

Bare Foot Journalism : Its Role In Village India

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Background: Media development will take place mostly in developing countries. This is not necessarily because the development of media is related to the development of a country. There is always a stage of optimum point from which the pattern changes

Natural and the abnormally historical or psychological happenings in any given part of the world can influence the development of media. Such influence is felt much more by newspapers than by other media because of the simple reason that newspapers are said to be indicators of a nation's thinking and progress. Bearing these in mind, it is important for us to understand the background within which "barefoot journalists" are expected to operate. Ad nauseam it has been stated that about 75 per cent. of our population lives in the villages. However other factors have to be borne in mind. They are the unending illiteracy, the inroads made by unemployment, orthodoxy that cannot be pushed back, belief in dowry, caste and the like, the need for not just hygienic way of living but also medical supplies undeclared hold of the moneylenders and zamindars over their workers to make them virtual slaves for generations.

There have been valiant laws and other means have been adopted to bring them to an end. However, without sounding too pessimistic I would like to state here in the presence of this august body that all these continue with a vigour that should belong to other areas of activity if our country is to change from a developing country to a developed one.

The structure that I have presented so far does not necessarily apply to India. It can be found with variations and varying intensities in numerous other countries. Whereas in one country the nation might have solved one of the above problems, others continue. In another country, perhaps, the government has succeeded in tackling another problem, but the rest still continue. Therefore, the total image that emerges is virtually the same for many developing countries or underdeveloped countries. Certainly it is the same for numerous countries of this part of Asia.

Barefoot Journalism: The concept of "barefoot" men is not a new one. There has been talk of barefoot doctors, barefoot engineers and barefoot what-have-you. In that sense, a barefoot journalist is part of the increasing thinking towards barefootness.

Nevertheless, barefoot journalism presents numerous problems which either many of the active journalists do not want to look at or those employed pretend not to understand. As has been made clear in the background, rural India has numerous problems. That is only one side of the coin. The other side is its rural area which presents an unending source of information for an enterprising journalist. Unfortunately, the concept of information happenings or events as the present-day journalists seem to understand, or as has been taught in our universities and other educational institutions teaching journalism, has been faulty. It is because of this faulty concept that the Indian village has not been considered important at all. For us "news" seems to have been only what happens within the rural areas. Happenings in the rural areas do not make news.

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The larger problems arise because like so many other professionals, even the enquiring journalist does not want to go to the village. Therefore, barefoot journalism does not gather momentum. In this process village India seems to suffer by default in terms of the rest of the world getting to know about the villagers or being able to communicate-in-the-larger-sense with them.

Journalism can never ever do without communication. It implies communication. It is not dull, drab, insipid, reports or articles which do not communicate to the reader about something else. This is where the barefoot journalist comes in. He is the one who will let the rest of the world know about Village India.

Encouraging barefoot journalism, therefore, begins to assume not just greater importance, but is of primary importance to a country like India. It is not just a minister cutting a tape for some building in the city which is news. Unfortunately, our newspapers seem to be over-politicalised. Therefore, the moment a minister opens his mouth, there is a journalist to take down what he says even if what he says is virtually meaningless -- has been said before, perhaps, a dozen times. The pencil poised on the notebook moves furiously as if some great news is being obtained. Yet, when various forms of developmental activities take place in the rural area, when an isolated village becomes connected with the rest of the world for the first time or when a small unheard of dam brings water to an arid zone; at that time it still does not become news. No journalist is interested. In other words, the barefoot journalist is missing.

Yet, those are the things, so-called small, which mark the progress that a country is making. The stress is on village India because most of India is in the villages. In fact, I would like to stress here in the presence of experts in the field of communication that tomorrow's India lies in our villages. It is only when our villages progress, may be in small bits and small sections till ultimately a large totality is obtained that our country is really said to have progressed.

Although I have often felt that Gandhiji is quoted customarily time out of numbers by almost everyone who has no argument to give, I am still compelled to refer to him. This is not because I have no argument. I have presented most of my arguments. But if there ever has been an Indian who understood village India, I think it was Gandhiji alone. He stressed rural development, rural self-sufficiency and indicated that India lay truly in what is called village India. Accepting this, we must also accept the fact that journalism has to go to the villages, to the rural sector, to understand changes, gradual, slow, but vast, that are taking place. The Indian society will undergo a transformation not because of what happens in the cities, but because of what happens in the villages. And the journalist, if he is true to the most important role that he has to play, cannot keep himself aloof from such changes. A journalist, after all, is a chronicler of changes, of happenings, of the development of society. This is where the barefoot journalist comes in.

Now about the 'difficulty' of ensuring that there are barefoot journalists. The problem is similar to the one faced with regard to barefoot doctors or barefoot engineers. After much education, learning and effort, none of the professionals really want to involve themselves in the rural sector because they cannot get what they think are the means to live well. It is to be made clear, therefore, what living well means. It is also essential to make the objectives of a profession clearer than it has been possible so far. All of us are citizens of a country for certain obligations while requiring certain things for ourselves.

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It is in this context that a journalist must consider reportage, articles, editorials and other forms of journalistic work related to what is happening in the rural areas.

It is suggested that the aptitudes of journalism students be assessed before they qualify in the institutes and universities. On the basis of these, surely some barefoot journalists can be developed. Besides, thought must be given to the possibility of ensuring a certain minimum period of rural reporting before confirmation is given of having qualified in journalism.

As for those who become journalists without going through universities, the burden of ensuring barefoot journalist lies with their editors. This has to be proved to them. They have to be informed about the importance of the rural sector. If necessary, data can be collected on the ~~mx~~ numerous happenings in the rural area which have taken place, to which they not paid their notice, which nevertheless mean much. Possibly, a small study group would be necessary for this. Even this should be considered.

No country can afford to overlook the rural sector. For India, unless Village India is considered and unless there are increasingly larger number of barefoot journalists, its progress itself will be much slower than it can be if journalism reports on what happens in the rural sector.

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