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The Role Of Press Institutes And Journalists Associations In Promoting Pluralism In Sri Lanka

By

Lakshman Gunasekara
The Role of Press Institutes and Journalists Associations in promoting Pluralism in the Media in Sri Lanka.

Lakshman Gunasekara

1. Definition: 'Pluralism'

1.1. Concept and its role in political culture

This short note on the role of organised media professionals in promoting pluralism in Sri Lanka must necessarily begin with an explanation of my understanding of the concept of 'pluralism'. The Oxford Dictionary gives the philosophical meaning as "a system of thought which recognises more than one ultimate principle of being" (as opposed to Monism). The CHAMBERS Dictionary further explains it as "a condition of society in which different ethnic etc groups preserve their own customs, or hold equal power". The Collins Dictionary of Philosophy (1990) says that "in political theory, pluralism is the view that there is no single overriding interest, but a range of competing interests". These explanations adequately describe my understanding of Pluralism.

1.2. Relevance to Sri Lankan situation:

Sri Lanka's political institutions conform, by name at least if not by practice, to what is generally described as a political structure of western-style parliamentary democracy. But it is a political structure which has evolved, since it was introduced by British colonial power in mid-century, according to the imperatives of an under-developed, non-western society striving to break out of the twin shackles of poverty and traditionally hierarchical, hegemonistic social relations.

Thus we see today the emergence of a considerable degree of authoritarianism entrenched in the political structures themselves - beginning with the state constitution - and, also in the actual political practices of both politicians and ordinary people. Complementing this authoritarianism, no doubt a survival of feudal political culture in a new form, is an ethno-centrism which is equally strongly entrenched in the political structures. Whatever its justification may be, there can be no doubt that the national polity is closely
linked to the identity and culture of a particular ethnic group. When this happens in the context of an underdeveloped, multi-ethnic society which is already suffering from the tensions of economic inequality and an intense competition for resources and social status, can one be surprised that the island is today torn apart by an ethnic war? Especially since attempts over several decades to correct this ethno-centrism were not only resisted by the dominant ethnic group - the Buddhist-Sinhala - but were increasingly suppressed and responded to with ethnic violence?

Again, whatever the justifications there may be, today the country is torn apart by a second ethno-centric political tendency, Hindu-Tamil, and there is evidence of a nascent third tendency - Islamic-Moor. A Pluralistic perspective must necessarily acknowledge these various ethnic tendencies as inherent social factors which must be reconciled with each other if the overall polity and society is to survive and flourish. Hence, Pluralism, then, is a form of political social relations which is propagated in Sri Lanka in opposition both to a 'Sinhala-Buddhist' ethno-centric State and also to a Tamil secessionist insurgency.

Pluralism is also propagated here in opposition to the authoritarianism which now infects the political institutions and relations.

2. The Sri Lankan mass media.

The evolution of the Sri Lankan mass media itself has paralleled that of the political structure, deriving, as mass communication does, from political culture and social behaviour in general. The State dominates and heavily controls the radio and television sectors, which have recently seen a phenomenal expansion in private ventures. No private radio or TV station broadcasts 'news' relating to Sri Lanka whether it originates from a local or foreign media source. Their broadcasting licence does not provide for it. Hence BBC-TV, for example, may interview local political personalities and broadcast to the whole world but Sri Lankans may not view it.

The print media, therefore is the one in which there is the least state control, although here too the country has experienced the constraints of state intervention: in the nationalising of newspapers, in the suppression of journals, in frequent direct censorship, and constant indirect censorship. The country has had a bitter experience of government harassment of private-owned publications of varying persuasions - from the political to the erotic or 'pornographic'. At the same time, both the press and the electronic media have suffered from attacks by non-
government political groups as well. Not only have journals and journalists been intimidated into silence or subservience, but journalists have been physically attacked, incarcerated or even killed. The case of Richard de Zoysa, IPS correspondent, who is strongly believed to have been killed by a government-linked 'death squad' and, the case of Rajani Tiranagama, writer and academic, strongly believed to have been killed by Tamil secessionist militants, are perhaps the two most prominent examples of the pressures Sri Lankan media people have faced.

3. Media organisations.

The Sri Lankan media suffers from the lack of a properly constituted and socially recognised 'profession'.

What this has meant that is that since the social and economic rewards are little, the profession (as I dare to call it) has very few truly skilled communicators who are vocationally committed to consciously fulfilling a defined social role. Hence virtually all organisations of journalists have been, and are those, which focus on immediate career advancement in monetary and institutional terms. While their approach and functioning is no more than that of a trade union, the prevalence of different, and often rival, journalists' unions has merely added to the weak state of the profession. Sri Lanka does not have a 'Press Institute' or any similar professional body.

While the dominant organisation at present is the Sri Lanka Working Journalists' Association, there are two other and older organisations - the Press Association of Sri Lanka and National Union of Journalists, both of which are groupings largely based on personal and ideological allegiances. None of these organisations have ever attempted to espouse larger social causes - such as Pluralistic socio-political relations - even if these causes have a direct relevance to mass communication. Thus, I actually have very little to talk about, under my theme!

There is just one organisation of journalists which has done so. This is the Free Media Movement which came into being in mid-1991 and, which so far has not functioned as a journalists' 'trade union', as the other organisations have done (and which is a vitally necessary function, no doubt).

But it is necessary first to examine some of the factors other than economic which have led to the failure of journalists' unions to take up issues such as pluralism. This may be done through a brief look at the work of just one media-related organisation which was the first to take up the issue of pluralism. This is the Council for Communal Harmony through the Media (CCHM).
5. Council for Communal Harmony through the Media.

The CCHM was born directly out of the concern of a small and multi-ethnic group of senior media professionals, academics, administrators and human rights activists who met in Colombo in 1979 to urgently examine the mass communicational aspects of what this group recognised to be a worsening ethnic tension. In fact many of those people were already fearing the deterioration of the situation into the violence and war which today afflicts the country (I don't think that even these enlightened few ever imagined how violent the situation would become). A subsequent seminar held by the Marga Institute in Colombo decided that the media played a crucial role in defining communal identities and communal perceptions and, already suspicious of state interventions, proposed the setting up of an independent body - the CCHM.

In the ensuing three years (1979-81) the CCHM undertook the study of ethnic bias in the mass media - mainly in the press. Not stopping at analysis, the CCHM took in upon itself the enormous task of actively criticising the media for instances of what the CCHM decided were media behaviour which contributed to the worsening of inter-ethnic tensions. Through occasional newsletters aimed at media professionals and through the medium of small seminars conducted through a range of networks of various types of non-governmental organisations, the CCHM carried a message criticising media behaviour which did not serve the cause of ethnic harmony. The CCHM regularly identified instances and trends in ethnocentric media behaviour. It pointed out that the dominant media, which is in the Sinhala language medium, largely catered solely to an ethno-centric Buddhist-Sinhala perspective, constantly failing to communicate the predicament and aspirations of the ethnic minorities. Alternatively, the CCHM promoted a multi-ethnic, pluralistic conceptualisation of Sri Lankan society and offered this as a desirable perspective to the local media.

The CCHM also carried out a study of ethnic bias in primary and secondary education.

But the CCHM remained a lone voice in the media sector at that time. It is today that others (mostly individuals, not very many yet) are beginning to take up issues of pluralism in the media. The CCHM, which ran out of funding by 1984, remains the sole organised effort of such nature.

What the CCHM realised in its study of media behaviour is that the media professionals themselves are subject to ethno-centric biases, which then are reflected in their media discourse. The CCHM's 'counter-communicational' actions attempted to correct this, but this is something one small agency cannot do against the might of a national mass media industry much of which, at that time was backed by an
ethno-centric State. How could criticise media behaviour when the State itself justifies and legitimises such ethnocentrism?

6. Free Media Movement.

The Free Media was born out of the courageous initiative of a handful of journalists responding to their professional predicament in conditions of extreme authoritarianism in the late 1980s and early 1990s. While the CCHM responded to the problem of ethnic bias, the FMM responded to heavy handed, often extra-legal and even violent controls imposed on the very basic freedom to communicate. While the general media predicament in 1990 had already brought these journalists together to plan action, the proposal by the government for a 'media commission', which would further institutionalise state regulation of the media, became the immediate inspiration for the setting up of the FMM.

For the first time in Sri Lanka's modern history, media personnel actually demonstrated and otherwise carried out protest actions in response to something which was more than their immediate career interests. One could argue that those journalists who formed the FMM had perceived that the freedom of expression itself had become an issue of immediate career interest. The FMM successfully mobilised broad sections of the mass media and aroused public opinion against the media commission proposal. Shortly after the proposal was shelved by the government, the ruling party itself split and with a significant faction joining the opposition, the political and ideological hegemony of the government was greatly weakened. This provided the opportunity for the FMM to extend its momentum to broader issues. The FMM began a campaign of meetings to criticise the government for its authoritarian attitude towards the media.

The main issues raised by the FMM were:

1) An end to state intimidation of journalists and an investigation of cases of attacks on journalists (including disappearances)
2) an end to State monopoly of electronic media, especially news programmes
3) an end to direct and indirect censorship
4) a commitment by all political parties to a democratic media structure.
More recently, the FMM has begun a campaign to create greater public awareness of the role of the media in perpetuating the ethnic conflict.

While these have been the principal focus, the FMM's formal objectives include the question of media biases which favour other social iniquities such as gender oppression.

Faced as it was by the power of the government political machinery for authoritarian purposes, the FMM, has had to link up with opposition political movements. This has led to the FMM being identified as a politically biased body and is a major reason why it remains a small but very active force. The bulk of the profession has refused to directly cooperate with its actions, although most journalists have sympathised. The fact of this sympathy can be seen in the prominence given to FMM actions in reportage by many journalists who are not involved.