Pluralism issues in the South Asia media

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PLURALISM ISSUES In The SOUTH ASIA MEDIA

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In the late thirties and the forties two rival nationalisms, one represented by the Congress and the other by the Muslim League, dominated the politics of South Asia. Each of the two commanded the allegiance of all the sub-groups constituting the respective Super-groups. Life was very simple. No diversities based on ideology, ethnicity, class disparity, sectarian affiliation and unequal regional development seemed to matter much. Particularisms arising from the conseiousness of sect, caste, class and linguistic affinity received only grudging recognition. Feminism was not much more than a fit subject for literary writings by sensitive souls. Newspaper readers never saw Jharkhand or the Seraiki region or the Brahvi language mentioned in reports or comments.

This era of simple political faith ended rather abruptly soon after the dawn of freedom. Monolithic unity was a thing of the past, and diversities began to assert themselves. Nevertheless the leaderships of the two countries put before thamselves a unitarian political model. Both India and Pakistan adopted highly centripetal constitutions deriving their inspiration from the 1935 Act. Both set store by a centralised administration run by powerful bureaucracy, of course the trend being incomparably more pronounced in Pakistan. And in this country polices have often borne the impress of elitism, unitarianism and regimentation. Regional economic imbalances have grown in both countries partly because of demographic, resource endowment and other factors but also partly because the politicians and bureaucrats belonging to the dominant regions are partial to their own regions.

Democracy and federalism together provide mechanisms for resolving conflicts, promoting social equity and affording to a pluralist society's weaker sections access to the policy-making organs of the political system. But they do so only in the long run. In the short run democracy and federalism seem to work towards the contrary end of intensifying and multiplying conflicts by awakening the economically weak and politically marginalised communities and making them assertive and rebellious. What one witnesses in South Asia is the simultaneous working of two contrary processes of integration and assimilation on the one hand and differentiation and fragmentation on the other. Nevertheless it is clear that the developments of the past four-and-a-half decades have strengthened the pluralistic orientation of South Asian Society.

How have the mass media of South Asia acquitted themselves in relation to the complex demands made by

pluralism? The impulse of an editor if he is not a born Fascist is to follow a liberal and eclectic policy of accommodation in dealing with matters concerning disparate sections of society. There is a subjective inclination to be fair to the weak minorities and marginal groups and even to accord them some weightage in the allocation of space. But such an impluse does not go very far. A newspaper's autonomy is circumscribed by several factors, some having to do with the particular newspaper's own survival and progress in the market and some arising from the constraints imposed by the given community's political culture, more particularly that of its dominant groups and of the Establishment.Let us first take the market. A newspaper is always under a complulsion to bear in mind the sensitivities of the dominant groups among its readers. It will risk losing its circulation and eventually also its advertising revenue if large sections of its readership find their concerns and interests being subordinated to those of lesser groups, particularly those deemed to be rivals. The market is always partial to the dominant groups and scornful of the marginal ones. Here an editor has to keep his liberal, pluralistic impulses under control in what he may feel are the larger interests of the newspapers' survival and solvency. Now we come to the political culture of the dominant groups which imposes harsh limits on the way the media work, especially in situations of conflict involving the economic or political interests of these groups. The constraints arising from political culture are sometimes seriously prejudicial to the airing of opinions held by disparate groups and to the unfettered ventilation of grievances nursed by disadvantaged elements such as religious groups, small sects, ethnic minorities, women and professional groups. The political and cultural environment of South Asia is generally riddled with intolerance, bigotry and jingoism, which are so pervasive that dissent is often considered impermissible even within dissedent tendencies. The prepossession of the ruling classes and dominant groups with the enforcement of national unity, ideological purity and politically motivated religious orthodoxy creates an environment in which disent of all kinds and the liberal corcern for the weak and submerged groups lose their relevance. When the cry goes up that ideological purity or national unity is in danger, every sane person hurries to take cover. In the event the media have to dilute their pluralistic tendencies, and self-censorship in varying degrees becomes the rule.

It can hardly be claimed that the deprived and submerged sections of the community enjoy the same opportunities for interest articulation in the media as are enjoyed by the advanced and dominant upper strata of society. The Gonds and Bheels of India or the tribals of northeastern India do not enjoy adequate access to the decision-making apparatus or to the mass media. They have virtually no leverage with the major political parties.

Much the same can be said for such sections of the population in Pakistan as the fishermen of the Mekran coast, the Kalash Kafirs of Chitral and the residents of Tharparkar and Cholistan deserts.

Today the gravest threats to political stability and democracy in South Asia arise from the political exploitation of religion and the sense of deprivation which is the lot of the weaker ethnic communities. The groups at the receiving end suffer in different ways. The media are in no position to act as worthy allies of these groups in combating under-development, exploitation and oppression. All they sometimes do is to assuage these groups' suffering by affording them an opportunity to air their views and grievances. Only sometimes, by and large the challenge of nurturing pluralism in the media has yet to be met.