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Role Of Press Institutes And Journalists Unions
In Promoting Pluralism

By

Zakariyya Sajid
Promotion of pluralism is crucial for the development of democratic traditions and institutions in a society. It is now increasingly realized that a participant society can function only when its various components have unfettered say in its affairs and are given proper share in national administration and decision making. However pluralism is still viewed as an ideal in the developing world.

In the Western world where political systems have matured, pluralism is practised with zeal and devotion. Marginal groups and underprivileged classes of the society are the focus of enlightened citizenry so that they can be helped to safeguard and enjoy their rights. In addition courts are vigilant in protecting and enforcing human rights. However it is the society's enlightened awareness of the ideals and rights of freedom, equality and enlightenment which really function as bulwark against the violation of human rights.
Consequently pluralism typified by individualism, equality and freedom is becoming the hallmark of Western industrial world.

Concern for the promotion of pluralism is not germane to the developing world. Here it is being emphasised as part of introduction and reinforcement of democratic values passed on during the colonial period even though the democratic and popular basis of decision-making in our society is reiterated quite often.

South Asia is marked by a diversity of religions and rites, races and castes, languages and customs as well as rampant illiteracy and ignorance and poverty and diseases. Mutual distrust and bigotry are the age-old characteristics of our society. We need to eradicate all these social evils if we wish to embark upon any realistic programme of social and economic advancement. The region is characterized by country specific ideologies and world views. World’s greatest religions are professed here in terms of embodiment of universal equality, fraternity and freedom but, in practice, people are immersed in the darkness of ignorance, bigotry and poverty - the syndrome of backwardness and underdevelopment. Such a situation cannot be regarded as pluralism-friendly.
Role of Media:

As for the role of mass media in promoting pluralism in South Asia one has to be cognizant of the scenario obtaining at all levels: (a) the perceptions of pluralism itself and (b) status of media development. All over South Asia electronic media are by-and-large government monopoly, pluralism there can be practised only within the confines of government policies and perceptions. However, with the growing realization and demand to liberate electronic media from government control it can be expected that the electronic media will come to play a more independent role like the print media in projecting the ideals and dictates of pluralism and help demolish the walls of hatred and alienation in South Asia.

Role of Press Institutes:

Press Institutes in South Asia vary in administrative complexion from those functioning as government departments to those which are completely private enterprises. Despite this difference, both types are expected to look after their basic function of organizing professional training programmes for various categories of journalists and other media professionals. Similarly they try to encourage and undertake media research specially of practical value and benefit to the newspaper industry.
A look at the activities and programmes of Press Institutes in South Asia reveals that they still suffer from inertia and teething troubles and would definitely succumb to the pulls and pressures inherent in such ventures but for the encouragement and assistance from international and regional professional agencies sponsoring training programmes. Happily, these agencies have strongly manifested a soft corner for pluralism. It can therefore be expected that the Press Institutes will take cue from this situation and visualize organizing of seminars/workshops focusing on ethnic and sub-national issues and concerns, minority and human rights, women and children specific programmes. In other words, a reorientation of the Press Institute's training programmes is called for to take a fresh look at the socio-political realities and reorders their priorities. A regular monitoring of the situation human rights, ethnic, sectarium, gender specific issues - should be an abiding concern.

It has been observed that many international and national agencies such as UNICEF, social welfare departments and human right groups are eager to lend financial and logistical support for organizing training programmes for various special sectors of the media. A case in point is the establishment of regional or district level journalists/correspondents organizations such as the Sindh Journalists...
Network (SJN) in Pakistan which aim at improving their reporting and writing skills as well as making themselves more conscious and knowledgeable about the problems of their neighbourhood communities i.e. disease, poverty, illiteracy, environmental degradation and general backwardness especially in the rural areas. We should take note of such promising development and plan training programmes accordingly.

The strategy for organizing such programmes should be from less to more controversial areas. Such an approach will facilitate the acceptance of messages hitherto considered risky and objectionable by the society.

Asian Mass Communication Research and Information Centre (AMIC) has to be complimented for providing a common platform to the Press Institutes in Asia for articulating common concerns, seeking common solutions and developing inter-dependent relationship. No other international organizations can directly or indirectly match its reach, range of activities and status as a patron saint for media organisations in Asia. We need to accept this situation to avail of AMIC’s potential individually and collectively. One of the desirable activities to be developed, it appears to me, is the establishment of networking relationship.
involving AMIC and the Press Institutes and similar organizations on the one hand and the national Press Institutes and other national organizations (journalists unions, Press clubs, reporters associations advertising and public relations associations, writers guild etc.) on the other. The network would aim at integrance of these structures with a view to identifying international, national and sub-national problems and irritants highlighting both sides of a given issue/problem and providing interpretation leading to conflict resolutions. Such a mechanism would require larger and more frequent exchange of journalists and writers - hitherto just a trickle in an ocean of total solation, ignorance and mistrust.

Press Institutes generally lack funds not only for programing but for their bare existence as well. Newspaper publishers and other media proprietors are apathetic towards the financial needs of the press institutes. It is therefore necessary that they develop income generating projects. Developing **Consultancy Services** appear to be a promising venture. AMIC and other professional organisations should give some thought to this prospect. My observation is that many NGO’s and private enterprises seeking editorial and publishing advice and assistance could be our potential sources of gainful activity.
Another desirable activity for the Press Institutes in Asia would be to take more interest in the new sub-discipline of media/education, that is educating and informing the general populace about the status, orientation and role of various mass media in a given society and how the citizens should respond towards their conduct and performance. Unfortunately in South Asia, steeked in illiteracy and ignorance as it is, the role of mass media is not adequately realized and appreciated. There is need to offer courses and workshops on the role of Press and other media for various non-governmental organizations (NGO's) and similar groups so that by learning to appreciate the persaasire nature of mass media they can think of ways and strategies to them for common weal and good.

Besides, the Press Institutes, there are journalists unions, press clubs, university teaching departments and other professional associations in advertising, public relations and other media specialities. Their services and expertise can be availed of for reaching out to the marginal groups as they operate both at the media and interpersonal level of communication.

Though the journalists union have generally focussed on trade Union activities, they have also spearheaded the struggle for the Freedom of the Press. In fact their contri-
bution towards Freedom of the Press and restoration of democracy, especially in the South Asian context, has been examplary. In Pakistan, the Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists (and its provincial affiliates) and the Karachi Press Club have been taking vigilant cognizance of the cases of child abuse, police/state torture, violence against women, minorities and other marginal groups. Bold journalists stance, especially against government functionaries, requires establishment of new alliances and unions. Hence the new trend to have a group of journalists/reporters working as WAR (Women against Rape), JAHAD (Journalists Against Heroin and Drugs.) Journalists Resource Centre (for Environment) and of course the Sindh Journalists Network (SJN)