2 (118)	2 (45)	-	1 (26)
3. Freedom of Assembly and Association	-	1 (17)	-	2 (49)	-	1 (34)	1 (33)	-
4. Freedom of Movement	1 (30)	1 (5)	1 (34)	3 (33.5)	1 (55)	1 (7)	1 (19)	-
5. Right to carry on Business	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
6. Right to Privacy	-	1 (30)	-	-	-	-	-	-
7. Equality	-	-	9 (233)	13 (857)	-	-	4 (56)	5 (120)
8. Freedom of Thought and Speech	3 (79)	6 (152)	5 (207)	3 (101)	1 (150)	1 (100)	1 (8)	1 (30)
9. Freedom of Religion	-	-	-	3 (38.5)	-	-	-	-
10. Academic Freedom	1 (17)	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
11. Right to Property	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
12. Others	3 (129)	14 (294)	3 (97)	19 (544)	1 (312)	14 (1189)	4 (129)	10 (187)
Total	10 (298)	24 (506)	21 (644)	49 (1839)	5 (635)	19 (1375)	12 (250)	20 (441)

Figures in brackets denote space covered in column centimeters.

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TABLE II  
FORMAT OF COVERAGE

1. In terms of format, the coverage given to human rights issues could be considered as satisfactory in The Hindustan Times and The Telegraph which concentrated more on articles, editorials etc. While The Times of India concentrated mostly on 'news items'.
2. The Hindustan Times carried 8 articles 2 editorials and 6 news-analyses, 5 letters to the Editor and two photo-features on human rights in the two weeks. These formats accounted for about two third of the total space devoted to the subject while 'news items' formed the remaining coverage.
3. The Telegraph also carried 7 articles, 1 editorial, 2 letters to the Editor, and 2 photo-features. The Deccan Herald carried 2 editorials on the subject. Only The Times of India, which otherwise gave a relatively less coverage, carried mostly the news items.

TABLE II

Formatwise Number of Items and Space covered by Human Rights Issues

Format of Coverage	Times of India		The Hindustan Times		The Telegraph		Deccan Herald	
	6-13 Sept 1987	4-11 Oct 1987	6-13 Sept 1987	4-11 Oct 1987	6-13 Sept 1987	4-11 Oct 1987	6-13 Sept 1987	4-11 Oct 1987
1. News Items	10 (298)	20 (397)	13 (198)	33 (637.5)	3 (173)	9 (265)	9 (193)	17 (307)
2. Article (Contributed)	-	1 (90)	2 (164)	6 (944)	1 (150)	3 (406)	-	1 (48)
3. Article (Own Correspondent)	-	-	-	-	1 (312)	2 (414)	-	-
4. Editorial	-	-	-	2 (71)	-	1 (50)	1 (32)	1 (40)
5. News Analysis	-	-	3 (123)	3 (78)	-	-	-	-
6. Letter to Editor	-	3 (19)	1 (64)	4 (91)	-	2 (111)	2 (25)	1 (46)
7. Photo Feature	-	-	1 (56)	1 (16)	-	2 (129)	-	-
8. Others	-	-	1 (38)	-	-	-	-	-

Figures in brackets denote space covered in column centimeters.



TABLE III

SOURCES OF INFORMATION

- 'Own Correspondents' accounted for a substantial coverage of human rights issues in all the four dailies more in the case of The Times of India and The Hindustan Times. These two dailies, presumably, have a longer number of its own correspondents because of their larger circulation and multiple editions.
- The national news agencies also contributed a significant coverage on the subject in the four dailies during the two weeks.

TABLE III

Sourcewise Number of Items Covered on Human Rights Issues

Source of Information	Times of India		The Hindustan Times		The Telegraph		Deccan Herald	
	6-13 Sept 1987	4-11 Oct 1987	6-13 Sept 1987	4-11 Oct 1987	6-13 Sept 1987	4-11 Oct 1987	6-13 Sept 1987	4-11 Oct 1987
1. National News Agency	3	2	13	1	6	4	10	
2. Foreign News Agency	-	1	5	-	2	1	3	
3. Own Correspondent	7	17	19	2	4	4	4	
4. Editor	-	-	2	2	1	1	1	
5. Contributor (for article)	-	1	6	1	3	-	1	
6. Readers (for letters)	-	3	4	-	2	2	1	
7. Others	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	

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TABLE IV  
CONTENTS OF COVERAGE

- A significant proportion of coverage on human rights in all the four dailies was 'informative and education'. Violation of human rights also formed an adequate proportion of the total coverage.
- Number of items containing merely 'factual information' were relatively small in the four dailies.

TABLE IV  
Contents and Number of Items Covered on Human Rights Issues

Contents	Times of India		The Hindustan Times		The Telegraph		Deccan Herald	
	6-13 Sept 1987	4-11 Oct 1987	6-13 Sept 1987	4-11 Oct 1987	6-13 Sept 1987	4-11 Oct 1987	6-13 Sept 1987	4-11 Oct 1987
1. Factual Details	5	14	6	16	2	9	5	2
2. Informative/ Educative about Human Rights	2	5	4	15	3	2	2	12
3. Violation of Human Rights	2	5	11	14	-	8	3	6
4. Others	1	-	-	1	-	-	2	-



TABLE V

PLACEMENT OF COVERAGE

- Almost the entire coverage of human rights issues was carried on important pages like the front page, editorial page or other prominent pages. Again, it was only The Times of India which carried quite a few items on 'not-so-important pages'.

TABLE V

## Placement of Coverage of Items on Human Rights Issues

Placement	The Times of India		The Hindustan Times		The Telegraph		Deccan Herald	
	6-13 Sept 1937	4-11 Oct 1937	6-13 Sept 1937	4-11 Oct 1937	6-13 Sept 1937	4-11 Oct 1937	6-13 Sept 1937	4-11 Oct 1937
1. Front Page	3	4	3	6	-	5	4	3
2. Editorial Page	-	3	3	3	1	6	3	4
3. Prominent Page	2	5	11	26	1	7	5	10
4. Supplement	-	2	4	9	1	-	-	3
5. Others	5	10	-	7	2	1	-	-

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TABLE VI  
MAIN EMPHASIS OF COVERAGE

- 'Political' and 'social' aspects of human rights accounted for a significant proportion of coverage while the issues having 'economic' implications attracted very little attention during the two weeks.

TABLE VI

Main Emphasis in Items Covered on Human Rights Issues

Area of Emphasis	Times of India		The Hindustan Times		The Telegraph		Deccan Herald	
	6-13 Sept 1987	4-11 Oct 1987	6-13 Sept 1987	4-11 Oct 1987	6-13 Sept 1987	4-11 Oct 1987	6-13 Sept 1987	4-11 Oct 1987
1. Political	8	10	9	24	4	6	4	8
2. Economic	1	--	1	3	--	--	--	3
3. Social	1	--	11	20	--	--	4	9
4. Sex	--	14	--	2	1	13	4	4



TABLE VII  
CONTEXT OF COVERAGE

- The fact that almost the entire coverage on human rights issues was in the 'national context' is significant. Very little attention was paid to human rights issues outside India.

TABLE VII

Context of Coverage of Items on Human Rights Issues

Context	Times of India		The Hindustan Times		The Telegraph		Deccan Herald	
	6-13 Sept 1987	4-11 Oct 1987	6-13 Sept 1987	4-11 Oct 1987	6-13 Sept 1987	4-11 Oct 1987	6-13 Sept 1987	4-11 Oct 1987
1. National	10	23	17	41	5	18	10	13
2. Foreign	--	1	2	18	--	2	2	4
3. International	--	--	2	--	--	--	--	3

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RAD IO

COVERAGE OF HUMAN RIGHTS ISSUES BY  
ALL INDIA RADIO DURING SEPTEMBER  
6-13, 1987 AND OCTOBER 4-11, 1987

1. During September 6-13, 1987 one item (international commission of Jurists on Human Rights violation in Pakistan. Visit of 11 members of Commission to Pakistan and the report of their visit) was broadcast at 14.00 hours (100 words) and repeated the same day at 21.00 hours (66 words).
2. During October 4-11, 1987, one item (US Senate support human rights in Tibet) was broadcast at 14.00 hours (91 words)
3. These news items were broadcast in English and all major Indian language broadcasts both in the Home and External Services.
4. No talk or discussion on human rights was broadcast during the two weeks mentioned in September and October 1987.
5. There are no specific guidelines or policy decisions regarding coverage of human rights in All India Radio.

TELEVISION

COVERAGE OF HUMAN RIGHTS ISSUES BY DOORDARSHAN  
(INDIAN TELEVISION) DURING THE TWO WEEKS -  
September 6-13, 1987 and October 4-11, 1987).

1. During September 6-13, 1987, not a single items on human rights issues was telecast.
2. During the week October 4-11, 1987, eight items were telecast with a total duration of 6 minutes and 95 seconds. Out of the eight items, 4 items pertained to World Habitat Day (Shelter for the homeless) (October 1, 1987) two items on Tibet (curfew and sealing of monasteries and coming in of military police), one item each on Tribals in Bangladesh and anti-Sati procession in Jaipur. All the eight items had visual support.
3. On October 5, 1987, Doordarshan telecast a UN Documentary 'Shelter for the Homeless' with a duration of 25 minutes. It was telecast late in the night at 10.25 PM
4. The programmes for 'women' and 'Rural Audiences' did not carry any item on the subject.
5. Three episodes each of the two sponsored serials 'Aur Bhi Hain Rahein' and 'Pratham Pratishruti' dealing with women's rights were telecast on September 6 and 13, 1987, and October 11, 1987.