

Paper No. 5

National Unity and Media Practice

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Nationalism, all through the history of mankind, has been one of the most powerful urges that moves a people, and it is around this feeling of nationalism that cluster sentiments and traditions and a sense of common living and a sense of common purpose.

Nationalism, inspite of the recent events in several parts of the world, involving ethnic and ideological conflicts is still universal in its influence and appeal. The nationalist ideal, by and large, in most of the countries is deep and strong. The abiding appeal of nationalism to the spirit of man has to be recognized and respected. Nationalism is not the product of one age, nation, class, party, religion or philosophy, but that each has partly contributed to its growth, partly counteracted it, though in very different degrees.¹

National consciousness is a pre-requisite and a determinating factor for national unity. National unity, to a very large extent, would depend upon one's perception and concept of nation.

The word nation conveys fascinating nuances and connotations. It conveys to the German mind the impression

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of a great powerful and highly civilized people with its own State, and national is employed only for such lofty concepts as national honour, national unity, the national flag.² In Burke's view nation is not merely a multitude of human beings living together, but an historical personality with a specific political and social structure, united by a sort of tacit consent and guided by a small class trained in politics and public service and embodying the national traditions. As Frederick Hertz, in his seminal study 'Nationality in History and Politics', points out to the wide spread modern usage of nation which identifies a nation with a people constituted as a state. In this view every state forms a nation and every citizen is a member of the nation. This definition, of course, is an exclusively legal one. Many states were or are composed of different nationalities. The Scots, the Welsh and the Irish regard themselves as nations, though they live in a common state with the English. Therefore, in modern history, the moving force is not the legal concept of nationality but the social and emotional force of national consciousness.

The word nation is used in different senses and its meaning has changed during the course of time. Different nations, and even different parties within a nation often have different connotations according to the interests they pursue.

Several tendencies and attitudes have been attributed to nation and nationalism and different elements - cultural,

linguistic or even religious - have been emphasised by different parties on different occasions and in different contexts. It is however accepted that, by and large, nationalism represents ardent love of the people, ⁿunrelenting fight for its true interests, protection against foreign interference and aggression, safeguarding ^s traditions and stressing of national unity and solidarity; and of course subordination of particular interests to those of the nation.

A nation, like the tribal, local and professional groups, is a self-conscious group, but unlike the other groups it comprises millions of people belonging to a variety of sub cultures speaking different languages and professing different religions, all of whom feel they are one. Nationalism thus involves the will of the people and leads to the formation of a national government. It also implies that interests of the nation are more important than interests of any individuals or groups within it.

However, cohesive these groups within a nation may be, these could not be entirely homogeneous. They are bound to be diverse in terms of language, religion, economic and literacy status, etc. Forces of nationalism, in order to succeed the onslaught of divisive forces, have to assert themselves through different media, implementing the national policies and counteracting the forces of disintegration and disunity.

Nationalism or national consciousness is complex and abstract. As Hans Kohn has written, nationalism is a set of mind. It is the result of social learning.³ This feeling

of national consciousness could be generated only over a period of time, overcoming a large number of obstacles and barriers, vested interests and countervailing influences.

Having attempted to lay down the broad definition of nationalism, how do we go about forging national unity? Should as important an issue as that of national unity, which encompasses the whole nation, cutting across communities, languages, regions and religions be left to the government policies; or should it be left to the political opinion leaders of the country to espouse the cause of national unity, or would media alone be able to cope with this challenging task which has more to do with the thoughts, aspirations and attitudes of the people than with attainment of merely quantifiable targets designed to fulfil a laid down schedule.

National unity, by definition, is a national objective. It cannot be viewed as just an elitist affair. It cannot be confined to particular groups or classes of people - whether social, religious, economic, political or intellectual. Its objective has necessarily to be a super person or national character which transcends and binds together people of every type, profession, region, creed, caste or race in the country into a single identifiable whole.⁴

Role of Media in forging National Unity

Having stated that the task, which cannot be left either to the political leadership, elite groups or the intelligentsia alone; what role can the mass media possibly play in this crucial task.

In his book, *Nationalism and Social Communication*, Karl Deutsch points out that presence of ample communication facilities is the single most important feature that makes for the development of nationalism. Deutsch goes to the extent of proposing functional definition of nationality 'which consists in the ability to communicate more effectively and over a wider range of subjects with members of one large group than with outsiders'. Easy accessibility to means of communications facilitates social contacts, travel, knowledge of history and culture. Communications help develop a broad and catholic outlook as opposed to insular and local. Deutsch calls such people as, "mobilised population of the country", who are mobilised by intensive communication with others, directly and indirectly. The frequency and intensity of communication with the within different parts of a country would certainly go a long way in encouraging the forces of national unity at people -to-people level. Likewise communication is seen, "as a kind of temperature controlling agent." Through the stimulation of aspirations, "Social temperature" can be raised, and the other way round, by providing explanation, the temperature can be lowered.⁵.

Two of the main functions of communication, listed in the Report of International Commission for the study of communication problems, 'Many Voices, one World', are:

Integration: the provision to all persons, groups and nations of access to the variety of messages which they need in order to know and understand each other and to appreciate other's living conditions, view points and aspirations.

Socialization: the provision of a common fund of knowledge which enables people to operate as effective members of the society in which they live and which fosters social cohesion and awareness thereby permitting active involvement in public life.

These two functions, alongwith others like Debate and discussion and Motivation, underline the critical role that the communication media can play in fostering national unity.

Touching Faith in the efficacy of media

It is again intensely interesting to note as to how some of the developing countries have almost touching faith in the efficacy of media as an instrument for forging national unity. In Nigeria media is viewed as a national unifier. In the Nigerian context the mass communicators are expected to:

Perform the unique role of aggregating and articulating the interests of the people, giving them leadership, enlightening them and pleading their cause with the government in a plural society;

Gather information about the problems, needs and interests of the people, and communicate them to the appropriate decision making centres. Besides mass media in a pluralistic society should see itself as the melting pot where various cultures dissolve and merge into one national culture.

In China, mass media alongwith face-to-face communication was effectively used for national integration. The media in China focused popular attention on developing China industrially into a modern state. The media have portrayed regional developments in the context of national progress and unity. Just as television enabled Americans across the country to laugh at the same jokes, the media in China has greatly increased the number of terms, news items, stories and personalities that the Chinese people now can share. The end result is a much enhanced national awareness.⁶ This enhanced national awareness has mobilized the Chinese people in a way that they are now more ready psychologically to be integrated into the new institutions.

These general conclusions form a part of the Michigan studies on China, Communications and National Integration in Communist China, as the title of the publication. The study, which is a fascinating account of the use of mass media by the Chinese communist party for its political and ideological use, points out that the media cannot create national integration by themselves. The study also underlined the role of radio and films being oral media, as

being more adapted to rural audiences, whereas newspapers, journals and books being more suited to urban and educated residents. However, a study affirms that the media cannot create national integration by themselves.

In his book, *The Third Wave*, Alvin Toffler points out that as Second Wave societies began to build national economies, a basic shift in public consciousness became evident. The Second Wave swiftly multiplied the number of people with a stake in the larger world. Bit by bit, psychological horizons expanded. The new mass media increased the amount of information and imagery from far away. Under the impact of these changes localism faded. National consciousness stirred. Since the author of *Future Shock* and *The Third Wave* credits mass media with stirring the national consciousness, the practitioners and scholars of mass media have lot to feel cheerful about.

In India primary objective of the national policy regarding the use of mass media is to strengthen national unity. Some of the important guidelines and principles are:

1. Among the nine objectives laid down for Doordarshan, the first two are: to act as catalyst for social change and to promote national integration.

2. Likewise, the principles guiding newspolicy for broadcast media issued by the Government of India interalia state:

The style and methods of newsreporting should reinforce the fundamental principles on which national policies are based. These fundamental principles include territorial integrity, national integration, secularism, maintenance of public order and upholding the dignity and prestige of Parliament, state legislatures and the judiciary.

3. The statement of objectives, or the charter for the National Broadcast Trust, as envisaged in the Akashbharati Report,⁷ recommended inter alia, that the Trust shall:

- i) Uphold the unity of the country and the democratic values enshrined in the Constitution,
- ii) Safeguard the citizens right to be informed freely, truthfully and objectively on all matters of public interest, national or international,
- iii) Provide a national broadcasting service, predominantly Indian in content and character,
- iv) Produce and transmit varied programmes designed to awaken, inform, enlighten, educate, entertain and enrich all sections of the people with due regard to the fact that the national broadcast audience consists of a whole series of publics,
- v) Uphold the secular ideal and promote a spirit of truth and enquiry in the country and among all sections of the people.

The Working Group also underlined the imperative need to propagate a national approach to India's problems, and to

develop a national consensus on issues which concern the country as a whole.

4. The Press Council of India, likewise, while keeping in view that India is a country with a vastly diverse and differing range of languages, communities, regions and also with varying degree of economic prosperity suggested that the Press, in order to achieve national unity, should emphasise those aspects of the national life which underline the common features of diverse faiths and religions and subordination of sectional interests to national unity and integrity. The Council was, however, emphatic that writings, which merely set forth or explain the grievances of a community be it in any field social, political or economic and are meant to ventilate the grievances of a particular linguistic group or regions should not be considered communal. The Press Council laid down the following guidelines as offending against journalistic proprieties and ethics:

1. Distortion or exaggeration of facts or incidents in relation to communal matters or giving currency to unverified rumours, suspicions or inferences as if they were facts and base their comments on them.
2. Employment of intemperate or unrestrained language in the presentation of news or views, even as a piece of literary flourish or for the purpose of rhetoric or emphasis.
3. Encouraging or condoning violence even in the face of provocation as a means of obtaining redress of grievances whether the same be genuine or not.

4. While it is the legitimate function of the Press to draw attention to the genuine and legitimate grievances of any community with a view to having the same redressed by all peaceful, legal and legitimate means, it is improper and a breach of journalistic ethics to invent grievances, or to exaggerate real grievances, as these tend to promote communal ill-feeling and accentuate discord.
5. Scurrilous and untrue attacks on communities, or individuals, particularly when this is accompanied by charges, attributed misconduct to them, as due to their or of a particular community or caste.
6. Falsely giving a communal colour to incidents which might occur in which members of different communities happen to be involved.
7. Emphasising matters that are apt to produce communal hatred or ill-will, or fostering feelings of distrust between communities.
8. Publishing alarming news which are in substance untrue or make provocative comments on such news or even otherwise calculated to embitter relations between different communities or regional or linguistic groups.
9. Exaggerating actual happenings to achieve sensationalism and publication of news which adversely affect communal harmony with banner headlines or in distinctive types.

10. Making disrespectful, derogatory or insulting remarks on or reference to the different religions or faiths or their founders.

All these statements of objectives, policies and guidelines however do not always translate themselves into ideal writings and programmes furthering the objectives of national unity.

The task of media in fostering national unity is made difficult by bureaucratic thinking, countervailing powerful caste and communal interests and political ideology. The government control and policies framework has an inhibiting and restrictive influence on the quality and nature of programmes put up by the electronic media in the country.

One of the important programmes on Doordarshan - the National Programme - broadcast simultaneously from all the TV centres at the Prime Time from 8.40 - 10.30 P.M. cannot claim to attract the national viewership throughout the country. The programme has not been received favourably by several states particularly in the South, some of whom have discontinued the Hindi news. The programme was also considered an imposition of Hindi on non Hindi stations. Since most of the programmes are from Delhi, contributions from other parts of the country are not represented. An other serious objection was that this compulsory relay from Delhi took away the prime time from the station's own regional programmes. Such efforts at centralised programme presentation only go on to show that a country of India's size and diversity cannot fruitfully have a single set

pattern for its media content.

It is inconcievable that Doordarshan should have ignored the strong feelings that its programmes in Hindi have aroused in other parts of the country.

"The main thrust of Doordarshan is not only the conversion of the South to Hindi and the Northern way of life but to obliterate by indirect means the culture of the South.

It is a kind of psychological warfare that has been unleashed on the South. All the resources of Government of India are employed by Doordarshan to impose not only Hindi but the superior Northern Culture", R Gopale Krishana in the Illustrated Weekly of India, December 21-27, 1986.

Cultural alienation of people, linguistic differences or communal conflicts can be a threat to the unity of a country anywhere in the world. At one time Canada's internal crisis over Quebec and heightened bitterness between French speaking and English speaking Canadians had created the real possibility of national disintegration. The French Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau, fighting to preserve the national unity had warned, "if certain centrifugal tendencies fulfil their lves,, we will have permitted this country either to break up or to become so divided that its existence and its ability to act as one nation will have been destroyed."

India at present, is also riven with numerous conflicting and fissiparous tendencies which threaten the very basis of national unity.

In such a situation how could the media meet challenges facing the country. Certainly not through laying down guidelines or issuing directions alone.

The media will have to come up with certain unconventional, innovative, path breaking and courageous steps. It will have to greatly modify the tendency of projecting only the point of view of the government, the administrators, planners and the policy makers. The voices of dissent, anti establishment and opposition, however unpalatable it might appear to the powers that be, should be given an equal opportunity to be articulated. An environment of openness, an easy accessibility to the divergent views, a tolerant attitude towards opposing ideologies will help bring down temperatures all around.

In a free society media cannot be expected not to report what it perceives to be truth as it sees it. At the same time it may not contribute to inflaming passions on sensitive issues. I remember how a particular issue of a video magazine, through its on-the-spot filming of the scene of self immolation of a young student during the tension filled days on reservation issue in July 1990 had suddenly aroused passions throughout North India and encouraged several young boys and girls to take their lives for what they considered to be a worthwhile cause. The point at

issue is: should not video reporting/filming have been suitably edited so as not to have given rise to separatist, divisive and palapably/^{harmful}tendencies in the society?

The disadvantaged and depressed sections of the society feel that their living conditions, their aspirations and even their success stories do not make news unless something out of the way, violent or even bizarre happens to them. In the William Allen White Centennial Seminar in 1969, Carl Rowen had pointed out that the grievances of Negroes hardly receive any coverage in the American media unless something volatile happens. He stated:

"The truth today is that someone who legitimately speaks for thousands of Negroes, who articulates their hopes and frustrations, can show up in most American cities and get no better than routine press coverage. But let a Negro show up who says: "If you don't do this or that we're going to burn down this damned town." I guarantee you he'll make front page headlines and all the TV shows."⁸

How prophetic his observations are, when viewed in terms of contemporary scenario in the United States. The media must therefore concern itself with the grievances, problems and issues impinging upon the depressed and deprived section of the society on ~~the~~ continuing basis, and not only when the lid blows off.

It is apparent that once a programme is targeted and slotted as a National Unity programme, it is considered

merely as so much of propaganda, The well known cinema producer Khawja Ahmed Abbas points out that making films on national unity is a risky business which few are prepared to take up. He had made three films - Hamara Ghar, Saat Hindustani and Do Boond Pani, the last two got National Award as the year's Best Feature Films on National Integration theme; but box office wise all the three were flops, What is therefore needed is a more subtle approach with no direct preaching of the moral, which is always counterproductive. And that is what most of our programmes on national integration on Doordharshan turn out to be.

It must be conceded that while mass media do play a vital role in fostering national unity, it is powerless against mighty forces of casteism, religion and fundamentalism. Media must not be exalted as the, 'begetter of all beneficent change or guardian of all that should be cherished. Despite the considerable influence of media, it would be wrong to attribute to it more virtues, more faults or greater powers than it truly possesses. At the same time it is incumbent upon the media practitioners to also consider whether truth, if it is going to offend, inflame passions or cause fissures in the society and the country, should it not be better unsaid? I myself find it very difficult to accept the above axiom. But should not we not ensure; even if a particular event is true, does it at the same time promote goodwill and does it serve the larger interest of the society. If that happens we would have done our duty by the society, nation, apart from our profession.