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<td>Som Benegal.</td>
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The Changing Media Environment In India:
The Perspective From The Press

By

Som Benegal
I shall be brief as required by the Chairman. Brevity is the soul of my wit. The most exciting and progressive change is going on in India. One might almost call it revolutionary except that that word has become obscene or laughable to many people around the world. On the other hand the most deplorable and retrogressive change is going on in India. One might almost call it reactionary except that word has become tiresome to many people around the world. What then is this contradiction? The contradiction lies in the fact that there is a big divide in India about what is going on, and therefore depending on one's viewpoint the change is progressive or reactionary. Here we must be careful to note that progressive and reactionary are used to mean exactly the opposite of what they meant yesterday.

In the past three years India under the leadership of the present Prime Minister decided upon policies of globalisation and liberalisation along with his Finance Minister known to be wholly sworn to opening up India and to scrap all previous ideas and notions of economic, financial and mercantile policies. These ideas which go counter to the cherished ideals of the old leaders are anathema to many who cannot countenance the thought of inviting forces which appear to revisit the bondage of imperialism and colonialism in a new form of economic exploitation leading to a different but essentially same slavery but now sold with catchy slogans, attractive packaging and upbeat media hype.

In a different situation ideas can be rammed down people but in India, as no doubt in other democratic countries, the voice of the people even if seemingly confused is vibrant enough for the ruling classes to sit up and take notice. We must remember, and you must know that despite various slanted views about India, democracy in its most extreme form prevails. Every Indian feels he is free and therefore exempt from all discipline. In politics any and every party, possible and impossible, exists. India is the only country which spawned as many as eight different warring Communist Parties even in the heyday of monolithic communism. They still exist, very much alive. It is this raucous and diverse manner of living that excited Pakistan's Zulfikar Ali Bhutto to envy the din and dust of democracy in India, and made John Galbraith marvel at the world's only functioning anarchy, that is India.

My esteemed colleague Mr. Rajan in his exhaustive and penetrating analysis of the media monitors in India spoke of our unity in diversity. That is a comment often and proudly asserted by Indians. But Mahatma Gandhi saw it more perceptively when he said that the unique quality of India was its diversity in unity and he strove to reinforce that concept.

You may think that all this is far from the media and environment. But I put it to you that, in fact, it is relevant and closely relevant. Because media has been a vital and inseparable aspect of Indian life. During the freedom struggle against the British it was among the vanguard forces despite the repression unleashed. After
freedom it continued that role in nation-building though it required a new and different orientation. From being a partisan, it now had to be a participant. But it recognised that participation did not mean merely being a hand-maiden of the new ruling classes. It had to be vigilant not to fall a prey to specious arguments that loyalty and patriotism now required unquestioned acceptance of whatever happened. Fortunately in the early days of Independence there were leaders, notably Jawaharlal Nehru, who had no patience with a captive press and insisted that it must be free if democracy had any meaning. But regrettably as time went on while no one dared to question democracy all kinds of manoeuvres were initiated to compromise the freedom of the press.

This was inevitable because all governments all over the world have a gargantuan appetite for power. And the acquisition of power only whets the appetite for it in an inexorable escalation unless someone comes to intervene and thwart it. And the press is one of the great instruments of correction.

Without boasting I may say that the Indian press has stood up to the challenge of the political predators who have sought to strangle and silence it. Of course the people, the vast millions of the Indian people, have dealt crushing punishment on those who have forgotten that service must come before self, that a people must have a social vision if living has to have any meaning to life. Here the people have not only applauded the various crusades of the press for defending its freedom, but also actively taken part in them according to their ability.

Today a new challenge is posed to the Indian press not through the pressures of the State alone. Here permit me to refer to a recent development. A senior political leader recently proposed in Parliament a bill on the right of reply in the Press. Briefly the bill sought to protect people from misreporting and misrepresentation in the Press since the laws delay are unbearable. So only a statutory right of reply in the Press could set the record right. This right essentially meant the controverting or denial of a story or statement attributed to a person who felt had been wronged. Fair. But the right included the same prominence in display, unquestioned acceptance of the reply and a short time-frame for it. Stringent punishments were prescribed for a paper not fulfilling these requirements. Though the mover of the bill claimed that he spoke for the common man who was maligned one wondered who this man is who would attract the attention of the Press to denigrate his reputation or his business. Rather, it was felt that this was only a cover for powerful but irresponsible high-profile sections of society to escape their unbridled activities. Fortunately, after resistance by a stunned and outraged Press, the bill has gone into limbo.

To get back to my point, the new pressures are from entirely new sources, through the informatics revolution and the irresistible pressures from giant corporations and bodies making the fullest use of the dizzying speed of technological change, invention and innovation.
The new concepts of liberalisation and globalisation while bringing India into the world mainstream are also seen as a threat to all values and heritage which have been bequeathed to us. In this short intervention I need not elaborate. The replacement of tandoori chicken with Kentucky Fried is enough of an example to show the calamity of change! It is not that Kentucky should be shunned but that the tandoori should go cold.

The Indian media are gallantly trying to cope with new ideas and concepts without compromising some old and time-tested values which do not need obliteration. The challenge is indeed fearsome because it is a tidal wave.

As usual there is a din and a lot of dust about the presence or absence of a threat. The debate continues. Should the foreign media, meaning of course, the West, overwhelm us, or should they be resolutely met?

The whole debate rests on whether a forcible, but counter-productive, suppression is the answer, or should the people be strengthened in their resolve to retain their discrimination of what is good and bad for them.

Historically change is inevitable, unstoppable. It is only that in the last few decades the change has been so rapid that many cannot reconcile themselves to it except those who only live for the moment, unmindful of the consequences. Broadly, and confidently, one can say that the media environment in India is such that the press will live and ride through with honour and dignity and prevail as a free instrument because of its own clear perspective and because more importantly of the backing of the millions.