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Media's role in promoting a culture of peace in India

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It is a truism to say that India is at a crossroads today. The dawn of this new millenium coincided with a significant milestone in India's history as it marked the 50th year of the country's tryst with self-governance as a Republic. The latter half of the 20th Century, after Independence, was a period of transition in which the fledgling democracy had to grapple with the task of administering the country, a more formidable task than the winning of political freedom.

Democracy in India today has come of age and it cuts across the barriers of class, caste, race, language and religion to enable all its citizens to lead a free, full and rich life. If Indian democracy has endured during the last five decades in spite of political changes, economic adjustments and social problems and if individual freedom continues to flourish in this country, the media, especially the newspapers, have had a major role in it.

The freedom of the Press, which is often called the guardian angel of a democracy, is the foundation for the successful functioning of a democracy. In this age of information its significance and responsibility has gained further with the veritable flood of information inundating society thanks to the advent of other media like the Internet and cable television.

The print media, both in English and in the regional languages, had its growth during the freedom movement and has acquired a vibrancy of its own in the ensuing decades after Independence discharging its role as the watchdog of the democratic polity. The economic liberalisation initiated in the 1990s has brought in a sweeping change in the media scenario. While the print media has retained the national ethos, the electronic media and cable television reflect the global cultural trends, though technology has widened the reach of the Indian newspapers worldwide with their online editions.

The unity of a nation has to be wrought at a more fundamental level if it is to endure. The narrow caste, linguistic, religious, communal and racial loyalties that operate with vested interests threaten not only peace in society but they also play into the hands of elements which pose a threat to national integration and security. During the freedom struggle the feeling of patriotism forged an emotional bond and united people to work for a common cause and it has become apparent now that unity as a nation-state has to be forged at a more fundamental level.

It is against this background that the role of the mass media in promoting a culture of peace must be examined. It is universally acknowledged that a free Press is crucial to a democracy and the First Press Commission of India has emphasised that the Press is a responsible part of a democratic set-up. The role of the Press is to inform, educate and entertain the public in that order.

Since democracy demands vigilance from the people all the time, the people look to the Press in this regard. Though it is information through factual reporting of news which is the primary responsibility of the Press, with the explosion of news programmes in television channels and the Internet, increasingly now the first news report of the day is being provided by the evening television channels.

Yet, it is the printed word in black and white which creates a lasting impression on the mind and not the fleeting images on the television screen. Opinions are often formed based on reading the report in the morning newspapers and hence the importance of objective reporting of news and presentation of the same in the print media have not been undermined by the availability of news and information through the other media. More than the news content, analytical articles based on news and educative features about social maladies like gender discrimination, dowry evil, drug abuse and female infanticide, create general awareness and also initiate policy formulations and debates.

In a country in which half of the population is illiterate and with the increasing popularity and affordability of television, its influence on this vulnerable section of society is tremendous. It is this strata of society which is easily swayed and can easily be exploited and mass hysteria unleashed in the event of any violence.

The convergence of the media in India throws fresh challenges which the media professionals are still grappling with as it has been brought about within a short span of time. More than half-a-century after Independence, the country is still engaged in debate about its expectations, failures, achievements and the future concerning all aspects of life -political, economic, social and ethical.

The national integration achieved by uniting 500 odd princely states into one sovereign Republic with a working Constitution, enduring democratic institutions, self-sufficiency in food production and state-of-the-art technologies are no mean achievements but, yet, the population growth, poverty of nearly 30 per cent of the population and the illiteracy of about half of the population, which is now over a billion, have resulted in a sharp divide in which the marginalised millions live in appalling squalor and inhuman conditions.

Added to this are the problems of rampant corruption in public life, social unrest, insurgency and vagaries of nature like floods and droughts which severely constrain developmental endeavour. The paradox of the Indian situation today is largely due to its societal composition. The creamy layer is the highly educated, high income tier of five per cent of the population with the most global outlook, the next is an upwardly mobile, educated, middle class which is reaping the fruits of economic liberalisation and the lowest rung comprises the teeming illiterate majority which has no access to even the basics of life.

The implications and fallout of such a social stratification are staring us in the face today in the form of violence, corruption, communal tensions and laxity of morals in public life. These fissiparous tendencies and disintegrating factors if not nipped in the bud can threaten the very fabric of the nation as a single unit. There is no doubt about the cohesiveness of India as a nation-state forged by geographical, administrative and constitutional unity but this should not be a reason for complacency.

Violence shown on television has become a matter of serious concern to the intelligentsia and the sociologists alike. It is not just newscasts but also entertainment programmes which are responsible for the portrayal of violence. With the spurt in cable television channels and DTH telecasts also approved recently the onus of fixing responsibility becomes very complicated and a lot of restraint is called for.

In this regard it is important to first come to some consensus about the definition of peace itself. Peace does not make news in the absence of aggression and violence and hence in the media the concept of peace should not take on a negative connotation as "absence of violence". The impact of subtler forms of violence in the name of entertainment, for example verbal and emotional, will in the long run gain acceptance if there are no checks and balances and a culture of violence may become the norm.

India is not just a functional democracy in the socio-political sense but a mosaic of cultures with a long chequered history. From the beginning it has been a multi-lingual, multi-racial and multi-religious society. The political and socio-economic aspects of democracy work towards providing equal opportunities for all and raising the standard of living of the common man. According to **Dr.S.Radhakrishnan**, "There is a more fundamental aspect of democracy which is the ethical approach by which democracy becomes a matter of faith." So, democracy and violence are incompatible, he concludes in his book "**The present crisis of faith**", which is more relevant to our times.

Globalisation has brought in its wake a counter-culture of consumerist values which fuels social conflicts by creating an acute sense of exploitation in the economically marginalised sections of society. Besides, this is an age of disintegration of traditional values due to the advance of science and technology which encourages a spirit of enquiry.

The younger generations nurtured in this climate are unwilling to accept anything on authority. This period of transition must also be one of renewal, as all such earlier instances have been in history and in India which has been the cradle of many religions and cultures, they must rise to this challenge and give a fresh perspective and direction.

The Indian spiritual tradition does not force anyone to accept dogma or anything on authority and to test everything by experience and thus holds a lot of promise for promoting not only peace within the country but also towards fostering unity in the world. All religions of mankind under the onslaught of modern thought are realising that exclusiveness is a blight on religion.

The need for religion, for a system of thought and devotion to a cause like fostering peace which will give our fragile existence meaning and value, can be readily conceded. It is the fundamental element of human nature. But the question is what kind of religion?

This is an age of humanism. Any system which does not respond and adapt creatively to changes by way of events or ideas will decline because of its rigidity. Again, religions which are insensitive to social ills or create discord and division by enforcing authority will not appeal to the modern mind. In a pluralistic society as in India it is mutual respect and inter-faith dialogue which can foster universal lasting values of truth, love and peace.

Whether religion is used as an instrument for creating conflict and tension in society or as a valuable resource for promoting a culture of peace lies in our hands. But it is imperative that a dialogue be initiated in this direction if sanity and peace have to prevail. The mass media can play a positive role in this regard by creating awareness about the universal values that all religions advocate.

Let me conclude on a positive note with an invocation for peace from one of the oldest scriptures of the world.

Peace be in the earth, peace be in the atmosphere, peace be in the heavens, peace be in the waters, peace be in the herbs, peace be in the trees, peace may all-gods be to me; peace, peace through all this peace. With all this peace, may we bring peace to whatever here is terrible, is cruel, is sinful. May all that be to us tranquil, benevolent, peaceful.

(Atharva Veda XIX. 9.14.)