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Mehra, Achal

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Seminar Report

By

Achal Mehra

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COMMUNICATION DEVELOPMENT AND HUMAN RIGHTS

SEMINAR REPORT

Bangalore, India

9-11 May 1988

Report prepared by Dr. Achal Mehra, Seminar Coordinator
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AMIC-ISS-MERIC SEMINAR ON COMMUNICATION DEVELOPMENT AND HUMAN RIGHTS

Bangalore, 9-11 May 1988

Introduction

The past four decades have witnessed considerable growth in the communication capabilities of developing countries. But the corresponding development in human rights coverage by the media has been lacking.

With the view of exploring ways to strengthen the role of the mass media in protecting human rights, the Asian Mass Communication Research and Information Centre (AMIC), Singapore, the Institute of Social Studies (ISS), The Netherlands, and the Mass Media Educational Research and Information Center (MERIC), India, with support from the Swedish International Development Authority (SIDA), Sweden, and the Nederlandse Organisatie voor Internationale Ontwikkelingssamenwerking (NOVIB), The Netherlands, organized a Seminar on Communication Development and Human Rights in Bangalore from 9-11 May 1988.

The seminar was timed to commemorate the 40th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the 10th anniversary of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO) Mass Media Declaration.

Participants

Eighteen participants from seven Asian countries, as well as from Sweden and The Netherlands, participated in the seminar. The participants included human rights activists, media practitioners, civil rights attorneys and academicians. A complete list of participants is attached as Appendix 1.

Programme

The seminar was held from 9-11 May 1988 at Hotel Ashok, Bangalore. A detailed programme is attached as Appendix 2.

Introducing the conceptual and contextual framework of the seminar, Professor Cees Hamelink, of ISS, noted that the Universal Declaration was the most widely accepted international document and its vitality and universality was reflected in the pledge that all nations took every year to it. Professor Hamelink identified the four central issues in the international human rights debate as: universalism v. relativism of values, rights and remedies; permissible restraints on the rights; differentiation among the several rights, i.e. core rights and participation rights; and the mechanisms for enforcing the rights.

Participants debated the universalism of human rights, focusing principally on the level at which cultural relativism came into play. Justice Rajinder Sachar, a former Chief Justice of the Delhi High Court, and currently

President, Peoples' Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL), and Mr. Navroz Seervai, a civil rights lawyer and activist, asserted that the principles, values and rights embodied in the universal declaration were universal and could not be subordinated to cultural mores or collective needs.

Some participants argued, however, that the interpretation of the values and the rights was culturally dependant. Professor Ashwini Ray, Secretary, Peoples' Union for Democratic Rights (PUDR) and professor of political science at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, observed that in post-colonial democracies, the modern institution of state often utilized traditional structures for entrenching inequities and oppression. He maintained that there was a direct correlation between political authority and traditional structures of oppression in these societies.

The seminar heard country reports from Indonesia, Malaysia, Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. While the participants from South Asian countries were generally critical of the mass media's coverage of human rights issues, their colleagues from Southeast Asian countries were more sanguine.

Mr. Tribuana Said, Editor, *Waspada*, said that the Indonesian press had a long history of struggling for human rights, but he criticized the emergence in his country of a press based on liberal western traditions. He outlined the Pancasila press system of Indonesia and noted that in Indonesian culture the good of the majority had precedence over individual rights.

In his presentation, Mr. Rejal Arbee, Editor-in-Chief, Bernama, discussed recent political developments in Malaysia and traced the genesis of the federal constitution. He said the fragility of Malaysia's ethnic structure created unique problems in governing the country, which the media, both foreign and domestic, need to recognize.

Mr. Sinha Ratnatunga, Deputy Editor, Independent Newspapers, pointed out that consideration of human rights abuses should not be limited to state-individual relations. Violence by individuals and the state's reaction to such violence is also a cause of human rights abuses, like in Sri Lanka, he said. Mr. Mahfuz Ullah, Editor, *Lokejan*, criticized the Bangladesh media's coverage of human rights and noted that even when human rights issues are covered by the media, the reportage is weak and incomplete and the fact that a human rights abuse is involved is rarely pointed out.

Mr. Sa'adat Rizvi, Assistant News Editor, Pakistan Press International, in a passionate presentation, bewailed the state of human rights in Pakistan and lamented the role of the media. Pakistan, he said, had turned its back on the vision and dreams of its founding father Mohammad Ali Jinnah.

Mr. Nikhil Chakravarty, editor, *Mainstream*, said the declaration of an emergency in 1975 by Mrs. Indira Gandhi, which drastically restricted the civil rights of citizens, was a fillip to human rights movements in India and generated deep public consciousness on the subject. The media share the credit for this, he said. He identified eleven categories of human rights struggles in

which the Indian media had played a significant, even decisive, role, including women's rights, communalism, caste oppression, rural poor, labour, industrial safety, health and family planning, popularization of science and the environment and press freedom.

The participants were all agreed that the media can play a strong role in informing and educating people about human rights. Several participants cautioned, however, that the role of the media in the human rights struggle should not be exaggerated. Mr. T.J.S. George, former editor of *Asiaweek* and currently consultant with the *Indian Express*, argued that the media could not and should not be the prime leaders and instigators of social and political causes; they serve merely to inform.

Professor Ray asserted that he was pessimistic about the role of the media in the human rights struggle, arguing that they could not be expected to rise above the level of democratic consciousness and biases of society. Even the human rights movement, he said, was not a substitute for a wider social/political revolution.

While acknowledging the structural and practical limitations of the media, AMIC's Senior Programme Specialist and Workshop Coordinator Dr. Achal Mehra nonetheless insisted that human rights reporting in the media can be strengthened if human rights organizations understood the idiom of the media. He proposed that pamphlets be prepared to educate human rights organizations on how to effectively communicate their messages to the media by training them

in media strategy and sensitizing them to the values and imperatives of journalism.

Dr. Mehra criticized the media for harping exclusively on political rights abuses to the exclusion of social, cultural and economic injustices. Human rights abuses have many faces, he said, some familiar and ugly, others more subtle and even respectable, such as those represented by the global economic inequities and the status of women all over the world.

The contribution of new communication technologies in the human rights struggle was also debated by the seminar participants. Mr. Chanchal Sarkar, former Director, Press Institute of India, and Mr. Goran Hedebro, Media Adviser, SIDA, felt that low-cost new communication technologies offered the media and human rights organizations new opportunities to strengthen coverage of human rights abuses. Some other participants, however, argued that new technologies benefited the oppressors more than the oppressed.

The role of the international media evoked considerable debate among participants. Mr. M.A.S. Rajan, Chairman, MERIC, said coverage of human rights abuses by the international media often had a salutary effect upon governments. But Dr. K.E. Eapen, Professor Emeritus, University Grants Commission, and Mr. George were dubious about the motives and consequences of the western media's shallow reportage of developing societies.

Participants proposed the establishment of national human rights

information networks and the development of a training manual on human rights reporting for Asia. They said the networks and manual would help strengthen human rights reporting by making needed information available to the media and by sensitizing journalists to the depth and breadth of the human rights problems in the region. They also recommended that human rights reporting should be incorporated into the curricula of journalism training programmes and exhorted press organizations to conduct short-term workshops on human rights reporting for journalists. The seminar report is attached as Appendix 3.

At the closing ceremony, AMIC Secretary General Mr. Vijay Menon promised that AMIC would strive to implement the seminar recommendations. The seminar papers will be published by AMIC for presentation to UNESCO Director General in Barcelona, Spain, in July.

Seminar Evaluation

Both the organization and contents of the seminar were highly commended by the seminar participants. The seminar was perceived to have blended the right mix of theoretical/philosophical discussion and practical action in the form of group reports to implement specific ideas that emerged during the discussion. One participant commented that "the seminar's content was concrete, substantive and of tremendous importance to national development"

Recommendations

Several viable proposals emerged both in the seminar's final report and in the course of the discussions. One participant captured the general feeling of all participants when he wrote that the "follow-up should match the enthusiasm" of this "very stimulating" seminar. In that spirit, the following specific projects are proposed for implementation:

1. National human rights information networks that will link the disparate human rights groups and make accessible to the media critical information on human rights abuses and human rights organizations throughout the country. The Peoples' Union for Civil Liberties has agreed to implement a pilot project in India if adequate funds are made available.

After evaluating the success of the Indian project, similar networks can be explored for other Asian countries. These national networks, in turn, can be linked by a regional network for exchanges between the countries of Asia.

2. Journalism education organizations should be persuaded to include human rights reporting in their curricula. This can be done by adding sessions to existing courses, adding new courses and inviting human rights activists and scholars to professional classes. A roster of speakers available to speak on the subject can be prepared and made available to journalism educational institutions. Professional organizations, like AMIC, the Press Foundation of Asia, The Asia-Pacific Broadcasting Union (ABU), etc. should include sessions

on human rights reporting in their regular training programmes and organize short workshops on the subject.

3. A manual on human rights reporting should be developed. The manual could cover laws and constitutional provisions on human rights; international documents (including information on countries that have ratified the conventions and ones that have not); international machinery for enforcing these rights; sources of information; data collection and evaluation; writing human rights stories, etc., as well as examples of exemplary human rights reporting.

4. Booklets advising human rights organizations on techniques to gain access to the media should be developed.

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Seminar Report

The mass media play a central role in educating people about the importance of human rights and in exposing their abuses. To facilitate the media's ability to perform these roles, the participants to the seminar believe that access to information on human rights as well as the professional skills of journalists need to be enhanced. Toward that objective, the following recommendations are proposed:

Human Rights Information Networks: National networks linking the media with human rights organizations throughout the country should be established. The networks will have a central clearinghouse in each country, which will issue periodic newsletters to other human rights organizations as well as the media on reports submitted by members of the network. The central clearinghouse will also house the detailed reports provided by members for access by the media and other interested in human rights issues. In this way, the network will serve not only to link the different human rights organizations, but also make their information accessible to the media. The national central clearinghouses can later serve as nodes for a regional network to be established once the national networks are in place.

A pilot project can be implemented in India. Efforts should be made by AMIC to secure funding for this operation. The possibility of collaboration with HURIDOCS should be explored.

Incorporating Human Rights Reporting into Journalism

Curricula: The Board of Journalism Studies at Universities should examine the modalities of incorporating the teaching of human rights reporting into their programmes. This can be done in the form of new courses, by building sessions on the subject into existing courses, or by inviting guest lecturers. National rosters of resource persons drawn from among human rights organizations and activists should be developed for the use of journalism educators.

National and regional media training organizations, like AMIC, The Press Foundation of Asia, The Asia Pacific Broadcasting Union, national press institutes, editors guilds, journalists unions, etc. should include sessions on human rights reporting into their existing training programmes and organize workshops on human rights reporting for working professionals. International organizations, like UNESCO, IPDC and other international aid bodies should be approached to finance these activities.

Manual on Human Rights Reporting: A manual on human rights reporting should be developed for use by journalists. The manual could cover laws and constitutional provisions on human rights; the text of international

documents (including information on countries that have ratified international human rights conventions and ones that have not); international machinery for enforcing these rights; glossary of terms; sources of information at the national, regional and international level; data collection and evaluation; leading human rights cases in the region; techniques for reporting and writing human rights stories; examples of exemplary human rights reports, etc. To be effective, the manual should be authored by Asians familiar with the structures and constraints of Asian conditions and should be translated into local languages.

Booklets on Mass Media and Human Rights Organizations: Short booklets advising human rights organizations on ways to gain access to the media should be developed. The booklets can explain the imperatives and idiom of the media and media strategy for effective communication. They can also explain the use of traditional media for communicating human rights messages.