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Paper No. 8
Press Freedom and Responsibility in Asia - The Indian Perspective

It is indeed a great privilege for me to have been invited to attend this seminar, and I must thank the Asian Mass Communication Research and Information Centre for getting together such an important gathering to discuss a vital issue facing all of us today. I regret that exigencies at home prevent me from being present here today and share your deliberations. It is also a great honour that you believe me capable of giving a meaningful insight on the state of affairs of our vast press network - at last count, there were 4,155 dailies, 12,250 weeklies, 5,052 fortnightlies and 11,240 monthlies, published in 17 languages! It is a daunting task, but if nothing else, journalism teaches one the art of appearing knowledgeable!

Perhaps the most striking feature of any developing country for a foreign visitor are the extreme nature of the contrasts between different segments of society - the rich and the poor, the owners of enterprises and the workers in those enterprises, the governors and the governed. India is no different. As far as my country is concerned, one need not wade through voluminous reports or crunch enormous numbers to understand this. A ride into town from the airport in my hometown Bombay is sufficient.

On a bad day, the 20 kilometre ride could take up to two hours because of traffic. Tens of thousands of vehicles crawl along at a snail's pace, with drivers ineffectually craning their necks out over the endless line of vehicles to try and see what is holding them up. That itself is an accurate indicator of the state of affairs in India - millions of people - a giant nation - on the move, but nevertheless held up here and there, for reasons known and unknown.

On the way, you will see towerblocks next to tenements. A made-in-India Mercedes, complete with a captain of industry on his cellphone to London, racing past some of the most overcrowded commuter trains in the world. Electronic hoardings advertising Coca Cola, under which urchins scrabble amongst rubbish. For some of my countrymen, everything is available. For others, nothing is.

For most Asian journalists, this is a tired, familiar litany - to the point of being cliched. But it also exemplifies the problems faced by the Press in India. How do you report on a country where ALL cliches hold true! We are a developed country, a developing country and an underdeveloped country - all at the same time. We are a rich country - collectively. We are a country of the middle class - we have a larger middle class population than any other in the world. We also have more abjectly poor people than most. We are an educated country with the world's second largest pool of scientific and technical manpower. But around half the population is illiterate. The list is virtually endless.

Nevertheless, cliched as they may be, these facts have to be borne in mind. For the issue of a responsible press cannot be discussed without first establishing a fundamental issue - responsible to whom? To our profession, to our readers or to our society at large?

In a pluralistic society like India, there is no easy answer to the question, because what may be irresponsible in one context may actually be responsible in another.
For example, the origin of the modern Indian press is inextricably linked with India's struggle for freedom from British colonial rule. Some of the greatest leaders of modern India - from Mahatma Gandhi to Jawaharlal Nehru, used the press as a powerful vehicle to create awareness among the people and motivate them into joining the freedom struggle. Some went further. Mahatma Gandhi used the paper he founded and edited, The Harijan, to create a parallel awareness of social issues and mobilise public opinion against some historically practised customs like untouchability.

The were political leaders, thinkers, visionaries or even, as in the case of the Mahatma, modern-day apostles. But they were also, for a long period, practising journalists - writers, columnists, editors. Were they 'responsible' journalists? From the British point of view, no. They were rabble rousers, troublemakers whose 'irresponsible' writings led to a breakdown of law and order.

Indians did not agree then, and they will not agree now. History shows that this 'irresponsible' nationalist press played a pivotal role in achieving the ouster of the most powerful empire in the world.

But if we apply modern-day standards for what is considered fair and ethical reporting, many of their pieces will fail to pass muster. 'News' and 'views' were not separated. Commentary often mingled with reportage. The 'other point of view' was missig and when it came to actions of the colonial masters, the 'right of reply' was unheard of. So how come honourable men did this?

There are a chorus of answers. They were 'right', the British were 'wrong', their cause was just, British oppression was not, the people needed to be 'awakened', etc. etc..

Fine. Let us cut to the present. As you are aware, we are at what could be a turning point in history. For the first time in secular India, a political party which avowedly claims to represent the interests of the majority hindu community in India is about to come to power. Of course, they too claim that their version of 'hindutva' - the hindu philosophy or way of life - actually represents benevolent nationalism, encompassing all. But in the over 400 seats they contested, they fielded only two muslim candidates.

As the election results have shown, a vast majority of the country's muslim population did not buy this argument. But a significant section of the rest did. And this polarisation was undoubtedly sharpened by the extremist and alarmist writings on both sides of the fence by sections of the media.

The secular press condemned them as irresponsible. But for those convinced of their point of view, be it hindu or muslim, this 'secular' view was actually 'pseudo-secular' - closet appeasement, or worse.

The contentious issue of responsibility is represented here in a nutshell. What is expected of the press in a large and diverse democracy? I sought an answer from Mr Vivek Goenka, Chairman and Managing Editor of The Indian Express Group, and my boss. He was quite clear: "Our duty is to report, explain, analyze and even challenge. This is our strength in a developing country like India which, at the same time, enjoys unrestricted freedom of the press. Our people expect us to go beyond mere reporting and don a steering mantle when the need arises. We cannot be passive disseminators of news, but have to reflect plurality of opinion and encourage debate. In an environment of falling social values, we have to strive for upliftment."

This is a role which the Indian press has performed in the past. Even the not-too-distant past. During infamous 'emergency' period in the mid-'70s, when the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi imposed a virtual dictatorship and muzzled the press, several newspapers
fought courageously against it - to the extent that dozens of journalists, editors and columnists got jailed. They eventually succeeded, the emergency was withdrawn and Gandhi suffered a humiliating defeat in the elections which followed.

That was perhaps the finest hour for the post-Independence Indian press. Faced with a common enemy of freedom, they banded together and proved the power of the pen. But today, the dilemma is the absence of an enemy, a clear-cut persona non-grata. For the past three successive general elections, even the people of India have shown that they have not been able to make up their minds clearly. The mandates have been fractured, no party, or the ideology it represents, has clearly proved that it enjoys the clear support of the electorate. Coalition governments and minority governments have stumbled on. In the process of ensuring survival, they have managed to blur ideological lines, mix up manifestoes and delay development. Realpolitik rules, OK.

The Indian press has reflected this dilemma to some extent. But in many ways, they have strived to fulfill their role as instruments of social change as well. For instance, when P V Narasimha Rao's minority Congress party government assumed power in 1991, the country was faced with its gravest financial crisis ever. The foreign exchange reserves had sunk to a meagre 10 days' requirement, the government's budget was in tatters and a protected, but increasingly inefficient industry was under mounting threat.

The situation required immediate, and extreme action, action which would be both economically and socially painful and politically inexpedient. Most observers gave that government little chance of survival. But it managed to not only survive, but instigate a major process of reform which has pushed India on to world map as a major economic power in the making.

The Indian press, in my view, played a significant role in that process. The media recognised the need for change, and strove to educate the people about it - so much so, that terms like 'liberalisation' and 'reform' became recognisable even in villages; so much so, that parties ranging from the 'nationalist' Bharatiya Janata Party to the hard-left Communist Party of India (Marxist) not only came to accept and include it in their policies, but ensured, with their tacit support, that the process continued.

The exposure by the press of a gigantic scam in the capital markets led to a clean-up of the banking system. Loss-making nationalised banks were forced to pay for their past sins of omission and commission, strengthen their balance sheets by providing for real losses and adopt a more service-oriented approach. The exposure of the 'system failure' which led to the scam led to the setting up of a new supervisory board for banking activities. The exposure of malpractices and rampant insider trading in the stock markets led to the creation of a supervisory body for capital markets, armed with real teeth. Industry, with its powerful connections, was nevertheless forced to accept the entry of foreign competition and give up some of its government-provided protection. The exposure of open connections between crime and politics forced the government into setting up a committee which officially traced and confirmed such links.

None of this could have happened without a free and active press putting forth the issues, generating debate and through that, widespread acceptance of the need for reform. It is another matter that the party which initiated the process, the Congress, has apparently failed to claim credit for this from the electorate!

These are significant achievements. But there are failures too. The Indian press, with some honourable exceptions, by and large fails to provide adequate attention to developmental issues. That India is a “country of villages” is dinned into the ears of every Indian schoolchild. Regardless of his or her area of specialisation, I think every Indian journalist will be able to tell you off the cuff that 72 per cent of the country's population lives in rural
areas and derives its subsistence from agriculture. But the “share of voice” of this segment in the press is nowhere in proportion to its numbers. The Indian press continues to be obsessed with politics.

It is here that the question of responsibility also becomes linked with the question of viability and survival for individual media players. Yes, it’s true that the press, especially the sizeable and influential English language press, devotes far more attention to the new Indian - urban, urbane, affluent - than the rural Indian.

But it is also true that India’s sizeable and growing middle class is the engine which is driving economic change, by providing a ready and growing market for new products and services. A bulk of the advertising - in fact, almost all - is directed at this segment. Advertisers naturally look for reach amongst this segment when they are deciding their ad spends. And if publications need to have this reader profile, it stands to reason that they must also cater to the interests of this segment of reader.

Freedom of the press has also ensured a free market. The Indian press is intensely competitive. In Bombay alone, there are five general and three broadsheet morningers in English (which is still spoken by a minority) - and a couple more are in the offing. No matter how noble their intentions and aspirations, publications are faced with this hard reality. They need advertising rupees. Not merely for making profit, but merely to survive. There is not a single news publication in India today which can survive only on its circulation revenue. Advertising rupees are needed to keep them going as viable organisations - and if they are not viable organisations, they will not be able to find the funds for modernisation, expansion and professional excellence. And everybody out there would like his share of the pie. The ‘paper shock’ introduced by the steep rise of newsprint prices in recent times has served to make this rupee chase more frenetic.

Gone are the days when editors could leave grubby finance to “the other side.” Terms like ‘positioning’, ‘product-mix’ and ‘branding’ have made their entry into editorial rooms. In the process, there are fears that monetary concerns may have compromised basic freedom and ethical reporting.

That is true to some extent. Undeniably, advertiser pressure has led to the killing or toning down of some reports in some places. But what ultimately has helped is the not inconsiderable constitutional and legal protection provided to the press, as well as the diverse nature of media holdings in India. Mega-conglomerates do not run papers here. As a result, leverage at best applies to pockets - there has always been some paper somewhere which has taken up an issue, regardless of commercial concerns.

I mentioned legal protection. Laws are double-edged swords. If some laws are made to protect, others can be made to damage. The press in India is provided legal protection against being forced to disclose sources of information. But members of legislatures are also provided ‘privileges’ - and legislators have often clashed with the press on this issue. Journalists have been punished by legislatures - both at the state and central level - for refusing to disclose sources, or for contempt of elected bodies for their writings. Twice in the last three years, members of Parliament have attempted to move bills for enforcing a ‘Right of Reply’ Bill, proposing to legally compel publications to provide a ‘right of reply’ to aggrieved parties. Both times, the move was ultimately dropped on the advise of the Press Council of India. But the issue is by no means resolved as yet.

The Press Council also decided to ultimately drop its move for setting down a rigid code of ethics and fair practice for the press, in favour of evolving a set of guidelines based on its own actions and adjudications in courts. It noted with concern the deterioration of standards in certain sections of the press, but also said that by and large, the press had behaved honourably.
But that is not an unqualified certificate. The high-pitched reporting on the 'plague epidemic' in India—which eventually turned out to be nothing of the kind—caused panic, confusion and avoidable distress to many. More recently, a celebrated spy scandal which dominated the headlines some months ago has quietly fizzled out, with the court exonerating all accused and pulling up the investigative agencies to boot. But the victims' reputations have not been rehabilitated in quite the same manner as they were first damaged.

There are some reasons for this. If the need to stay competitive forced even the responsible press to run stories based on dubious or second-hand evidence, then the universal press dislike for appearing to have erred downplayed later developments. After all, the world over, rejoinders tend to appear in the 'Letters' column!'

There is another ethical question which is the subject of current debate - corruption. Corruption is a global phenomenon, and India is no exception - the press included. Individual corruption has always been there, but a more invidious practice has taken root - giving 'gifts' and 'tokens of appreciation' - to journalists in press conferences and elsewhere, to ensure coverage. In fact, some organisations have taken to regularly slipping in a small 'gift cheque' along with their press releases! The practice is most widespread in the area of commercial or business reporting.

Some of these gifts are pocketed, some are not, although most papers do have a code for journalists which prohibits this. Since the act involves two players - a giver and a taker - I once asked industry representatives and some PR practitioners at a meeting about their stand. I was told that this could not be called 'corruption' - the values were not high, it was just a token give-away, the reporter anyway was free to write what he or she felt, etc. etc..

But the key issue here is not cost. The act of taking has nothing to do with poverty - India has thankfully come out of the stage where journalists were paid less than labourers - but with honour. But there are cases where it becomes difficult to decide. Take the age-old journalistic practice of going on 'junkets'. It cannot be denied that the acceptance of hospitality does place some constraints on the reporter. But what about foreign junkets? Most Indian papers are so resource-starved that a junket may be the only opportunity for a journalist to visit another country - by itself an enriching and broadening experience.

These are, if one may put it so, 'voluntary' constraints on ethical reporting. But there are some situations where a reporter or a paper has been perhaps forced into carrying something which it inherently does believe to be correct, because of physical intimidation.

The situation in Jammu and Kashmir, for instance, is extremely complex. But reporters in the field have no time to worry about the validity of political arguments, for there is a more pressing concern - their safety. Militant organisations have threatened, kidnapped, even killed journalists who refused to follow the 'rules' laid down by them for reporting events. Newspapers in Srinagar, Kashmir's capital, have been attacked and burnt - even those which openly support the militants' cause, because one group does not agree with the other. They even went on strike and refused to publish till the government could assure their safety.

What is one supposed to do when somebody points a gun at one's head? I have no answer for I have never been in that position myself. Yet, they have been forced to make these choices. Outside the valley, the press has voiced its concern, pressured the government into providing better access, more safety for their staff - but in the field, the reporters are on their own.

These are painful questions to which we are in the process of finding some answers, and I hope the deliberations here will throw up some guidelines for our benefit.