



Transparency Review

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TWO FACES OF MEDIA

Media has two faces today. One is confident and optimistic as never before. Contrary to fears based on the experience of Western countries, the rise of visual media has not eaten into the revenues and readership of print media. In India they are doing very well, with one riding on the shoulders of the other. The impressive facts and figures collated by the CMS for a comprehensive appraisal of the media scene in 2007 show a rate of growth that can only be described as phenomenal, as the excerpts we publish indicate. The wide-ranging study goes into details of revenue and reach as well as other factors influencing the media, including the danger of commercial considerations influencing editorial judgment.

The other face of media is less attractive. It was seen at its ugliest in the long-drawn-out coverage of the Aarushi Talwar murder case. The manner in which some of the TV channels competed in suggesting, even

fictionalising, sordid details about a young girl and her family strengthened arguments for some form of regulation. There have been other such cases. Print media, fortunately, cannot depict scandalous scenes as vividly as visual, but serious questions are being raised about its credibility and ethical standards. The subservience of the editor to the manager in many papers, as noted in the appraisal of last year's media scene, has led to distortion of information and entertainment being treated as news.

Increasingly, the role of media in society is under scrutiny. Is it to be treated just as a profit-making industry or does it owe a debt to society? The media gets special benefits, like the right of access to authority, on the assumption that its primary objective is to serve the public good. But this is certainly not served by a diet of scandal and sensationalism. Some of these issues are discussed within.

Editor: Ajit Bhattacharjea

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Letters To The Editor

Thanks for the latest issue of Transparency Review. I appreciate your crusade against corruption. I have some ideas for tackling corruption with a few amendments in the Constitution and the laws. Unfortunately, Members of Parliament are not interested in the electoral reforms or reforms for tackling corruption. No one else can legislate. This is where we are stuck.

P.P. Rao, Senior Advocate, Supreme Court

I was delighted to read the April issue of the TR. The information on RTI and the Rural employment programme was very valuable.

N. Vittal, Former Chief Vigilance Commissioner

This (April issue) is a very valuable reference document, bringing together excellent material on RTI.

Anant Trivedi

I regularly receive your CMS Reviews and they are always enlightening! Thank you for the latest review matter sent on NREGS.

Yashodhara Raje Scindia.

Media in Perspective

Dr N Bhaskar Rao has traversed the media world to make a detailed study for CMS of the way it has been functioning last year, the challenges it has faced, the overpowering influence of advertisement, the constant conflict of interests and, despite all this, its massive growth

PHENOMENAL GROWTH

The year 2007 was yet another year of an impressive turnaround in the newspaper scene in India. The growth has been much beyond global trend and higher than the overall growth of economy of the country. And, in fact, notwithstanding marginal decline in the readership across all segments of newspapers, the mass media scenario itself has been witnessing a phenomenal growth during the recent years. There were visible signs in 2007 of continued buoyancy in the newspaper scene.

The Indian print media “industry” according to Price Water House Coopers, recorded a growth of 16 percent in 2007 to reach an estimated Rs. 13000 crores. This growth percentage of print media has been more than in the case of television. Its forecast is that print media would grow to Rs. 281 billion by 2012. Within print media, newspaper publishing constitutes more than 80 percent and this segment grew at 17 percent. This growth rate however is expected to decline to 13 percent in 2008 but buoyancy will continue. (During this period newspaper publishing market would reach Rs. 243 billion from the 2007 level of Rs. 149 billion). An analysis of the finance of 37 publicly traded companies in the Indian Media and Entertainment (M & E) sector, for example, shows that the gross profits grew 31 percent in compound terms between 2003 and 2007. The Indian M & E group was twice as profitable as its global counterparts. Between 2003 and 2007, print media enjoyed the highest compounded growth and operating profit margin according to Ernest and Young.

Readership trends

Notwithstanding the inconsistencies in readership surveys year to year, a time series analysis at macro

level for 1982-2007 period reflects broad trends. In terms of reach of television and press their growth path has been different. as could be seen from the graphs:

Despite the recent growth in the numbers of mass media and the boom in news media, their overall reach put together is not even two thirds of adult population of the country. In fact, in the last couple of years when proliferation was high, there was stagnation in the “overall expansion” in media reach. This is obvious going by various national surveys, including the latest IRS 2007 (R2). Such a trend is evident even going by number of newspapers and circulation figures of RNI. Male-female differences in readership have come down during the period although not significantly. In fact, even in urban areas, readership among women is hardly a quarter against over one-third among men. Younger age groups are not reading newspapers as much as their elders. This is because the young educated are taking to Internet and also, and more importantly, because of preoccupation of news media with their own concerns. Despite proliferation of media and increased competitiveness, the choice in the content package to readers and viewers is neither inclusive or distinct. The IRS for 2007 in fact has brought out that even the reach of newspapers has fallen in urban India since 2002 (from 48 to 46 percent) and that there are 314 million adults now who can read but do not read any publication.

In the last couple of years the overall readership of newspapers has increased by about four percent both in urban and rural areas. Language publications obviously continue to dominate the scene. Twenty five dailies out of the top 100 have increased their readership in 2006 and all of them are in Hindi or regional language. Out of the top twenty newspapers, only two are in English having multiple editions. Only 14 of top 100 dailies in terms of published readership

are in English in 2007. *English dailies in all are read by less than four percent of adults. Over the years readership of daily newspapers in the four Southern languages has increased. This is significant for two reasons. Firstly, both circulation and readership of dailies in these Southern States has been growing in the earlier*

never before as if “viability” in the conventional sense is no longer an issue. Newfound optimism in newspapers and the process of globalization appears to have triggered this boom in magazines. The Ministry had given approval for 284 foreign publication in the last five years.

Having added editions in the last couple of years, the big Hindi newspapers are going through a phase of either taking to business newspaper or some other niche publication. Even a Telugu daily has announced a business daily. Most English business dailies had already taken to Hindi version.

READERSHIP TRENDS (Percent of adults)						
	2006			2007		
	All India	Urban	Rural	All India	Urban	Rural
Dailies	37.4	57.0	28.6	37.1	55.8	28.6
Magazines	13.8	23.9	9.2	12.2	21.1	8.2
Any publication	38.7	58.7	29.9	38.3	57.5	29.7
Source: IRS 2006(R2) and 2007 (R2)						

Spread of Publishing Centres

Prior to proliferation of news channels, “district edition” approach in the earlier decade had given impressive results and triggered both

growth and expansion of dailies. Although that was limited to one or two language dailies, it had set the pace for competitiveness between publishers.

Nearly 90 percent of daily newspapers are published from around 36 big cities. The number of locations publishing newspapers however, has doubled in the last more than two decades. Dispersal of daily newspapers within a State is an important indication of the growth potential and also expansion into newer “markets”.

News channels have expanded market for dailies

States that witnessed growth of newspaper circulation and readership in the last couple of years are the same where television news channels has proliferated. It could be said that TV had no significant adverse impact, as apprehended, on the levels of readership of daily newspapers in the country or their growth, particularly of the big ones. On the contrary, competition had helped expand the overall market for newspapers. The phenomenon in some way is like “notebook” driving “personal computer” sales.

Competition triggered growth

Newspaper competitiveness and growth in the last couple of years has been in those states or regions where the scene was dominated mostly by a single daily — with half or more of readership and circulation. It is these States or regions which witnessed emergence of new dailies or and older dailies catching up. These

years too. Second, the spread and proliferation of television in the four Southern States has been lot more in language TV channels originating local programmes, including news and current affairs. This has not slowed the growth of newspapers and their readership in the South. This is also the case with Marathi dailies. Overall, both growth and expansion has been more and faster in the case of regional language media and coincide with proliferation of news broadcasts.

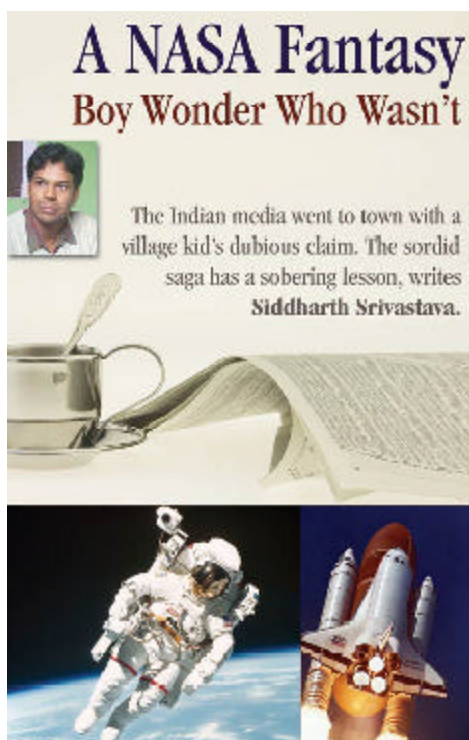
Half of those who are not readers of any newspaper are literate. That is of about 360 million, 20 percent of them are Hindi readers and more than 5 percent are in higher income groups. Then, there are nearly one-fifth of all readers, who read newspapers but only “irregularly” or “occasionally”. Put together, more than 450 million people thrice the current readers constitute the “potential market”.

Yet, the competition between channels and newspapers so far has been for winning the market share of each other rather than reach out the unreached and create new market. Even in Gujarat where a Hindi language group ventured into Gujarati market, the overall reach of newspapers has not expanded significantly.

Growth of Magazines

Despite decline in circulation and readership of magazines and also in advertising outlays in the last few years, the number of new magazines in English as well as in regional languages, continue to swell as

States include Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, Maharashtra, West Bengal and now, since 2003, include all Hindi speaking States although not all



the regions with in the states. An exception is the State of Orissa where neither newspaper nor news broadcasts have increased.

It was the competition among media itself that has helped further the growth, whether it is in the case of radio and television, or between TV news channels and newspapers, or between entertainment channels and cinema. Thanks to the boom in 24 hour news channels, from only a couple in 2003 to about three dozen channels in 2007 (expected to cross 60 in 2008), more newspapers have been launched since, circulation has gone up more, and the very scope and structure of newspaper enterprise has been going through changes.

High Growth, Low Expansion

With proliferation of TV, radio and newspapers recently in the country, the overall role, reach and relevance of news media should have expanded much beyond what it was before 2000. The scope of coverage of the news media should have also expanded beyond metro cities. But there has hardly been any change in both the respects. This is because the competition within and across the media has been for the same sections of people, the ones having deeper pockets. That is how rural reach as well as rural coverage is still negligible. Some increase in circulation

and viewership nevertheless is because of multiplicity, or duplication in readership, not because of expansion in the reach; that is same viewers seeing more channels or programmes, and readers reading more newspapers.

FDI into media

Since change in Government policy in 2002 on foreign direct participation in newspapers allowing 26 percent FDI, the number of enquires from, and deals under negotiations with foreign investors was unprecedented since 2007. Foreign newspapers can now launch facsimile editions of their international edition, but after incorporating local subsidiaries

Undeterred Advertising through newspapers

Increased advertising outlays has been one of the key factors creating momentum in the growth of mass media which in turn is a result of overall growth of economy. However, per capita consumption is both a cause and effect of advertising. As a percent of GDP the advertising expenditure in India is only 0.34, which is much below the average of one percentage in some countries. That is the way India is viewed as a market for consumption of products and services. It is this growth in advertising expenditure which will drive the growth of newspapers. Advertising accounts more than 65 percent of revenue of newspapers and in fact even higher in the case of most English dailies.

Credibility increased, but slipped as primary source

A 2007 CMS survey on “sources of information” and their reliability has brought out that the overall credibility of newspapers has relatively gone up. This survey however indicated that television news has now surpassed newspapers as “primary source” as the “most relied first source” for political and sports news. The gap in this respect in 2007 between TV news and newspapers was significantly high. Special efforts being made increasingly by various television news and business channels to cover both politics as well as business/markets is making inroads into the market image of newspapers. Form this, however, one could not conclude that newspaper readers are “shifting” in favour of news channels. This survey had brought out that when it comes to “comprehensiveness”, newspapers are viewed better. This finding rather reminds newspapers the compulsion to go beyond conventional approach to news. The Indian

newspapers continue to be preoccupied with politics. However, against 40 percent of edited space two decades also, only one-fourth is devoted to hard politics in 2007. Nearly one-third of front pages of dailies by and large contains politics. The “gloomy” content of Indian dailies in the past however, has yielded to financial and corporate reporting. In many ways 2007 marks beginning of a new chapter as to content consideration of newspapers.

Most papers have Web editions since 2007 attracting readers for local specific and in-depth news. A study in 2007, sponsored by UGC, has brought out the speed and growth readership on the net – not just by professionals but by youth, students and women and not just English dailies but regional language ones as well. Also, they are reading on net not just “hard news” but also news on social, development and environment.

Media Operations

Role and relevance of news media depends on their priority in concerns and contents. Until a few years ago these were to do with the “Fourth Estate” notions and “watchdog” role. For, that is how the news media have been enjoying certain privileges and societal status. The News media are expected to have larger and long range concerns about society, not just market compulsions or immediate competitive outlook. Today news media tend to become voice of the corporate rather than of community. Certain new definitions, new values and different priorities dictate news media today. What does this paradigm shift mean? Is mass media a public service or private business or is it for promoting individual interests? Then of course is the controversy about blurred distinctions between news and views, news and advertisements, information and propaganda, etc. Which are the factors that drive these priorities, pre-occupations and the shifts in the news media? These dilemma stand out in 2007.

There is no independent and objective analysis of these changes in the media operations and their implications. The paradigm shift involves the bigger issue of consumerism. Consumerism which is a global phenomena is an undercurrent for media priorities. Advertiser - depended media appear to

cater more for greed, rather than for the needs of the majority of people. 35 years ago, 55- 77 percent of the total revenue of newspapers was from the readers. Today it is advertising which sustains media.



There is a declining dependence on the reader and the viewer. And yet media are able to grow and increase their profits and valuation because of the extent of advertising revenue and potential growth opportunity.

Power Shift

Today advertising and market research in many ways determine the scope of mass media, including journalistic trends. Advertising, market research and media planning sets the scope and pace of media including in the case of ownership pattern and journalistic trends. Today persuaders are no longer hidden. They are out in the open pushing forward “their agenda”.

Media Viability

Firstly, the share of advertising in total revenue of newspapers has been on the increased from that of a “supplementary” (25- 30%) nature some decades ago, to that of a “supportive” one (65 – 75%) now in 2007. In fact, in the case of television channels, advertising has been the “primary source” (70-80%) to the extent of “determining” the priorities and preoccupations. Even in the case of some big newspapers, revenue from advertising constitutes more than 75 percent of total revenue. That is how the recent boom in news media in India is often attributed to advertising. Total outlays on advertising in the country in 2007 was over Rs. 15,000 crores with more than three-fourths going to newspapers, television, films and radio. The revenue of the news media has gone up manifold in the recent years. Secondly, market research is a basis for proliferation of brands and consumerism as well as for the preoccupation and priorities of mass media and the very character of advertising.

New Gatekeepers in Media

More specifically, market research agencies are the ones, which also conduct “readership” surveys and “rating” of television viewership and thereby directly influence advertising agencies as well as the news

media as to their priorities and preoccupation. The point here is that the methodology being followed for readership surveys and viewership rating is not without bias in favour of the sponsors. The “TRP trap”, as we call the phenomena of assessing “popularity” of TV programmes, has larger and long-range implications to India. Findings of TRP or IRS or NRS, do not highlight certain stagnation in the overall expansion of media particularly among the poor and the far off ones. The total reach of the media is not more than two-thirds of the population. It is much less depending upon which State of the country we are talking about. This is because of restricted view of concerns and limited representative nature of contents. Despite competition they all have same “formula contents” because of TRP prescription and phenomena. It is more a “copy cat tendency”. Some of the regional news media are better in this respect. In fact, what is being played up in the media is “what interests the public” not what is in the interest of the public. The two are not the same as is often being made out. Whatever surveys are being done in the country are mostly at the instance of advertisers or advertising agencies and the media operators themselves. There is no independent research to explain and explore beyond temporal and sectoral interests and to be concerned about “societal impact” aspects.

Fifth, with media becoming complex and also specialized, two “new” mediating functionaries have emerged since 2000 with serious consequences to the very nature and character of the journalist-centered “Fourth Estate” functions. Both these functionaries of “media planning” and “corporate public relations”, in a way erode into core prerogatives of journalists and their “editorial control”. And yet there are no initiatives to moderate/address “conflict of interest”. In the case of “corporate public relations”, functioning of these “experts” implies certain undermining or interference in the functioning, particularly of news reporters and editors and their marginalization. For, the function of corporate PR is to ensure coverage for a particular viewpoint or otherwise. “Disinformation” being talked about recently is a part of this new functionary. No wonder why former Chief Justice of India Dr. Anand had said “while commercialism has a legitimate place in the business office of the newspaper, it becomes a danger when it invades the editorial room”. Globalization has unleashed these “new gatekeepers” of mass media in India cutting across conventional functional lines in news media.

No State or corner of India could be said to the

saturated with newspapers. As a CMS Survey in 2002 showed hardly a third of country’s rural population (14 years plus) were readers of a daily newspaper. In some States it was not even half of that. That the potential is far more has been amply proved since then. Hardly a quarter of literate population now are subscribers of newspapers. In fact, the growth pattern of dailies in the Hindi States since 2005, should be convincing for the publishing houses to go beyond focusing on “consumers with deep pockets”. This of course requires moving away from the influence of conventional market development model.

Readership Surveys

National readership surveys in the last couple of years were consistent in their findings about a) decline in readership of newspapers, more particularly magazines, b) reduced time spent in reading newspapers, particularly among the young, and c) online news slowly acquiring visibility as web newspapers are free and attract, the younger age groups. Readership surveys have come into being to guide advertising agencies in their media planning function and help publications to position themselves for more advertising. Despite being a totally quantitative exercise, these surveys have become surrogates for actual reading and “popularity” and even for “quality” of newspapers. No sample survey could be without error. But with purchase habits and consumption pattern becoming a bigger concern, the very reliability of the findings of readership surveys is getting eroded. What else can explain the fact that only 2 or 3 pages are devoted for enquiring into readership out of 45 pages of a questionnaire used by these readership surveys.

Media Education

Shortage of trained people is a constraint for the growth of news media in India. Training and research are two critical facilities for the healthy growth of media, particularly news media. But both are equally neglected and nowhere near the task required to reap the growth opportunities in the country. Educational support to news media is one of the missing link in fully availing the potential for newspapers in the county. The present scenario in terms of academic programmes, courses and concerns are either outdated or inadequate or irrelevant. And yet it has been no body’s concern.

Inclusive Journalism

“Citizen Journalists” is a new concept being promoted by one or two news channels since 2007. Some big

English dailies have experimented with the idea of “guest editor” by inviting a well known expert or celebrity. In the case of newspapers the space devoted for “Letters to Editor” and for reports on certain disadvantaged sections or regions had come down or replaced with SMS based opinion polls. In fact some of the big newspapers no longer carry features on rural slums and on issues like rural and social developments.

At a time when “globalisation” is becoming obvious, the number of foreign correspondents of Indian newspapers and news agencies has dwindled. Whereas the number of foreign news bureau and foreign correspondents in India was never so high as in 2007. There are hardly half a dozen full time correspondents of Indian newspapers posted outside the country. But “by arrangement” news and features from foreign newspapers was also never high before as in 2007. And, proactively every big and multi-edition newspaper is trying to have some such arrangement with one or other foreign newspaper.

Visibility of Women Journalists

The number of women journalists has increased in the last couple of years, particularly in news media. A survey of women Journalists in print media conducted by National Commission for Women in 2006 had brought out discrimination (20%) at work of female journalists and that “their voices are largely unheard” despite a large number of women journalists being in high positions now in the news media”. Yet another insecurity” has to do with job insecurity as women journalists are “employed more like daily wagers” despite that women journalists are as sincere in their work as sincere in their work as male journalists. Some of the women journalists writings are popular and have wide readership too – both in newspapers and news channels. Readership among women is likely to receive further boost with women journalists becoming more active and visible in news media. Only then increased literacy and mobility of women is likely to lead to higher readership. Similarly, in the case of children (9-12 age) and their presence and role in news media. Coverage of them is not significant despite the potential of children both for growth and expansion of newspapers

Ever increasing production costs

Although there has been an increase in the cost of newsprint there is no evidence of its impact on any aspect of newspapers - their size or their growth. In

fact, there has been a liberal increase in the number of pages of dailies and in the frequency of supplements and add on sections. The impact is likely to be more in the coming months on small and single edition newspapers – some of them had already changed over to 42 GSM grade paper from 45 GSM. Since newsprint cost is likely to increase further, what implications it will have need to be seen particularly on the cost of daily newspapers which remained more or less stagnant. INS has been seeking cuts in taxes and duties. Revival of the tabloid in 2007 could also be a way of coping with newsprint costs. Apart from Mail Today and Metro Now dailies, the case of Mint newspaper signals that young readers perhaps prefer a change in size and look for convenience in handling of a newspaper. Thanks to TV, visualization of newspapers (photos, graphics, etc) is much more now and there are more design – elements.

Responsive Relationships

Rajasthan Patrika was the only one which announced its intention to go for Readers’ Editor after The Hindu had appointed a “Readers’ Editor” in 2005. No other newspaper talked about Ombudsman as a part of initiative to establish responsive relationships with or accountability to readers. Deccan Chronicle has set a new example when it named a former SEBI chief as Ombudsman for its new Financial Chronicle daily. It needs to be seen at the end of the year to what extent this second experiment (after the TOI’s a decade ago with a former Chief Justice of India) will make a difference. The Mint, in the meanwhile, since its launch in 2007 by the Hindustan Times group, has been practicing in its news reports to refer to any conflict with its own or its publishing group. It also has been frequently seeking correctives and complaints from its readers. Mint also had set a new practice when it appraised its own coverage and contribution at the end of its first year – as if giving an annual review to its readers.

Corporates controlled newspapers

More and more newspapers are now run by professionals having marketing specialization and with criteria of maximizing profits and to fare better at stock markets. That the pattern of ownership of newspapers is changing from individuals to corporates although a little over half of total circulation is still from newspaper owned by individuals. One wonders how this has to do with instances of “media excesses”, “media trials”, “sting

operations”, criminal trespassing of privacy, glamorization of criminals and mafia dons, promotion of hatred among communities and inflaming of public emotions. The Minister for Information & Broadcasting recently expressed his concern at “these dangerous trends” for both the media themselves and democracy.

The Supreme Court in 2007 too questioned, for example, whether sting operations are in the “public interest”. Going further. The apex Court observed that profit is the primary motive of journalists behind the sting operations. In the context of sting on “cash for question” involving MPs accepting money, the Supreme Court further wondered whether it will be a blow to freedom of expression if such stings are outlawed or should it be left to market forces it wondered. As newspapers tend to publish sting and the like coverage of TV channels, the issue acquires seriousness. The question here is accountability of journalists.

“Trial by media” is an issue of concern to judiciary, Justice Sabrawal observed that “media cannot usurp the judiciary’s functioning” by influencing judges when cases are pending.



“Contempt of Court” by journalists/editor is yet another issue that continue to crop up time and again, Media reporting of crime, particularly by news channels has added to this problem. “Trial by public opinion”, with instant SMS polls and “reality shows”, is causing the concern. 2007 was the year when the phenomena proliferated.

Price Wars

Average cover price of a daily newspaper in 1983 was about 55 paise. Twenty years later, thanks to

“price wars” between certain newspapers in several metros, the average price of daily has hardly increased four times, considerably lower than the inflationary trend in the country. Cover price of newspapers in India is lower than in many countries. However, advertising tariff has been revised more often than the cover price of newspaper. Today the average price of a newspaper is around Rs. 2, despite the increasing the number of pages-in fact more than double in the case of bigger newspapers.

Thanks to the competitive scenario between newspapers in different area centers of the country, price of news dailies in the last couple of years either remained the same or has declined. In fact, most new dailies and even old dailies entering new cities have kept their price low in that market.

Despite no increase in cover price of daily newspapers, most of them have been expanding either by way of adding new editions or launching a new daily or periodical or going for cross media. Earlier managements were concerned about advertising revenue apart from readership and circulation, now they are also concerned about “market value” in the share market. About a dozen media houses are already listed in the stock market and as many are expanding by raising money from the public.

Overall, newspaper cover prices have come down by 2007, but this trend is not in the interest of quality and implies increased dependence on advertising, particularly against the background of increasing production cost of newspapers. This is perhaps what leads to leaders seeking “other ways” of generating revenues from “other services” and even by “selling edit space”. In fact, some of the leading newspapers have started “private treaties division” to set up deals under which equity stakes could be picked up in companies in return for promoting them through long term advertising and publicity deals, including by way of editorial coverage. One of the highest circulated English daily ventured this practice of mingling news with “paid for content”, in line of equity partnership. Four top dailies have already signed several such deals and this practice is no longer a hush hush affair but a “business activity” as if mass media are becoming “marketing media”. This trend has been criticized as threatening honest reporting and editorial freedom. There are already instances of “no bad news” about companies involved in such deals. Increasing interference in public life and among non state players is reflected

in increasing in attack and violence on newspapers across the country. “Conflict of interest” is increasingly becoming evident in news media operations.

Threats to freedom of press

Threats to news media are not limited to J & K or Assam or to militancy or terrorism. But increasingly they are from political factions and or local mafia. What should worry more is intolerance of opposing political factions and leaders about freedom of press. Particularly because electoral politics is getting inundated with criminals and the like. The year 2007 was no exception. Interestingly, newspapers and their journalists are attacked more often than those of television channels.

RTI Act

The landmark Right to Information Act of 2005 with several implications to news media and good governance would have remained dormant had newspapers not given the coverage in 2006 and 2007. The coverage of contentious issues and the ones which would not have got into public domain started making head lines in 2007. Newspapers started taking RTI route as a source for news and for “investigative journalism”. In the process the news media got a new opportunity to reinstate their credibility and unleash an era of transparency in public affairs of the country.

Conclusion

While the continued growth of newspapers in the immediate years is not in doubt, to what extent the momentum will be kept up after 2012 depends on several factors – external and internal and initiatives taken now. The internal factors are far more critical. These include, first and foremost the “Content package” and how distinct the newspapers are going to be from one another and in contrast to the model of news channels, the second is how well newspapers integrate and adopt online media. The third factor has to do with priorities of newspapers in their reach and targeting. The fourth includes marketing strategies as to cover price, delivery efficiencies, competitive–collaborative, initiatives and innovations in the very promotion of news media.

The external factors rotate to the economy which in turn determines the flow of advertising outlays, political uncertainties and of course Government policies particularly with regard to globalization, foreign investments, etc.

In the meanwhile projections of foreign/global consulting firms continue to offer optimistic scenario for the next couple of years. These estimates are motivated more to prompt and facilitate investments, synergies, mergers, acquisitions, and collaborations. Nevertheless, they should help further the interests of news media in maximizing reach potential notwithstanding implications in that process to the “national endeavors”.

Dr. Bhaskar Rao is Chairman of CMS

STING OPERATORS MAY BE SINGED

S. Narendra

The months of July/August of this year seems to have given a rebirth and legitimacy to sting as investigative journalism tool. In July, the sting was for exposing what has come to be known as 'cash for vote' scam. A reputed television news channel partnered with a political party in clandestinely video recording the gifting of one crore rupees to its MPs in exchange for their votes when the Lok Sabha was deciding on the fate of Indo-US nuclear deal and that of the ruling UPA government.

In August, another news channel sting (undertaken earlier) was largely responsible for the conviction by Delhi High Court of high profile lawyers, one working for the defendants in a criminal case and the other for the prosecution. In this case, generally referred to as the BMW case, the news channel independently, without favouring either party in the case, video recorded the collaboration between the opposing lawyers engaged in offering financial inducements to a key witness for manipulating evidence in order to benefit wealthy and powerful defendants.

While the sting operation was the common thread, the above two instances vastly differ in the circumstances surrounding them. The BMW case and the special Parliament session on N-Deal had very high media visibility. Air of conspiracy and manipulation marked both. In the former, perhaps the witness and the channel collaborated; in the latter, the news channel partnered with an opposition party engaged in political conspiracy. Again in the latter case, the news channel did not air the sting until after the Parliament vote. The collaborating political party alleged that the channel had gone back on its promise to immediately screen the sting, hinting that it had come under the ruling party's pressure. In an after thought statement, the channel claimed that it withheld the news because its investigations were incomplete at that stage and it would handover the tapes to the Speaker of the house. Further, it claimed its right to decide on the timing of the sting telecast. When the channel finally telecasted the sting some 3 weeks after the Parliament vote, there was no explanation from the channel about

what additional investigations had been added to make the telecast more complete. Of course it had a few denial statements from some of the politicians alleged to be involved in the 'cash for vote' scam. Such statements had come out in other media much before this telecast.

The controversy surrounding the 'cash for vote' sting showcases the consequences of media walking into the quagmire territory of sting, where normal investigative journalism techniques are found inadequate. News Media sting operations have raised concerns mainly because like the crime-investigating police, they have tended to use sting as a routine professional tool. In the new millennium, sting became synonymous with the

Hindi word "Tehelka". This was because an Internet based news site, Tehelka, caught on tape some prominent politicians accepting money for influencing some defence equipment contracts. It created a political furore as well as debate, about appropriateness of using sting as journalistic investigative



tool, political corruption, alleged official harassment of the news agency that is still alive. News channels stings peaked in 2006. There was the case of a media sting to expose the well-known casting couch tricks. The Delhi High Court in another case went to the extent of suggesting that the Government should vet sting operations before they were telecast. In this case the news channels falsely accused a government schoolteacher of running a prostitution racket. After the channel used the footage she was beaten up by an angry mob. The teacher was dismissed from the job. Later investigations revealed that a businessman hostile to her was involved in the sting operation. The broadcasters federation took exception to the High Court's suggestion in this case, terming it as 'censorship'.

The series of stings on 24x7 news channels, some of them excessively focusing on sensational crime, a few even creatively recreating criminal events and general tendency to offer news as entertainment

during prime time for gaining advertising rewards in return for improved television rating points (TRPs) has rekindled debate on the role of media, particularly the news media in democracy and media ethics.

This persuaded I&B ministry to constitute a committee of eminent media and entertainment industry personalities to evolve a media code. When the code finally came out, the news media was not very enthusiastic about it. This committee recommended self-regulation by channels with an industry body exercising oversight over such regulation. While no one supports Central or State Government interference with media freedom, experience has shown that self-regulation is no regulation. The Press Council experiment for self-regulating newspaper content has been largely disappointing and the Council is now in limbo.

Commonly 'regulation' is understood to mean control over content for removal of negatives, ie, what is considered 'undesirable'. Also, any suggestion of media regulation ends up in debates on semantics and controversy and equated with government censorship. This is done to shut up for ever any discussion on media regulation. But regulation properly understood should ideally go beyond this. Besides credibly assisting media in protecting its freedom, cautioning it against licentiousness, it is expected to create an environment for improving programming quality by encouraging forces wielding positive influence.

Self-regulation not only does not address this but also tends to be self-serving in promoting infotainment that trivializes news through 'stings' or commodification for capturing more eyeballs, TRPs and advertising revenue. Will it ever address people's privacy issues? Did the media industry compensate, if ever it can be compensated, an ordinary school-teacher whose reputation was tarnished and put through a trauma? Will ever media define and declare its freedom from its owners, especially when powerful corporates are trying to own channels, cables, content and straddle both media and information highways? Senior professionals have not gone beyond mere voicing of their concern over 'cash for media coverage' practices. One rarely comes across of instances of media bodies suo motto taking note of any negative trends, uncalled for invasion of privacy or undesirable journalism and taking strict action against the errant. Why not the broadcast media on

its own set up a common Ombudsman to receive and adjudicate complaints? It is this failure on the part of media leadership (if there is one) that invites acts such as the infamous Defamation Bill proposed in 1988, which threaten media freedom.

Beyond regulation, the influential broadcast media require a programming standard bearer for creating competition for quality programmes raising the level of LCD or lowest common denominator. This role is assigned to the public service broadcaster in Britain. A McKenzie world wide survey of public broadcasting states that in most countries, PSBs. are on the decline. Mostly they are over-dependent on government munificence and tend to unsuccessfully compete in the same space as commercial private broadcasting. Indian Prasara Bharati Corporation exemplifies this trend. The new Lok Sabha channel is trying to swim against this tide, though one cannot predict its future course. Can it substitute Prasara Bharati in some limited areas and survive competition from commercial news channels?

The present situation is that there is a regulation hiatus. On some issues I& B ministry jumps in, depending upon the activism and politico-cultural sensitivity of the incumbent minister. In some areas the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) is slowly testing media regulation ground. There are reports that it wants to claim sole authority over media development regulation. Already it has ruled on television audience measurement issue that impinges on media content and TRP as well as on the subject of opening FM radio news and cable TV structure, media foreign ownership and many other crucial media growth and development matters. The media is growing feverishly as business and industry attracting global finance. The government does not seem to be in any hurry to bring a Broadcast sector regulation bill for clearing the air and setting up a separate, independent, media expert regulatory body for promoting media that serves the cause of our diverse, complex, democracy that is always riding on the edge. Perhaps we are heading towards a US model of regulation in which the telecom carrier and private business conglomerate are supreme arbiters of media space in a commercial laissez faire culture. And, news and news channels will be part of such a Mcdonaldization process. Indian and international business is 'loving it'.

(Mr. Narendra is former information Adviser to PM, now Adviser to CMS)

TV CHANNELS FRAME CODE OF CONDUCT

Meha Mathur

With TV stings getting caught in controversies recently, news broadcasters have come out with their own code of ethics which seeks to discourage such operations, saying that they should be the last resort.

The Code of Ethics and Broadcasting Standards proposed by the News Broadcasters Association (NBA) for self-regulation states: “As a guiding principle, sting and under-cover operations should be a last resort of news channels in an attempt to give the viewer comprehensive coverage of any news story.”

The Code, submitted to the Centre, stresses that news channels will not allow sex and sleaze as a means to carry out sting operations, the use of narcotics and p s y c h o t r o p i c substances or any act of violence, intimidation or discrimination as a justifiable means to undertake exposes. “News channels will, as a ground rule, ensure that sting operations are carried out only as a tool for getting conclusive evidence of wrong doing or criminality and that there is no deliberate alteration of visuals or editing or interposing done with the raw footage in a way that it also alters or misinterprets the truth or presents only a portion of the truth,” the NBA said. The broadcasting industry has already rejected the Content Code proposed by the Government, saying it could self-regulate itself.

In the backdrop of fake sting operations by TV channels, the Delhi High Court had sought a status report from the government on the proposed Broadcast Bill and the Content Code.

The Government had told the court it was open to the idea of self-regulation by the broadcasters.

On the coverage of crime and violence, the self-regulatory guidelines of the news broadcasters prescribe that channels should exercise restraint to ensure that any report or visuals broadcast do not induce, glorify, incite or positively depict violence.

Another important issue that the code of ethics deals with is portrayal of superstition and occultism, saying the channels should not broadcast “as fact” myths about supernatural acts, ghosts, personal or social deviations.

News channels would ensure that they do not show, without morphing, nudity of the male or female form.

“Channels will also not show explicit images of sexual activity or sexual perversions or acts of sexual violence like rape or molestation or show pornography or sexually suggestive language.” The broadcasters would conceal

the identity of any woman or juvenile who is a victim of sexual violence, aggression, trauma or has been a witness to it.

The principles include giving accuracy and balance precedence over speed. “Errors must be corrected promptly and clearly, whether in the

use of pictures, a news report, a caption, a graphic or a script,” the code said.

The code recommends that the channels will use specific terminology and maps mandated by law and Government of India rules when dealing with India’s strategic interests. “However, it is in the public interest to broadcast instances of breach of national security and loopholes in national security and reporting these cannot be confused with endangering national security,” it said.

Prescribing that the privacy of individuals should be respected, the code states: “As a rule, channels must not intrude on private lives, or personal affairs of individuals, unless there is a clearly established larger and identifiable public interest for such a broadcast.”

(Courtesy: msn news — the code has been vetted by senior Advocate and former additional solicitor general, Mr Harish Salve)



BEST BYTES, WORST STORIES

P. Sainath

“Good journalism or decent journalism has always been judged according to how relevant it is to great processes of the time. If we are going to apply this criteria, how relevant are we to our times,” wondered P Sainath, India’s leading development journalist, whose writings have brought to the fore the rural crisis and the plight of the poor. He was delivering the keynote address at Rajendra Mathur Memorial Lecture in New Delhi sometime ago. Organized by the Editors’ Guild of India, the theme was ‘Rural Crisis and the Role of Media’.



While the media has been busy covering Indian Premier League, Nano and Big Brother, the single-most important event, according to Sainath, is the rural crisis. “It’s the greatest agrarian crisis since the beginning of the Green Revolution. Eight million people have quit farming between 1991 and 2001 census. Where did they go? Did we do that story? How are migrations unfolding in the country? Do we know that?” In rural India it’s stories that chase you and not you that have to chase stories.

He said the food crisis had been building up for a decade, and was a result of a “considerable effort”. Citing the farmer suicides in the last 10 years (1,66,000), he said the rates had been higher since 2002. “There is a suicide every 30 minutes. But there is no written record of a wave of suicides. These are some processes unfolding. The major process is not IT, it’s inequality. In terms of child literacy and nutrition, we are in bottom 10... Bolivia is ahead of us, Al Salvador is ahead of us. None of them has nine per cent growth rate. None of them is a software superpower or a nuclear superpower. But they have handled poverty better than us. Even Ethiopia is ahead in management of hunger.”

But then, according to Sainath, another great process is the incredible rise of corporate power. And in the light of that, some of the fundamental features

of the media today, according to Sainath are:

1. Growing disparity between mass media and mass reality, the 2004 elections being an indication of that. The media had no clue of what was unfolding.
2. Structural shutout of poor in media: Corporate hijack of agenda in media.
3. Media today is most elitist and exclusionist segment. It reflects the narcissistic concerns of the pleased-with-itself elite.
4. There is a fundamental change in the moral universe of media. Due to which many things have died — outrage and compassion. What remains is drawing room outrage over reservations.

He pointed out how the concerns of the poor had been shut out. Pointing out the beats that journalists are put on – investments, banks, fashion, futures, and even golf and even eating out — he said newspapers didn’t have not one fulltime correspondent on rural issues. “And in a country where unemployment rates are stunning, not one correspondent has labour beat.” Pointing at the implications of this, he said, “The fastest growing media of the world is saying seventy per cent people do not make sense. The media doesn’t want to talk to them. This leads to spectacular situation, wherein problems are expanding and beats are shrinking. While for a stock market flutter experts are flown in from Mumbai, for rural crisis, which is more intricate and complicated, nobody develops expertise.”

He told the gathering that in 2006, when farmer suicides had moved the Prime Minister to make a visit to Vidarbha, he (Sainath) decided to make a comparison of the media coverage of Vidarbha and the Lakme Fashion week. In that week, only six journalists stayed for a full week in Vidarbha, out of six two stayed back because they had missed their flight. At the same time, 512 journalists were covering the Lakme fashion week. And about 100 journalists were covering it on daily passes. And there was even footage on journalists covering the event. The irony was that the models at the fashion week were displaying cotton garment, and one-hour flight away from that spot, men and women who grow that cotton were committing suicide. And the journalists who did go to Vidarbha were covering the Prime Minister touring the area.

(Courtesy India Together)

OVERBOARD OVER MURDERS

Namita Bhandare

On national networks, TV anchors and editors Deepak Chaurasia and Ashutosh are clear: the media have nothing to apologise about in the Rajesh Talwar case. Now that the doctor, once accused of murdering his daughter, is out on bail for lack of evidence, you'd imagine that he's trying to pick up the pieces of his life and get on with it. No such luck. The murder of Aarushi Talwar continues to make news. On the day of Dr Talwar's release, more than a hundred camera crews waited outside jail, followed his car to the temple where he and his wife went to pray and then set up camp outside his father-in-law's house.

It's been high season for the media for the past two months since 14-year-old Aarushi and the family's servant, Hemraj, were found murdered in Noida. In the days that Dr Talwar was in jail, charges of sexual aberrations, intimate, personal details (much of it baseless), SMSes received and sent, and emails between Aarushi and her parents have flown fast and furious. Nothing has been sacrosanct — though some newspapers and channels did restrain themselves from publishing the more salacious leaks. Others, however, did away with such niceties. If one channel ran an MMS that purported to show Aarushi undressing in the presence of an unknown man (it was not Aarushi), others had anchors painting their hands red as they spoke solemnly about the "khooni baap".

This sort of coverage led to some introspection. One channel removed its OB van from outside the Talwar residence, although temporarily. But it was not enough. Just days before Dr Talwar's release, at least one newspaper and a couple of channels chose to run a story that claimed that the Talwars were at a party in a hotel, where 12 rooms had been booked, on the night Aarushi was murdered. The story was denied the next day by Nupur Talwar and the CBI but the damage had been done.

On Barkha Dutt's *We the People*, Ashutosh, Managing Editor of IBN 7, clarified that his channel

was not guilty of the more lurid reporting. Fair enough. But in the Aarushi-Hemraj murder case one thing is clear: nobody — English or Hindi, tabloid or broadsheet, print or TV — has come out smelling of roses.

Ashutosh and Star News' Chaurasia point out proudly that it was the media that focused attention on the 'Jessica Lall' and 'Nitish Katara' murder cases. And it was media attention in the Aarushi case that resulted in the investigation being moved to the CBI.

Point taken. So, what of the thousands of innocent people languishing in jail, who are not People Like Us? Who will tell their story? And, more important, is there a market for it?

Public memory tends to be short. And the media's collective memory is sometimes just as brief. Only two months ago, the media seemed convinced enough of

Dr Talwar's guilt to go and get sound bytes from young girls on whether they felt safe in the presence of their fathers. Today, the trio of Krishna, Ram Kumar and Vijay Mandal — the new accused — stand just as guilty.

There is some talk about defamation suits against the police and the media. But it's early days yet. I'm not sure that the Talwars, already traumatised, want to go to the courts for prolonged litigation.

So, what happens now? In the months to come, the Aarushi case will fade from public memory. Till that happens there will be much hand-wringing in the media about its role and responsibility. Politicians will bleat and shed tears about the role of police and media. There will be some talk about setting up self-regulation mechanisms and ombudsmen. But in the end, self-regulation always fails because there will always be rogue channels and papers who'll defy norms.

The Talwars can never get their life or reputation back. But an apology by the media that has wronged them is at least a beginning.

(Courtesy: *The Hindustan Times*)



RURAL WOMEN PILOT A NEWSPAPER

Kalpna Sharma

If you were a woman journalist, based in Citrakoot in Uttar Pradesh, what would be your take on the Scarlett Eden Keating rape and murder in Goa? Would you consider it front page news? Would you conclude that all of Goa is now unsafe for white women? Would you think it is national news?

For the eight Dalit and Kol women from Chitrakoot, who bring out a fortnightly publication in the local language, Bundeli, called *Khabar Lahariya*, Goa is a long way away. But rape and murder of women is something they know, that is not unusual. White women might not visit Chitrakoot, but the colour of your skin matters little if you are a victim of rape. You just have to be a woman. The editors and journalists of *Khabar Lahariya* know and understand this.

One of the more unusual interactions I have been a part of was a meeting between these eight women and Mumbai-based women journalists. We were worlds apart, literally. And yet, as journalists and as women, we spoke the same language.

An experiment

Khabar Lahariya began as an experiment in 2002, aided by Nirantar, a resource centre for gender and education. It is based in Chitrakoot district, one of the 200 poorest districts in India, where there is practically no industry and the majority of people survive on rain-fed agriculture. Literacy rates are lower than the national average; female literacy is only 35 per cent. The sex ratio is also below the national average, only 872 women to a 1,000 men. Incidents of sexual violence are high and the justice delivery system barely functions as criminal gangs operate with impunity under the nose of a complacent and often complicit administration.

Against this background, a group of Dalit and adivasi women felt the need to start and run their own newspaper because the existing media in the area did not report on the issues that concerned them. They wanted to break the stereotype that lower caste women like them would not dare enter the public domain. Despite their lack of education, they wanted to prove that they too could be journalists.

Meera, who is the editor-in-chief of *Khabar Lahariya* (they now have a second edition from Banda), says that initially women like her faced an identity problem. For instance, she had worked with the Mahila Samakhya programme and was known in the district as an activist. How could she establish that she was now a journalist? How could she tell people that she was there to report on what was happening but was not in a position to solve their problems? Would she be able to report with objectivity, she wondered? Also how would she tackle the feudal, patriarchal system? How would she and her team deal with opposition and criticism?

These and other related issues formed the subject of training workshops for the budding editors and journalists. In the initial years, they stuck to familiar areas - violence against women, developmental stories etc. They steered away from politics and other contentious issues. But a survey of readers shocked them into realising that no one was taking their efforts seriously. That their paper was being seen as a publication only for women and about women when they wanted to make it a rural newspaper that would be read by everyone, men and women.

The shift took place in 2004 when the general elections were held. The women had reported on Panchayat elections. But they were unprepared for the rough and tumble of a general election, of rallies, press conferences, manifestos and slogans, claims and counter-claims. With the help of Nirantar, the *Khabar Lahariya* women plunged right in. And thus began the emergence of a truly rural newspaper that today covers politics, development and a range of issues and news. It is read by men and women, by officials and other journalists. It is taken seriously.

Tough conditions

Most reporters based in districts face challenges in covering their areas. Transport links are poor. But mainstream newspapers can cover costs of travel. No such luxury is available to the women reporters of *Khabar Lahariya*. They travel to distant areas by bus and on foot. They believe they must see and check for themselves before they report, unlike district reporters who rely on what they hear on the telephone

from local officials. As a result, quite often what they report is diametrically opposite to what is reported in the mainstream press.

Each fortnight, all of them are required to file at least two stories and everyone participates in the editorial meeting, the production and the distribution. The final editing is left to the two women editors. As there are no printing facilities in either Chitrakoot or Banda, each fortnight one woman carries the editorial matter by bus to Allahabad, over 75 km away, where the paper is printed. Altogether, 4,000 copies of the two editions are printed, an estimated 10 people read each copy and the paper reaches over 150 villages in Chitrakoot district and four blocks in Banda district. After a great deal of discussion amongst themselves, the women decided only recently to accept advertisements. But they have laid down a strict code. For instance, they will not accept advertisements that promote casteism, fundamentalism, sexism, violence or superstition. They are unwilling to compromise on this code. Khabar Lahariya's soul will not be laid at the altar of commerce, unlike most of mainstream media.

Astonishing growth

Khabar Lahariya's journey from a modest news sheet into a rural newspaper with sections including national and international news, editorial, letters to the editor, State and district news, even film reviews etc.,

has been a fascinating one. It has evolved through the individual growth and understanding of the women who run it. Most of them had little schooling and practically no knowledge of the world outside their immediate environment. With encouragement from Nirantar, these women journalists have struggled to understand politics, economics, history, have trudged hundreds of kilometres in their districts to see for themselves what is happening on the ground, have learned through mistakes how to double check all the facts before committing to print - in other words, everything that a journalist must learn.

The result of all this is evident in the confidence in these women journalists. When we met them in Mumbai, they spoke of the different stories that they investigated, of how they decide each fortnight which story should come on page one, of how district reporters from major Hindi newspapers initially ignored them but now try to steal their information without giving them the credit, of how they have learned to hold their own at press conferences, and why today even district officials, who did not earlier give them the time of day, are willing to speak to them on the phone.

Khabar Lahariya is a small shining star on the media horizon. Its circulation figures are not so important as the very fact that it exists, that it comes out every fortnight and that it exposes the hollowness of much that masquerades as 'news' in mainstream media.

(Courtesy: India Together)

Chief Justice On Court Reporting

Defending the contempt of court provisions, Chief Justice of India K G Balakrishnan on Saturday said they were not aimed at "terrorising" the media but asked the press to be cautious while reporting court proceedings, especially rape cases.

However, he favoured an element of sensationalism to make news interesting.

Contempt proceedings were to protect the 'majesty' of courts. "If there is no contempt proceedings, none will implement the court orders," he said in his inaugural address at a workshop on 'reporting of court proceedings by media and administration of justice for legal correspondents and journalists', here.

Urging the media to exercise caution while reporting court proceedings, he said caution was especially needed while reporting cases like rape wherein the names of the victim and her families should not be mentioned.

"Press has a duty to keep secrecy", he added.

Touching on the issue of media sensationalising some reports, he said sensationalism should be there, otherwise all news reports would read as Kerala gazette. "Only when there is sensationalism, people will read. But this exercise should be used with a tinge of responsibility," he said.

(Courtesy: Zee news)

National Rural Employment

The success of NREGA social audits in Andhra Pradesh covering 12 million people is a brilliant example of civil society action enriching mainstream politics.

ANDHRA PRADESH SHOWS THE WAY

Mihir Shah & Pramathesh Ambasta

A key element that unexpectedly propelled the United Progressive Alliance to power was the deep distress in India's countryside. The passage of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) is an important part of the UPA fulfilling mandate-2004. But the report card on NREGA implementation has generally been poor. While many States report high expenditure, independent enquiries reveal massive leakages in money reaching the poor. Andhra Pradesh affords an extraordinary counter-example bucking this trend. What has happened in the State over the last two years is unparalleled in the history of independent India but these soul-stirring events have received surprisingly little attention.

Critical in what Andhra Pradesh has achieved is the extraordinary support of top echelons of the political and bureaucratic leadership. Cynics say that the leadership has found greener pastures to graze, leaving NREGA alone. Quite irrespective of the merits of such scepticism, it cannot be denied that this thrust towards transparency and accountability has the potential to transform rural governance not just in Andhra Pradesh but throughout India. And that is of central concern to millions of poor people who voted the UPA to power in 2004.

Political support has, of course, been a necessary but by no means sufficient condition. Two other novel features have turned the tide. One, the use of Information Technology (IT) and the other, the role of civil society. All stages of NREGA work, from registration of workers to issue of job cards, preparation of work estimates, muster rolls and payments to workers have been computerised. With strong administrative backing and robust social audit, this IT system frees information from the shackles of power and privileged access.

Take for instance, the payment of wages. A major complaint from all over India is of delays and corruption in payment of fair wages under NREGA. By contrast,

labour payments in Andhra Pradesh are increasingly being made within a week of completion of the previous week's work. How does this happen? By the last (sixth) day in a week's work, the measurement sheets and muster rolls of the entire week are closed and reach the mandal (sub-block) computer centre. The next day, the muster data are fed into the computer. On day eight, the pay order is generated by the computer and the cheques are prepared. By day ten, these cheques are deposited into the post office accounts of workers. The next day cash is conveyed to the post office so that on days 12 and 13, workers are able to access their wages from their accounts. All payments to labour are made only through these accounts; there are no payments in cash.

Since the computer system is tightly integrated end-to-end, any work registered in the system is alive, status-visible and amenable to tracking. Delays at any stage can thus be immediately identified and corrected. The system keeps track of the work from the day the work-ID is generated and starts flagging delays in the payment cycle as soon as they occur. Because the network secures all levels from the ground up to the State headquarters and data are transparently and immediately available on the website, a delay at any stage is instantly noticed by the monitoring system. The free availability of this information on the website also facilitates public scrutiny, thus engendering greater transparency and better social audit.

Of course, we must recognise that the IT system is a support. Only the presence of a vigilant public can make it count. And it is here that Andhra Pradesh provides us a remarkable example of civil society action enriching mainstream politics. Social activists in India have historically played a watchdog role, raising questions reflecting the concerns of the most vulnerable sections. This has generally brought them into conflict with state agencies. The Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS) led by Aruna Roy, one of the architects of NREGA, introduced the concept of social audit into development practice nearly two

decades ago. But even in Rajasthan, where MKSS started its work, mainstreaming social audits has remained a distant dream. There has been violent resistance from the vested interests threatened with exposure and state support has been uncertain at best.

New High

By contrast, in Andhra Pradesh, instead of mutual ambivalence or hostility, the MKSS and the government are supporting each other to overcome the threshold of systemic defiance to such a radical initiative for transparency and accountability. An MKSS activist is working full-time within the government as Consultant and Specialist, NREGA social audit. Remarkably, this has not required the MKSS to dilute its position. Rather, in many ways, it has helped carry the process to a new high. The credit for this must, of course, go to the State government that has set up a separate unit exclusively for social audit, which enjoys great freedom of action. The work of this remarkable unit of dedicated people has culminated in the truly historic rules recently passed by the Andhra Pradesh Cabinet that will go a long way in institutionalising social audit. These rules draw upon experience in the State over the last two years.

The social audit process in Andhra Pradesh begins with filing of applications for NREGA records under the Right to Information Act by district resource persons (DRPs) designated by the government. This is done at least a fortnight before the social audit commences. The rules passed by the Andhra Pradesh Cabinet stipulate “concerned officials shall provide the information requested for without fail within seven days of the receipt of the application.” In every village, DRPs also identify a few energetic literate youth who usually belong to the families of NREGA workers themselves. After being trained in social audit processes, these youth form teams, which go from door-to-door authenticating muster rolls, check out worksites, record written statements of workers and conduct a series of meetings in each village.

The social audit process culminates in a massive public meeting at the mandal headquarters attended by people from every village, their elected representatives, the media, the NREGA functionaries concerned, and senior government officers. At this meeting, village-wise social audit findings are read out, workers testify and the officials concerned respond to the issues raised by giving an explanation about their actions under complaint. Officials are also required to specify the nature of remedial action they will take in what time period. Senior officials affix

responsibility and a number of corrective or disciplinary actions are taken during the meeting itself. Social audit rules specify that an “action taken report shall be filed by the Program Officer within a month of the social audit being conducted and the same shall be communicated to the Gram Sabha.” In addition, there is a rigorous follow-up where social audit teams go back to their villages every 15 days after the mandal public meeting to ensure that the decisions taken are actually enforced.

One full round of this process has now been completed in over 35,000 habitations. This is nearly half of rural Andhra Pradesh. Around 30,000 trained village youth are conducting this social audit that has already covered more than 12 million people. Nearly Rs. 1.25 crore of misappropriated funds have been recovered. On many occasions, errant officials have “voluntarily” returned money to workers at the mandal public meeting itself. The palpable impact on rural governance of such a spectacle, which invariably continues uninterrupted for 10-12 hours, is easy to imagine. Action has been initiated against thousands of officials and a number of criminal cases have been instituted. Forty lakh NREGA records have been publicly scrutinised under the RTI. Independent studies reveal that awareness about the detailed provisions of NREGA has risen dramatically among workers.

Despite these achievements, several weaknesses remain. The most important have to do with the quality of assets created. The government has not paid adequate attention to strengthening the process of people’s planning and implementation of works. The immense potential of NREGA for transforming rural livelihoods thus remains completely unrealised. Social audit is, after all, mainly a post-facto exercise. More important is what is done prior to works being started. It must also be said that even social audit so far remains a process mainly driven top-down by the government. It is not clear why civil society groups within Andhra Pradesh have not come forth to take advantage of the amazing opportunities opened up by a supportive State government. After all, this is what has been missing in States such as Jharkhand and Rajasthan, leading to violent attacks on NREGA activists.

The new rules approved by the Andhra Pradesh Cabinet promise full support to “any independent initiative of wage seekers to carry out additional social audits.” This is a historic step in the direction of institutionalising social audit that civil society must take forward.

(The writers are co-founders of the National Consortium of Civil Society Organisations on NREGA.)



Right to Information

INFORMATION STILL HARD TO COME BY

Last September when retired government employee H B Agarwal submitted an application in Lucknow's public works department seeking information under the RTI Act, he had hardly imagined the harrowing wait that lay in store for him.

Since then, he has been regularly visiting the State Information Commission (SIC) trying to get the answers to his queries. Agarwal had sought details of the expenditure incurred in the construction of a one-km-long road in the city's Bakshi Ka Talab area. After eight months of waiting, he filed a complaint with SIC but to no avail. "I know there were some financial irregularities. But I am still waiting for the information," he says.

Worse, in neighbouring Bihar, social activist Shiv Prakash Rai was made to languish in jail for a month this February when he asked for the details of schemes being executed under the Prime Minister's Rojgar Yojana by the district magistrate of Buxar. He was released only after a representation was made to chief minister Nitish Kumar.

Down South in Chennai, Samuel C Wilson, a superintendent with the central excise department, has been running from pillar to post for several years trying to expose a foreign exchange scam running into several thousand crore of rupees through RTI. The matter is now pending before the Madras high court.

Few, if any, would dispute that the RTI Act is one of the most people-friendly legislations ever. Thousands have benefited from it. But it is true that more than three years after Parliament passed the Act in June 2005, the road to accessing information remains arduous. From huge delays in getting replies to receiving incomplete answers to difficulties in filing appeals — the information seeker is discouraged at every step. "Those who go for appeals face the additional hurdle of having to travel long distance, waiting for hours during hearings and putting up with rescheduled hearings," says Raaj Mangal

Prasad of Pratidhi, an NGO that looks at RTI cases. In states such as UP, there are often 6-8 hearings before a case is decided.

According to Noida-based RTI activist Lokesh Batra, awareness about the Act still remains low, especially among the disadvantaged sections. That apart, even after so many years, many public authorities are yet to designate or notify Public Information Officers (PIO).

"The Centre has made Rs 10 as RTI application fee. But some states charge higher rates. For instance, Haryana charges Rs 50," he says. A survey conducted by a group of RTI activists in UP showed that at least 300 applications are filed under RTI every day and the average time taken to dispose off an application in 80% cases is around six months. The survey also says that the State Information Commission (SIC) functions more as a subordinate to the government rather than an independent body in providing information sought by the public.

Senior RTI officials acknowledge the problems. West Bengal's chief information commissioner Arun Bhattacharya admits that the state government has not been able to create awareness of the Act. "It is pathetic in the rural areas." He also points out that often records are not kept properly in government offices, so some questions cannot be answered. According to Bhattacharya, the Act "has become more of a grievance cell for IPS, IAS and WBCS officers" who inquire about "postings and other things that benefit them professionally".

UP information commissioner Gyanendra Sharma maintains that the SIC suffers from a severe staff crunch that delays work.

"There is an acute shortage of staff and infrastructure but applications keep pouring in," he says. In Assam, the state information commission does not have even five commissioners, the minimum number stipulated by the law, a clear indicator that the Act isn't being taken seriously by the state government.

Bihar SIC spokesperson Rambadan Baruah admits that some officials are hesitant in sharing information. "Things have improved though after PIOs were posted in each government department." He says that 9,000 odd cases against denial of information have been filed in the SIC and that 236 officials have been fined for delay in answering applications.

Clearly, solutions are required to make the Act function better. In West Bengal, senior RTI official Bhattacharya says he has asked the state government to conduct campaign in rural areas, through multimedia and kiosks.

"The government should also create infrastructure, like more buildings and provisions to send complaints directly from rural areas through e-mail."

Noida-based activist Batra suggests that

information on the RTI should be included in school syllabi to improve awareness.

"Government should come out with a special postal stamp of Rs 10 towards payment of RTI fee nationwide. The amount collected through the stamp and information cost can be used to create awareness programmes." He also suggests 45-60 days deadline to take decision on appeals.

Batra points out that state information commissioners should be posted in different district towns instead of being grouped together in the capital. "For instance in Maharashtra, the state information commissioners are also posted in Nagpur and Pune. But in Uttar Pradesh, all 10 information commissioners are in Lucknow."

(Courtesy: The Times of India)

REPORT CARDS ON ALL DELHI MLAs SOON

The report cards of Delhi MLAs will soon be out and people would be able to judge their performance on the basis of their work.

A non-government organisation, Satark Nagrik Sangathan, has used the Right to Information Act to access information on how all the 70 MLAs in Delhi have been performing over the past five years and the details would be of interest to both the electorate and the representatives.

Anjali Bhardwaj of SNS, who has been working to promote transparency and accountability in government functioning, explains: "We compiled the roles and responsibilities of MLAs and decided to access information against each of their roles such as their performance in the Delhi Assembly, how they allocated their MLA local area development funds over the past five years and their performance on various committees set up by the Government, namely District Development Committee, Thana Committee, Ration Vigilance Committee."

Ms. Bhardwaj said the inspiration for this analysis and information gathering came from the people who "showed an interest in reviewing the performance of their MLAs". Noting that the greatest challenge was on what parameters these MLAs should be judged, she said their roles and responsibilities were gathered from different Acts and laws.

Ms. Bhardwaj said: "We are pressurising the Government to install boards in each constituency to inform people of the roles and responsibilities of MLAs.

"From the information accessed, it is clear that in several areas Thana Committee or District Grievance Redress Committee have not been set up. Therefore it is

imperative that citizens should be aware of this and it be involved in monitoring. It is Only when people are empowered with information that they are able to monitor and hold the MLA accountable."

In the meantime, information on the performance of the MLAs has also enthused various residents' welfare associations.

Recently they had convened a meeting to discuss and assess the work put in by their MLAs. Attended by over 70 representatives, the meeting provided the residents an opportunity to evaluate the MLAs ahead of the upcoming Delhi Assembly elections and to discuss problems related to acute water shortage, long power cuts and pathetic condition of roads.

Delhi RWAs Joint Front secretary Pankaj Aggarwal said it was necessary that citizens take an active interest in the working of their elected representatives.

A Chittarajan Park RWA office-bearer highlighted how people who have access to the MLA and are influential in the constituency get funds for their needs while priority needs of the constituency remain unaddressed.

"The condition of slums and places where people do not enjoy the same kind of access to the MLA remains pathetic. The allocation of funds should be decided after doing a comprehensive analysis of the needs of the constituency." Some of the residents are peeved that MLAs often waste funds on unnecessary things.

(Courtesy: The Hindu)

49 BABIES DIE AFTER CLINICAL TRIALS

As many as 49 babies, many of whom hadn't even celebrated their first birthday, have died at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences while being subjected to clinical trials for testing new drugs and therapies over the last two and a half years.

Responding to a Right to Information (RTI) query on clinical trials on babies, the AIIMS administration admitted that of the 4,142 babies — 2,728 of whom were below the age of one — who were enrolled for clinical trials by the institute's department of paediatrics, 49 had died since January 1, 2006. The department conducted 42 sets of trials on babies during this period.

In its reply, AIIMS said the deaths amounted to a 1.18% mortality rate. The RTI query was filed by Rahul Verma of Uday Foundation for Congenital Defects and Rare Blood Groups, an NGO.

Clinical trials are the final stage of research conducted to answer questions about safety and efficacy of vaccines, drugs and devices, new therapies and forms of care or new ways of using known treatments. Many of these trials are for foreign drugs.

India recently pipped China to become Asia's most popular destination for conducting clinical trials. According to the Planning Commission, 139 new trials were outsourced to India recently compared with 98 in China.

The cost of conducting trials in India is 20% to 60% of the cost in industrialized countries. The RTI query also digs out information on the top drugs (according to volume of consumption) made in a foreign country that were used during the trials on the babies.

AIIMS has said five foreign-manufactured medicines were tested during the trials. They were zinc tablets for treating zinc deficiency and serving as a nutritional supplement, olmesartan and valsartan for treating blood pressure-related problems, rituximab for treating chronic focal encephalitis and gene-activated human glucocerebrosidase for treating Gaucher's *disease*, which affects the liver. AIIMS said it had taken clearance for the trials from its own ethics committee, the health ministry steering committee (HMSC) on ethics and the national ethics committees of ICMR and DBT.

Speaking to *TOI*, Verma said, "This is shocking. We decided to file the RTI when we saw parents unable to admit their seriously ill children at AIIMS while children of some other poor and illiterate families were being kept in the *hospital* needlessly for a long time."

He added, "AIIMS said in its reply that families of patients are given social counselling before trials are started. With most patients in AIIMS being illiterate and belonging to extremely poor families, I

doubt if they even understand what a clinical trial is and what their children are being subjected to."

Nod from ethics panel: AIIMS

In reply, an AIIMS official said, "All the deaths can't be attributed to the trials. Some patients were suffering from conditions in which mortality was the normal outcome and we were trying to see whether a drug could improve the situation. Some other trials didn't even use medications. They involved behavioural methods like nursing care." He added, "Trials in AIIMS are conducted under strict protocol and every step is scrutinized through faculty presentations and data safety management groups before ethical clearances are received."

Asked about the socio-economic status of patients on whom clinical trials were conducted, AIIMS replied, "The children eligible for trials represent a mix of patients attending the outpatient and in-patient services. The eligibility is based on the aims of respective studies. The department provides detailed information on the inclusion and exclusion criteria to the AIIMS ethics committee and sponsors."

Verma said the consent form that has to be filled by parents was read out by the treating physician for parents who were not able to read it themselves. "The question is, if the parents can't read or write, do you really expect them to understand the implications of these trials?" Verma asked.

Testing it cheap

- A clinical trial is a test for a new drug or a method on patients. It includes 'Phase 4' trials — the last stage of drug development after it has passed through lab, animal and human volunteer tests.
- India has become the top *destination* in Asia for clinical trials of foreign drugs. In 2007, 139 new trials were outsourced to India compared with 98 to China.
- It's cheap for a foreign manufacturer to test new drugs in India. Trials here cost around 20%-60% less than that in industrialized countries.

(Courtesy : *The Times of India*)

Corrupt Officials To Be Prosecuted

Following allegations of corruption and misappropriation of funds in the implementation of its flagship National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS), the UPA Government on Monday informed the Supreme Court that states have been asked to initiate criminal prosecution under the Indian Penal Code and the Prevention of Corruption Act, against officers found guilty of misappropriation of funds.

Referring to two letters written by Union Minister of Rural Development, Raghuvansh Prasad, the Government, in its affidavit filed before the apex court, claimed that it has repeatedly reminded the state governments about its duty to have serious complaints investigated and take action under the Act, even suggesting “stoppage of release funds” as prescribed under Section 27(2) of NREGA.

Going further, the Rural Ministry pointed to the recent letter dated May 30, 2008 wherein all states were told that in such cases, “not only disciplinary action should be taken against guilty officials but simultaneously criminal prosecution should also be initiated under IPC and Prevention of Corruption Act”.

The response came on a petition filed by an ‘NGO, Centre for Environment and Food Security (CEFS), which had alleged that most funds allocated under the scheme “do not reach the intended recipients, and are instead siphoned off by the corrupt officials and contractors”.

The Centre, while informing the apex court that states have also been asked to recover the embezzled amount whatsoever, “from the persons concerned”,

also maintained that for looking into complaints of serious nature, “National Level Monitors” are deputed by the Ministry itself.

By June-end, 2008, 42 area officers will cover 84 districts of the state and 261 NLMs will also visit different parts of the country to monitor the Act’s implementation, the affidavit further informed, asserting the “important role” it has in effective implementation of the Act.

The UPA Government, in its attempts to showcase its legislation during the Lok Sabha polls has filed a carefully drafted affidavit, portraying its intent to plug all the loopholes in the Act’s implementation.

Admitting of “shortcomings” in the implementation, the affidavit filed by Raman Kant Sood, under secretary in the Ministry also submitted, “There is also positive impact of the efforts so far, such as abatement of distress migration from rural areas, increase in rural wage rates, strong women participation.”

Earlier on May 16, acting on submissions of advocate Prashant Bhushan, who appeared for the NGO, the bench of Chief Justice K G Balakrishnan had issued notice to the Rural Development Ministry besides chief secretaries of all states.

Urging the Court to make the authorities concerned accountable for non-implementation of the Act, the counsel had pleaded that directions are issued for fixing liability on the Chief Secretary or the district collector.

(Courtesy: The Indian Express)

Shailesh Gandhi To Join CIC

The recent appointment of Mumbai-based Right to Information (RTI) activist Shailesh Gandhi as one of four central information commissioners has been widely hailed as a boost to civil society.

Other newly appointed central information commissioners are Satyananda Mishra, presently secretary with the department of personnel and training, M L Sharma, special CBI director, and Annapurna Dixit, widow of veteran diplomat and former national security adviser J N Dixit.

(Courtesy: DNA)

TRANSPARENCY STUDIES

The Right to Information Act 2005 represents a historic breakthrough in recognising the citizen's democratic rights to monitor measures affecting the public good. Following adoption of the Act by the Parliament of India, the Centre for Media Studies (CMS) set up a Transparency Studies wing to document, examine and publicise the interrelation between governance and society in all its aspects. It facilitates dissemination of relevant material, confers with experts and field workers and networks with the media to promote implementation and awareness.

The functions of Transparency Studies include:

- Publishing and distribution by electronic mail of Transparency Review, a journal designed to publicise news, articles and documentation concerning developments in Right to Information and the overall interface between governance and society. Priority is given to right to education, especially of children; right to work; right to justice and associated human and social rights, especially at the grassroots.
- Operating Transparency Features to disseminate articles and information on the above.
- Linking with civil society groups to further common objectives like exposing corruption, monitoring elections, improving civic services.
- Arranging discussions on emerging issues and problems between specialists and mediapersons.

CENTRE FOR MEDIA STUDIES (CMS)

Centre for Media Studies (CMS) is an independent professional forum engaged in research, policy advocacy, advisory services and programme evaluation. CMS promotes accountability, responsiveness and transparency in policy-making in public systems and services. CMS debates and dialogues on important public issues are appreciated nationally.



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