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Print Journalism: Tradition And Change

By

A T Chaudri
Speaking of tradition and change in print journalism, a notable aspect that comes to one's mind is the steady loss of missionary zeal that characterized the Third World press during the freedom movements, and the gradual onset of mercenary spirit in the post-colonial era.

In the West, too, the liberal tradition of journalism which dominated the first half of the twentieth century, seeking a universal audience through objectivity, has given way to what may be called partisan journalism which has a factional appeal with its preoccupation with opinion rather than "facts-only".

No wonder, the influence and authority the press wielded both in the East and the West, before World War II, has perceptibly waned in the post-war years — notwithstanding the transitory spurt in the prestige of the U.S. press in the aftermath of Watergate. From Watergate, indeed, the "fourth estate" emerged a bit different from what it was. It emerged as a political institution in its own right, more independent, more confident, more untramelled by tradition than ever before. But even Watergate did not give rise to any significant change—any new movement for "adversary" journalism.

That partly explains why the reading public no longer takes all its opinions from the newspapers. Not long ago, the political editor of the "Financial Times" observed in a survey of the world press that people have developed "a
distrust for and antipathy to the Press! They do not regard the Press as the guardian of their liberties and governments have been under no pressure from public opinion to increase the power of the Press. This in itself marks a radical change from tradition.

Over a century ago, after his first visit to London, Ralph Waldo Emerson had written about "The Times":

"What you read in the morning in that journal, you shall hear in the evening in all society. It has ears everywhere... it has risen year by year, and victory by victory, to its present authority".

Referring to the "famous trophies" won by 'The Times' with its "controlling voice" in national and international affairs, Emerson asserted:

"What would "The Times" say is a terror in Paris, in Berlin, in Vienna, in Copenhagen and in Nepal".

But times have changed for "The Times" in the third quarter of this century. In the past three years it has faced three closure threats and has been overtaken by one crisis after the other thanks to the mercurial interventions of successive proprietors, the militant trade unionism of printers and the excessive compromises made by editors. A year ago, the latter were under attack from their staff for making the policy of Britain's most famous newspaper less traditional and more popular to push up the graph of circulation.

The very institution of editors, who had traditionally high moral and intellectual calibre, is on the decline. Britain had once a galaxy of great editors—towering figures like J.A. Spender, A.G. Gardiner, J.L. Garvin and Kingsley Nantie—to name only a few. So had America at the beginning of this century, Americans could take pride in Joseph Pulitzer's crusading journalism, Godkin's unrelenting fight against corruption and earlier the anti-slavery cause.
and editorial influence of Horace Greeley "the father of American journalism". This is not to disparage Luces and Paleys or Grahams and Chandlers who have ruled the kingdom of media and changed the shape of America's tradition bound politics and society. But the fact remains that power has shifted from the editors to proprietors or publishers, and the Press has been unable to create a new tradition of journalism since it has succumbed to two major forces of pressure—money and power.

What is true of the West is also true of the East. The dawn of the present century was marked by the rise of Press giants in the sub-continent like Maulana Mohammad Ali, Maulana Azad and Maulana Zafar Ali Khan who were political leaders as well as journalists with prodigious intellectual acumen and great mass appeal. Literate India seemed to be on its knees every morning to the "COMRADE", the "AL-HILAL" and the "ZAMINDAR". Among the pioneers of the Hindu Press were men like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Keshub Chander Sen, Ishwarchandra Vidasagar, Furdonji Murzban, B.S. Jambhekar, Motilal Gosh, Subramania Ayer and Chintamani. They struggled hard to raise the status of the Press and fought many an epic battle against British colonialism.

In those palmyest days of journalism in undivided India, the Press, although under foreign tutelage, relished the air of freedom and unflinchingly endeavoured to guard this freedom. Take the example of Quaid-i-Azam, the chairman of the Board of Directors of the "BOMBAY CHRONICLE". He suspended its publication when censorship was imposed on it. Since the Quaid had drunk deep at the fountain of Morlay's liberalism and it became "part of my life", as he put it, he fought relentlessly for the liberty of the Press. His moving oration in the Central Legislature of India, in September, 1918, against the maladministration of the Press Act of 1910, his spirited defence of Bombay Chronicle's deported
editor, Horniman, in 1923 which shook the Indian Legislative Council, and again, in 1936 his forceful protest against the use of Indian Press (Emergency Powers) Act of 1931 against the Daily "Abhyudaya" of Allahabad all this brings into focus the high priority the Father of the Nation attached to the rights of the Press which he regarded as "immutable".

That was in the second quarter of this century when the Press in the sub-continent had a crusading spirit and the journalists had a mission to perform. The mission was the emancipation of the people from the colonial stranglehold. That called for great sacrifices which entailed loss of personal liberty, property, even life. But after the dawn of independence, newspapers mostly became commercial ventures and the majority of journalists became the peddlers of petty news and views, rather than the shepherds of human soul. This retreat from the ideological basis of the Press is what differentiates new journalism from the old.

What is the state of the Press in different parts of the world today? In the Third World, over 100 nations have gained independence during the past four decades, but newspapers have ironically lost their freedom. Take Asia. In this continent few countries can boast of a free Press. India claims that it has "a developed Press in an under-developed country". Yet, as S.Natarajan says in his "History of the Press in India", "...the sensational side of journalism has become a permanent feature in Indian journalism" and this, according to him, means "distorting communal and political differences. "One need not mention here the fate that befell the Indian Press during the emergency, or more recently, in Bihar under a proposed Draconian Press legislation."
Another country in Asia, Japan which belongs to the First World, has a free press. (So also Malaysia and Singapore). But as the Tokyo correspondent of "Financial Times" noted, some time ago, "Japan's newspapers like to be considered 'quality papers with a popular circulation'. But by attempting to be all things to all readers, in effect, they fail to meet standards which would be expected of true quality productions." In Africa, there were some prestigious papers like Egypt's "Al-Ahram", which was founded in 1875 and still reads some 300,000 readers. But after the ouster of its celebrated editor, Haikal, the traditional character of this great paper has changed beyond recognition. It hardly reflects public opinion. In most of the African countries, barring Tanzania, Kenya and Zimbabwe, in which the press is not without a national "clan", the governments look askance at press freedom and would not tolerate the voice of dissidence. The bulk of the African press is state managed and lies slumped under a multiplicity of pressures.

In Latin America, there are about a 1,000 dailies produced in 20 republics, but they are owned by urban elites and ruling juntas. With few exceptions — like "La Prensa" which had boldly taken up the cudgels against Peron, few Latin American papers conduct themselves as the watchdogs of public interest. Lately, they have acquired modern technology and gained in circulation, but most of them are like blunt knives that can draw no blood.

So much about the press in the Third World. What about the First and Second Worlds, where the press has undergone a telecommunication revolution? This revolution brought about by computers, satellites and a host of electronic and mechanical gadgets has almost turned the world into an international village and stimulated international trade and economic give-and-take. More important, it has lowered the barriers in the way of free flow of information and led to an explosion of information products and services. But it has also some negative aspects.
For, it has caused social and cultural disruptions, and made Western societies more vulnerable, partly because of the misuse of media freedom.

Broadly speaking, the press in the West which has to struggle against the growing power of rival media, notably the TV, and which has to put up with economic uncertainties, has developed visible streaks of pessimism. In the U.S., hundreds of newspapers have folded up in the Sixties and Seventies. In Western Europe, too, the press has been contracting. The French press has lost over a hundred dailies after World War II. West Germany had some 2,000 papers 50 years ago; now it has barely 700. The British press has also suffered from merger moves. The bulk of the Italian press comprises 18 major papers and these are run by industrial barons. The insufficient choice of journals not only affects the quality of democracy, but also impairs the authority of the press.

A word about the press in Eastern Europe, where journalism is a command-performance. The Communists may treat 'Pravda', or 'Izvestia' as a political Bible but what credibility do these papers enjoy? The Soviet press gives the reader's what the Government and the Party wants them to read. Indeed, the Czech and Polish papers tried to grant some freedom to themselves, by fits and starts, but the flowers withered in bloom. Yet, it would be fair to say that the freedom of expression in a socialist system does not die. It is only benumbed.

This equally applies to print journalism in the Third World. The rise of authoritarian regimes on the ashes of tottering democracies has changed the orientation of newspapers and journals. Press criticism is often confused with subversion and the stress on responsibility
negates the traditional concept of the independence of the Press. In the process of governing the Press, to meet diverse pressures political and economic, internal and external stringent Press laws have been enacted, censorship has been imposed indiscriminately, printing presses have been forfeited, journalists put behind the bars and even direct government control has been extended over a section of the Press. All these fragments put together make a bleak silhouette of the Press in most of the emergent States.

Where then do we go from here? One can only hope that in course of time emergent states will come to realise that societies cannot be transformed by the edicts of governments. They can be transformed only by the creativity of thinkers and initiative of opinion-makers. Here the news media, particularly print journalism, has an essential function to perform—to inform, to interpret, to deduce and to make the man behind the plough and the man behind the wheel and millions who have been enfranchised comprehend rationally and intelligently what is going on in their community and in the world community. This essential function cannot be performed if the Press, the TV and the radio are made to babble in a conformist tone. There has to be free exchange of ideas in the media—a media with a social conscience. Nor can this function be performed just by importing modern tele-communication technology into the media. That is like leaping from the 19th to the 21st century, without the proper infrastructure. This function can be performed only by drawing a clear line between the Government and the Press. The one must plan and act, the other must scrutinise and criticise rather than publicise every act, of course in the public interest. Make the media tame and timid and you will have a tame & timid society.