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Datta-Ray, Sunanda K.

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PRESS FREEDOM AND PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS IN ASIA

By SUNANDA K. DATTA-RAY

Ironically, the most serious challenge that press freedom faces in parts of Asia today is not from any of the traditional threats but from the quest for a better life. According to the new gospel, a high gross domestic product is incompatible with the unfettered written or spoken word.

Not that it is very logical to generalize about such a vast and diverse landmass as Asia. This is not to say that certain mystic bonds may not have united the countries of Asia in antiquity. But in the last two or three centuries — the period that saw the emergence of a modern media — most of the countries of the region have been so profoundly influenced by Western systems that the most obvious linkage is not between the newspapers of one Asian country and another, but between the newspapers of colonized and colonial nations. In spite of all that is said and written today about common dynamics, I am wary, therefore, of speaking in terms of an Asian identity in any sphere.

This hesitation would earn the disapproval of those for whom miracle growth rates have lent a dimension of defiance to the Asian triumphalism that owed so much to the anti-colonial thrust of India's Jawaharlal Nehru. But while Nehru borrowed freely from the liberal doctrines of Western political philosophy, many of today's Asian leaders would have it that there is nothing to borrow. If they revert at all to the colonial heritage, it is to dwell on its negative aspects. But there is no denying that, like so many other institutions including even the concept of the nation-state, the modern Asian media, too, is a colonial growth. Some of our most respected publications were started by the former rulers to serve expatriate communities and interests. Others emerged in response to the colonial press, either in emulation or repudiation. What binds them together today is a sense of nationalism.

This is, perhaps, the strongest distinguishing feature of the media in all Asian countries. Han Fook Kwang, political editor of *The Straits Times*, did not mince matters in affirming robustly that "the one guiding principle" of the paper "is an editorial policy of always being pro-Singaporean." The media personnel in other countries might be less forthright, but they are no less dedicated to the national interest. Two points arise from this commitment. First, one nation's meat being often another nation's poison, in continental terms, nationalism can be more of a divisive than a unifying factor. Even if Asia is not only a geographical expression, what is pro-South Korea, for instance, is obviously not pro-North Korea. Second, events have shown in country after country that it is only too easy to identify the national interest with the interest of the ruling party, or of the government of the day.

Leave aside the common factor of nationalism, and you will find that conditions of press freedom and professional standards vary greatly from one Asian country to another. Each has developed its own special idiosyncrasies. Indonesia, apparently, practises the system of *wartawan amplop*, or envelope journalism. Cambodia seems to revel in a lusty free-for-all with newspapers describing prime ministers as "rats" and "less than human excrement", and portraying their wives with pigs' snouts. Perhaps in return, Cambodian journalists live under the shadow of death. Similarly, Sondhi Limthongkul, publisher of the *Asian Times*, says that when he "was asked by representatives of one recent Thai

government to stop publishing stories detrimental to them, they accompanied the request with a death threat." A group of eight assassins was sent to his office early one morning, but, luckily, Limthongkul had been tipped off. It would be *lese-majeste* for Thai newspapers to direct at their monarch even a fraction of what the British media regards as normal coverage of its own royal family. Provision for demanding a security deposit, under Clause 10 of the 1984 Printing Presses and Publications Act, might be unique to Malaysia. Unique to Singapore is the device of management shares which secures effective control of all newspaper companies. While all media enterprises in Vietnam belong either to the party, the government or to social and political organizations, "top managers must be approved by the government."

The association is even closer among Communist Chinese, and I must confess to not being able to decide whether Xinhua news agency's chief in Hongkong is a government official doubling up as a newsman, or a newsman who also performs the functions of a government official. Myanmar's state-controlled press has risen manfully to the challenge of democracy by denouncing Nobel Peace laureate Aung San Suu Kyi and her supporters as "poisonous snakes", "maggots" and "lackeys of colonialism." It is probably only in post-Marcos Philippines that a government leader would agree with Mahatma Gandhi's belief that "the national cause will never suffer by honest criticism of national institutions and national policies", which is still the underlying rationale of government-press relations in India.

This diversity makes it clear enough that the state of the Asian press is not far removed from the state of Asian politics. Subscribing to the currently fashionable view, a German academic at Singapore's Institute of South-east Asian Studies not only lauded the achievements of the Asian Tigers as a fruit of authoritarian rule, but also dismissed democracy in India and the Philippines as "only happenstance". The first postulation is central to the denial of those liberties of which press freedom is an integral part; the second is arrant nonsense. If we agree that the colonial heritage is the most important determinant for press and politics alike, we must also agree that, upon gaining independence, each Asian country tempered that inheritance in the light of national perceptions.

Colonial rule offered a bewildering mix of autocracy and liberalism, of sturdy defence of the imperial interests and courageous opposition to the government of the day. In British India, for instance, newspapers could be asked to deposit a security as surety of good behaviour. At the same time, the British owned and edited daily, *The Statesman*, was frequently at loggerheads with the viceregal regime, becoming particularly unpopular when it published photographs of dead and dying people while the authorities were denying the Great Bengal Famine of 1942. Each former colony has retained from this heritage what it finds most useful. When Indonesia closed down three leading weeklies -- *Tempo*, *Editor* and *DeTik* -- a writer in the *Asian Wall Street Journal* recalled that such actions enjoyed a long lineage, reaching back to 1774 when the Dutch colonial administration had ordered the closure of a newspaper called *Batavia Nouvelles* that an expatriate had founded.

Others, besides India and the Philippines, had as much opportunity of nursing parliamentary democracy and a free press. If they did not do so, it is because they were not equal to their inheritance. You see this most dramatically in Africa. But new Asian governments also take from the variety of the colonial buffet only what appeals to them. Myanmar and Sri Lanka were both ruled by the British. Both inherited similar institutions and value systems. The difference in their present priorities is largely attributable to the

difference in the Myanmarese and Sinhalese temperament. When Mrs Sirimavo Bandaranaike did try to clamp down on the Sri Lankan press, her censors missed a tongue-in-cheek obituary notice mourning the demise of a certain gentleman called D.E.M. O'Cracy. Such a lapse would be unthinkable under Myanmar's egregious State Law and Order Restoration Council.

In one significant respect, however, the media in even the most enlightened of Asian countries is justified in deviating from the Western norm of a free press. And that is in its heightened awareness of the community with which it interacts. In a 1985 issue of the *Columbia Journalism Review*, Herbert Gans advanced the thesis that "the rules of news judgment call for ignoring story implications". This publish-and-be-damned philosophy explains much of the muck-raking reporting in the Western media that passes for investigative journalism. It is a luxury that responsible Asian newspapers, usually operating in a potentially inflammable mix of race, religion and politics, cannot afford. "If a bus collides with a bicycle, we can't say the driver was Chinese and the rider was Javanese", says Aristides Katoppo, senior editor of Jakarta's *Suara Pembaruan*. In India, the government traced a connection between the BBC's live coverage, relayed through the Star network, of the demolition by Hindu fanatics of a medieval Muslim mosque in the winter of 1992 and the vandalism and violence of retaliatory protests that erupted thousands of miles from the scene of the vandalism. But since press freedom goes hand in hand with democratic rights in India, the government did not impose curbs on either the BBC or Star TV.

However, even some Western authorities acknowledge the wisdom of suspending certain basic freedoms east of Suez. Though censorship ended in Britain in 1695 when the Licensing Act lapsed and was not renewed, the British administration of Hongkong clung to the right to prohibit "false news likely to alarm public opinion or disturb public order". Acutely aware that this legitimate concern for community harmony and social stability can be abused for political ends, Hongkong journalists have been demanding the repeal of the government's reserve powers before sovereignty is transferred to the People's Republic of China. They do not expect the PRC to exercise the same restraint or demonstrate the same respect for press freedom. As the *Eastern Express* put it, "being a member of the media in post-1997 Hongkong will be like facing a gunman with his finger on the trigger. Although the gunman guarantees not to fire, the threat is overwhelming."

But why go so far? Or wait so long? When Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, Malaysia's deputy prime minister, told a Hongkong seminar in 1994 that "it is altogether shameful, if ingenious, to cite Asian values as an excuse for autocratic practices and denial of basic rights and civil liberties", he was in effect admitting that such abuse does take place.

Less sophisticated controls are not unknown either. The very fact that China is so seldom included in these discussions underscores a glaringly unhappy truth. Not only does China not accept any internationally recognized codes of journalism, but the rest of Asia -- and, indeed, the world -- seems to have acquiesced in China's right to exemption. Even the old Soviet Union was not treated so leniently. Moscow would not have called its two principal publications *Pravda* (truth) and *Izvestia* (news) if it had not felt obliged to make some obeisance at the altar of free and objective journalism. In doing so, of course, the Soviets exposed themselves to the old joke that there was no *pravda* in *Izvestia*, and no *izvestia* in *Pravda*.

I can think of three reasons why the Chinese are spared such strictures and mockery. First, unlike the Soviets, they make no concession to world opinion, and are, therefore, accepted at their own valuation. Second -- and more important perhaps -- the prospect of returns from a booming market of 1.2 billion people is enough to stifle conscience. So does fear of a rising nuclear power that has inherited the mantle of a Middle Kingdom that divided the world between only subjects and tributaries.

The traditional instruments of control in countries that are less authoritarian than China and Myanmar include restrictions on ownership, licences for publication, rationed newsprint, foreign exchange regulations, and selective advertising. For various reasons, and in various countries, both proprietors and journalists are also often the targets of official attention. The former are especially vulnerable when they have other business interests to protect, or nurse political ambitions. It might not have been quite so easy to influence the latter if, by and large, Asian newspapers did not pay so badly -- even by Asia's own wage levels -- that journalists often have to look to others for material necessities.

But money is not the root of all evil. Nor is it the solvent of all problems. High wages do not rule out a stick-and-carrot system that is especially effective in tightly-controlled societies. As already noted, calls on nationalism and social responsibility can be exploited. The media's *raison d'être* being news, it is dependent on news sources, which is synonymous with the government in most Asian countries. Inclusion in special delegations, membership of committees, and titles where such honours survive can be far more effective than the crude bribery of envelope journalism. They are all invitations to self-censorship which is more suffocating than any explicit law. The danger is not exclusively Asian. As Tom Wicker of the *New York Times* wrote, "the danger of being seduced by having Henry Kissinger call you by your first name" was one of the pitfalls of American journalism of his time. But the phenomenon might be more common in societies with a relatively small catchment area from which the elite is drawn, and where public life is dominated by a single leader whose frown or smile can make all the difference.

These are the perils round which the media has always had to steer. The new danger looming ahead is the implication that press freedom, like untrammelled democracy, somehow constitutes a deterrent to economic growth. When Asians trot out this thesis, it is usually to make a virtue of political expediency. When patronizing Westerners (like the German academic at the ISEAS) endorse their views, the clear implication is that democracy and press freedom, fruits of the European Enlightenment, are intrinsic only to Western civilization, Asian societies not yet being ready for either. Pejorative references to the Philippines' lower economic growth and to India's political pluralism seek to uphold the contention that a free press impedes growth. The movement towards greater representation that is evident in South Korea and Taiwan is cited to support the further thesis that only when an Asian country has made enough money can it qualify for civilizational progress.

If the argument is carried further, it would suggest that the more prosperous a country, the greater the press freedom that it enjoys, and the higher its media's professional standards. We might then forget all about trying to improve the press and concentrate only on the Asian Dream of making money, confident that national wealth will automatically foster vigorously independent newspapers.

I do not deny that things might work out that way in the long term. But it will be a very long term indeed. It is like saying to the long-suffering Myanmarese that their travails will be over only when the SLORC's nation-building efforts succeed in attracting enough direct foreign investment to give an impetus to domestic industry so that the ripple effect creates prosperity for everyone: only then will people be able to afford to wallow in the luxury of political democracy and the liberty to say and write what they will. What, I wonder, is the GDP benchmark that has to be reached for SLORC to step down in favour of a more relaxed and representative regime? I am reminded of the man who went to an astrologer and was told that he would suffer the pains of poverty and hunger for 20 years. "And then?" asked the client anxiously, convinced that he would strike it rich at the end of two decades of deprivation. "You'll have got used to it!", was the laconic reply.

Those who claim that press freedom must wait on economic growth may not, of course, be indulging in cynicism or casuistry. They might well believe in this order of priorities. But the logic does seem to me to be curiously tortuous in the aftermath of a Cold War in which, we are told, the totalitarian order was routed by the champions of the Free World. ENDS.

Former Editor, The Statesman (Calcutta and Delhi)

Former Director, United News of India

Former Editor-in-Residence, East-West Center, Honolulu

Now Editorial Consultant, The Straits Times, Singapore