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Asian Values In Journalism

By

Mrinal Pande
A little over two decades ago, Asia seemed doomed to eternal poverty. The economies of Asia were given up as lost with no hope for the future. The Asian labour force was perceived as uniformly slothful & unskilled & its leaders uniformly corrupt and vain. To some extent there were grounds for this. The productivity of Asian labour was almost uniformly low, its public enterprises were heavily overmanned and subsidised in the name of socialism, leading to gross inefficiency. The goods produced were both shoddy & expensive. But all that has been changing gradually.

In the context of values and their adaptation to change, the relationship between the State & the society assumes significance. In most democracies in South Asia, including India the long fight against colonialism has shaped the basic concepts of governance. Unlike in the West, here the State symbolises & affirms the solidarity of national collectivity. In such a scenario, to outsiders, the political community often seems to take precedence over individual good. And so the State in some instances may even be given sweeping powers to override threats such as communalism and secessionism, and religious biases against
women. The Western media and its Asian clones find it difficult to accept that there is little of the public-private dichotomy in Asia, which is common to the Western democracies. This makes the question of discussing Asian values a complex exercise.

The reigning Western publications, seem to have settled on a line that seeks to neutralise and commercialise the Asian system of governance simultaneously. Its manifestations are usually stories that assert that there is a grave crisis of the State all over Asia, combined with a series of 'scares' about the unreliable & volatile polity & corrupt governments of the Asian countries. The accompanying ads show Asians flashing credit cards in Western shopping malls stacking up on designer suits & alternate life styles. This cheerleading stops suddenly when the Asian tigers are seen to pose a true challenge. Then a new genre of predictions begins. "The countries of SE Asia have rarely controlled their own destinies. Asia's three giants loom over the region. Even peace & unprecedented prosperity have not shaken the assumption that S.E. Asia's fate will be decided by outsiders." (The Economist 24.6.95). Such writing is further peppered with stories about old colonial ties and Asia's vast markets and buyers. Thus a reversal of logic, whereby Asian countries are said to be miserable because they are free in the wrong way and need their erstwhile masters to tell them what is the right-way. Such articles and columns are often picked up by the English
language dailies in India; and serve largely to confuse and/or anger the readers.

The politics of such media backlash against erstwhile colonies is often a politics of resentment. And one may well mention also that this is not a sensational new conspiracy but a re-run of regular backlashes against Asian socio-political and economic values; throughout the centuries.

As young journalists nearly all of us were fed on the popular journalistic aphorism: if dog bites man it's nothing; but if man bites dog, it's news.

Working as a journalist one realizes how true it is. All that is required is an occasional wilful reversal of common trends and the resultant story proves each time how all logic is in the eye of the logician. Inverted, the trends often become divining rods for detecting the real values and the socio-political biases in our own minds as also in our Western counterparts. While the English language media finds it harder to distance itself from the Western mind-set, the language media in India often exposes areas of inequality and injustices and also the tremendous potential of some areas that would otherwise have remained invisible. By using the homegrown logic as a tool they detect popular misconceptions so common and so widespread as to be often taken as the natural state of affairs. Consider
some simple questions the Indian media has thrown up in recent years:

* What, if the White Society and the Corporations manned (literally) by white Europeans were pre-judged by Asian Govts. as corrupt, conceited and unfair bullies? The way Asian Governments are usually perceived by the Western media? It would make considerable historical sense, since as long colonial rule by European countries has demonstrated all the above qualities in the colonial rulers in fair measure to the colonized in Asia.

* What if instead of locating instances of state failure, in Asia, the media were to focus on major market failures in the West, which do you think will make the bigger story?

* What if the soldier, who was shot down in Bosnia and rescued so dramatically by specially flown American forces, had been a coloured Asian? Would he have made the international news? Would the fact that an Asian was forced to live on grass and insects, horrify as many as it did when the victim was White?
* What if the New York Times, the Post and the London Times were to sack their wine and cheese correspondents and replace them with minority and community correspondents to cover the Asians, the Africans, the Blacks? At present they have no such category. In fact, out of the 5000 employees of the major British dailies, only about 300 are Asian.

The reason I'm discussing the Western media's orientation in some detail is that with globalization, the colonial caste-system in the media has acquired a new cutting edge and thanks to the satellite transmission and editorializing facilities in Asia major publications like the International Herald, Tribune and the Economist, the occidental logic has spread wide enough to be confused with the natural state of affairs in countries in the East also. It is only occasionally when a strong government, when unfairly stigmatised, takes matters to the court, or a particularly sharp mind uncovers the difference between the subject and the object and turns this brand of Western orientalism upside down that there is a sudden flash of recognition. And suddenly reveals an Asian reality, quite dissimilar to what the Western media is feeding the globalized market-place by way of Asian 'Trend Stories', is revealed.
The inference is clear. To recognise Asian values in journalism, we need to rely more on our own sources, our own media, instead of picking up those Eastern ‘trend-stories’ from Western counterparts and presenting their historical biases about Asia, as our own Asian reality. Several countries in South Asia have shared important moments in the histories of their nations’ fight against colonialism. With Malaysia, through the stalwarts of the Indian National Army, we have shared a certain glorious period of solidarity and mutual understanding, which got diluted subsequently. Where are those voluntary recruits of Malaysia today, who opted to join the INA to overthrow the British rule? Their marvellous story is still awaiting an Asian pen while you have stories about their markets and middle classes by the sacksful.

Each professional must experience the process through which he or she will later lead others. As journalists in a young democracy with a distinct culture; it helps if we walk a mile in someone else’s shoes, or even without shoes like many more. This way we may or may not always get a good story but it certainly makes us understand better the propensity of words to hurt or harm & lessens the danger of our doing so.

I think all those who wish to write about the Asian reality which is also inclusive of values, should similarly try walking barefoot or in someone else’s shoes. It is thus
that some of our women journalists have uncovered war stories that can make you laugh or cry. Stories such as the following demand a comparative study of women all over S. Asian countries:

* A female-headed household in the poverty sector in India is not a liberated and joyful example of matriarchy. It is one of the poorest pockets in the poverty zones; because both the society and the market treat her as a poor unskilled worker with no assets. Neither offers her an opportunity to upgrade her skills or to shed some of her domestic burden. What about female-headed households in the rest of S. Asia where, like India, patriarchy still calls most of the shots.

* Village level female workers and health functionaries, form the bedrock of the immense governmental network of welfare services for our rural poor. They are mostly paid less than the minimum stipulated wages, on grounds that they are doing 'voluntary work', so what they are being paid is labelled as Man-Dhan, or honour money. Foreign consultants, on the other hand who are brought in through the foreign funding-agencies to tell us how to help our rural poor, are paid astronomical salaries that gobble up most of the money received in foreign funding.
Most multi-nationals manufacturing cosmetics and other consumer non-durables, have farmed out their finishing & packaging work outside their factories. In the name of taking work to the women, they routinely take the raw goods to the slum areas in cities like Bombay and Bangalore, and collect the finished produce in the evening. This way the Industry can short-circuit the labour laws and keep their real workforce invisible. Needless to say, the workers, mostly women & children - get paid a fraction of the wage of a factory - worker, on a piece-rate basis. This includes Multi-nationals from countries whose hearts weep constantly for the child carpet weavers of Asia.

As Gandhi taught the world, there is no economic system that is value neutral. It is not as though the foreign investors are monsters. It is just that the monetary system that they represent, demands these measures and spawns these biases to justify those measures. Here there is a difference between the publically declared values and the true operative ones. Here one finds that national budgets make more believable statements about the dominant operative values of our power-system than all the manifestoes of the political parties that participates in it. The guiding principle of the restructured economies today is, if you scratch my back, you shall also scratch everyone else's to the same degree. We are in an age of itchy
multilateralism. Where the poor and the out-groups must wait for benefits to trickle down to them and never try to intervene directly to ask what is in the new economic policy for them. Here again a polaric diversity of views and opinions is available in the Indian media. Despite repeated assurances that foreign print media shall not be granted entry in the India media, the media scene has gradually been opening to Western financial news agencies and television networks. In recent debates within the Indian media circles, while most professional bodies opposed unlimited access to the foreign media, a sizeable chunk of English language journalists, particularly those writing for financial papers were all for it.

The multi-national assignments that most of our brightest seek today as correspondents to foreign journals and dailies offer them a sort of Faustian bargain. In exchange for crazy-figure salaries, they are twice as hard-worked and produce thrice as much as their predecessors. The result in the media is a tremendous rate of burn-outs and a near-total alienation of journalists from the vital socio-political contexts of their own countries. The end result is that they seek out and write lots about those who care the least for us; and almost nothing about themselves and their own value-systems.
A recent study of salary scales by a popular fortnightly in India revealed the truth in Mark Twain's remark: "If work was so good, the rich would have hogged it long ago." Work in the global markets, the survey showed, shall be valued not by the number of hours put in, or by the skill, but the social value of the worker. All over the world today, workers are less likely to be paid by the expertise they command or even by the importance of their work to the community - and more by their gender, race and class. We are no exception to this. So our women weavers and prawn-shellers are usually paid less than the male weavers and dock-yard head-loaders. And water piped through pipelines into urban homes is routinely taxed as valuable. But the countless pots rural women carry for miles go unnoticed, unvalued. So also fuel. So also dairy products.

There are many other vital productive areas that concern women and children which are given a space but aren't valued sufficiently in our mainstream media at all. One such category is the farm-workers or the housewives in rural areas. Their economic non-existence is a special problem in states where women have traditionally have not been permitted to be visible in the market place. This, in turn leads frequently to their marginalisation in developmental policies. One lacunae breeds another. Due to their invisibility in the media, women also remain largely invisible to the society and the policy makers & movers.
The Census system is one such valuable area. In India information gathering methods & categories of workers were all initially created with the usual traditional blinkers regarding the nature of rural women's participation in sectors such as agriculture, dairying, fishing, weaving and food-processing. Thanks to regular reporting of such lacunae in recent years, coupled with simultaneous efforts of some activists economists and social scientists, several of such terms and categories have been modified. This has resulted in a sudden and vast increase in the officially reported percentages of working women, their multi-faceted participation in income-generating activities and their overall contribution to the GNP. This in turn has led to several special policy efforts at identifying the most vulnerable groups of workers and efforts at strengthening their position. The situation may still be far from ideal, but ills that have lasted for centuries cannot be wished away in a decade.

To be fair, the media is like any large institution. Its movements & trends are not always premeditated, just largely susceptible to the prevailing political currents. Our own media often gets carried by western tides it rarely fathoms and sweeps the public - atleast the urban middle classes, powerfully sharpening the way we would think & talk ab. our legacy & the ailments it has supposedly inflicted on our international image. It coins terms that we also use, terms such as - the empowerment of women, structural
adjustment package, new market economy.

A central paradox being endlessly discussed by Western media is that Asian societies have achieved so much & are yet riddled with old rotten social practices & corruption and bigotry. The usual media reaction there is not to see behind this inner churning, an organic growth of an Asian democracy, with its own value-systems that connect tradition with modernity. But to label the democratic institutions as the source of all this pain, and confusion.

The message is clear. Have less government and let the poor wait till the free-market decides their fate. Several recent media - exposes in India have highlighted how the West institutionalises and justifies its own part in international corruption. For example in Denmark bribes paid to foreign companies have been made tax-deductible. In the USA regular surveys are done on money spent on easing the way of projects into Asian countries. The results are interesting. A recent Political Economic Risk Consultancy (PERC) survey revealed that in paying bribes in Asia the multi-nationals always go right to the top, and that the total amount they spend in bribes in Asia works out to about 5% of the total cost. If corruption is a part of the developing world today, it does not exist in Asia as a free-floating reality. One end of it is moored firmly in the developed world, and helps shape some new values in our polity and economy. Traditional Indian values of thrift,
economy and austerity are being challenged by the host of values that the new technological passages have tossed in the national cauldron.

Science and Technology are today the single most influential factors affecting both the media and the development process in Asia. The growth of new technology into more energy and finance consuming modes brings it unavoidably into sharp conflicts with the society with a developing economy. The value-system which comes along with the technological package, is broadly based on the profit motive. This motive looks upon both humans and materials primarily as 'resources'; and actively encourages surpluses, conspicuous consumption and flashy life styles. In journalism this has led to a strange schitzophrenia. While the news pages report the ground reality and highlight mounting debts and inequalities, the magazine sections and commercial pullouts celebrate consumerism and narcissism. The area where this is most in evidence is developmental reporting in our media.

In Asia the environmental had never taken precedence over development. In recent years our mainstream media has done a commendable job of informing the readers how all available figures point out that the major environmental damage is caused by the overconsumption of resources by the rich northern countries. The traditional consumption patterns even now in India are such, that according to a
recent survey by the Delhi based Centre for Science and Environment, India with 16% of the world’s population, gets 16% of the earth’s natural sinks for carbon dioxide and methane. These are described by the CSE report as ‘permissible’ since they will be absorbed by the earth. Itself India produces only 6% of the carbon dioxide of the world’s natural sinks and 14% of the methane. How can India be blamed for polluting the earth’s atmosphere? The same picture is true of China, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. In contrast nearly all the Western countries are emitting carbon dioxide well beyond their global share.

The global environmental concern is all about caring and sharing and learning to live within the limits of our shared environment.

The publicists notwithstanding, developmental journalism is one area in Indian journalism that should prove to be exciting in days ahead. However, given the commercialism of the major publishing scene and the powerful pull of politics prevent most of our brightest for opting for this field. In this, the Indian media today is both a direct beneficiary of technological advancement and a victim of the social mind-set and consumption patterns it triggers off. Today our papers and journals have improved their looks markedly and can editionalise like never before, but the media has in many cases also become obsessed with the profit motive and thus the owners seek to go up-market where
the ad-revenue is; rather than turn down-market. Where the people are. This is a disincentive to the journalists who seek to empathise with the majority of the people whose lives and human rights are being adversely affected by the new developmental paradigm that seeks to privatise resources and para governmental spending on welfare areas. Since promotions are quicker and salaries and perks higher for reporting on politics and the corporate world, most ambitious and young journalists opt for the fast track where the commercial interests of the owners meet the professional ambitions of the journalists.

The real need in India today is to build a society, that can truly embody public interest not only for the majority community but also all our minority communities. This requires new settlements between individuals and society, between journalists and readers, between journalists and social activists working in faraway rural areas with scant resources, operating as standard-bearers of true reforms. In a democracy rights and obligations have to be determined on both sides. The fight against poverty must not simply be seen and discussed as a governmental duty or as an act of compassion or even an updated version of the white or brown man's burden; but as any civil society's duty to all the individuals that constitute it. This view was stated by the economist Chanakya centuries ago, and still holds good.