

SUSTAINABLE MEDIA ETHICS-A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF MEDIA ETHICS IN INDIA PAST AND PRESENT

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ABSTRACT

Media is an important institution in a Democracy. Media plays the role of watchdog in any society. The Study focuses on changing standards and perspectives of Indian media. We look at four case studies too understand these changes. The roles of press during emergency, media during Bofors scandal are the two case studies in the late seventies and eighties in India. They highlight the integrity of the press leading to political changes in the polity. Two case studies from the present period are the role of press during corona crisis and the Sushant Singh Rajput case. They highlight the falling standards of journalism and threats that emanate from the same to Democracy. Sustainable ethics is a concept that means that media has to survive in the market by following ethical practices and be force for positive political and social change. It is to be seen how media survives this dark phase in Indian Journalism.

Keywords- Role of Media, Democracy, Sustainable Ethics, Media Freedom

INTRODUCTION

The News media plays an important role in any Democracy. India is the largest democracy in the world and newspapers have always played a crucial role in fostering and strengthening democratic values in Indian Society. Media is the fourth pillar of democracy keeping a watch on Executive Judiciary and Legislature. This role often puts the media in conflict with the government of the day. The very existence of Democracy is dependent on an independent and fair media. This paper attempts to analyse the falling values and failure of media to uphold ethics. We use four case studies to understand how media reacted in different situations in various periods of Indian History. Media ethics has to be sustainable in the sense that only if ethical values practiced is kept up can Democracy survives in India. The objective of the research paper is to analyse using the case studies varied responses from the press and understand how the situation can be improved to sustain social and political Democracy. For writing this research paper Historical, Analytical and comparative method has been adopted to trace the media behaviour in different situations.

Case- Study 1- The Role of Press during Political Emergency in 1975

In India, "the Emergency" refers to a 21-month period from 1975 to 1977 when Prime Minister Indira Gandhi had a state of emergency declared across the country. On 25th June 1975 the proclamation of emergency was issued by President Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed under article 352 of the constitution. On the night of 25th June 1975 power supply was cut off to New Delhi's street of major dailies Bahadur Shah Zafar Marg and effectively censored the next morning's elite English Language newspapers.

In June 1975, the High Court of Allahabad found Mrs Indira Gandhi guilty of using illegal practices during the last election campaign, and ordered her to vacate her seat. There were demands for her resignation. Mrs. Gandhi's response was to declare a state of emergency, under which her political foes were imprisoned, constitutional rights abrogated, and the press placed under strict censorship. Journalists in Mumbai or Bombay as it was called then were aware of Emergency by 26th June 1975.

Senior Journalist Inder Malhotra who worked with the Times of India recalled in an interview that Printing presses were shut in Mumbai also. The Times of India decided not to oppose emergency. There were exceptions like Indian Express led by Ramnath Goenka and Statesman led by the dynamic journalist C.R. Irani.

“Immediately after the Emergency was declared, at a Delhi Press Club meeting, 68 journalists signed a letter condemning the Emergency, but on the same day some 20 very senior journalists wrote to her (Indira Gandhi), saying they supported the decision. A lot of journalists were arrested” remembered Inder Malhotra.

The press was issued guidelines on what was to be printed. They had to consult the chief press advisor to the state government and the censor authority if they had any doubts. Binod Rau, a former resident editor of the Indian Express, was the Censor and Chief Press Advisor. An official from his office was sent to each daily newspaper in the evening. But by September 20, 1975, it became evident that it would be impossible to pre-censor every single word that appeared in print. Hence, newspapers were informed that they were expected to “self-censor” and abide by the guidelines.

During censorship, most of the nation's domestic dailies, however, gave up the battle for press freedom. Their pages were “filled with fawning accounts of national events, flattering pictures of Gandhi and her ambitious son, and not coincidentally, lucrative government advertising. But two tough, prominent publishers of English- language dailies, The Indian Express and The Statesman, fought courageously against Indira Gandhi's opposition of the Indian press. The Indian Express Delhi edition on June 28, 1975 carried a blank first editorial and the Financial Express reproduced in large type Rabindranath Tagore's poem “where the mind is without fear and the head held high” concluding with the prayer “Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake.”

In Mumbai Himmat a small local weekly edited by Rajmohan Gandhi left its editorial page blank. Of course, even a more valiant attitude was shown by independent, small journals like Sadhana (Marathi), Bhoomiputra (Gujrati), Seminar (a monthly journal) and Opinion (a weekly sheet). The Indian Express group led by its valiant editor and owner Ramnath Goenka opposed emergency tooth and nail. He received the highest attention from the Indira government and was greatly targeted. The paper was strangulated of government advertising support faced litigation and tax raids by government agencies. Undeterred it reported on many violations during emergency including slum demolitions and forced family planning programmes. Pre-censorship was imposed on all editions of Indian Express on August 16, 1976. Goenka filed a petition against it in the Bombay High Court and the Government withdrew its order on September 30, 1976. The Government then issued orders to all departments and public sector corporations not to advertise in any of the Indian Express group of news papers. The Statesman, a private limited company, followed the Indian Express. It's overpowering Managing Director, C.R. Irani, and Chairman of the board, N.A. Palkhiwala, the famous lawyer, both on the board of trustees of the paper, kept the paper within the law but saw that it took as much advantage as possible. The Statesman had its government advertisement suspended and it was only after the elections that the ban was removed.

Analysis- The Emergency was a dark chapter in Indian media history. But we can understand that important sections of media upheld the principles of Journalism. In spite of Government censorship and pressure newspapers like Statesman and Indian Express resisted control and tried their best to express themselves freely. Post emergency newspapers and magazines exposed the excesses of emergency regime. A new chapter of investigative journalism was inaugurated by the media.

Case-study 2- Media Coverage of the Bofors Issue

The Bofors Issue was a major weapons-contract political scandal that occurred between India and Sweden during the 1980s and 1990s. On March 18, 1986, India signed a Rs 1,437-crore deal with Swedish arms manufacturer AB Bofors for the supply of 400 155 mm Howitzer guns for the Army. A year later, on April 16, 1987, a Swedish radio channel alleged that the company had bribed top Indian politicians and defence personnel to secure the contract. The scandal rocked the Rajiv Gandhi-led government in the late 1980s. On January 22, 1990, the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) lodged an FIR against the then president of Bofors Martin Ardbo, the alleged middleman Win Chadda and the Hinduja brothers for criminal conspiracy, cheating and forgery.

It was alleged that certain public servants and private persons in India and abroad had entered into a criminal conspiracy between 1982 and 1987 in pursuance of which the offences of bribery, corruption, cheating and

forgery were committed. The Hindu carried out detailed investigation of the story broken first by Swedish Radio.

Chitra Subramaniam, a reporter working for The Hindu, along with associate editor, N. Ram, sent investigative reports, revealing the details of the commission agreements of Bofors with the middlemen and the payments made to various Swiss accounts. The Indian Express under the leadership of Arun shourie also pursued the story and put pressure on the Rajiv Gandhi government. For Hindu, with many people, notably Chitra Subramaniam, Manoj Joshi, Malini Parthasarathy, and V.K. Ramachandran, were part of the team that investigated the Bofors deal. According to N Ram the Hindu was meticulous in its pursuit of truth. He has said that "I think what worked for us at The Hindu was a methodical approach, an investigative discipline, a way of journalism that was factual, persistent, patient — and fair and just. We relied almost exclusively on documents, more documents, hundreds of documents, in fact, all of them laid out across pages and published in facsimile form in The Hindu (in the pre-digital age)." The Bofors scandal that broke in 1987 marked a watershed for India in more ways than one. It was the first time corruption became an intensely public, political issue—now the norm for most issues courtesy 24x7 television—with the Congress party and then Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi eventually ending up on the losing side in the 1989 general election.

Analysis- The Bofors scandal was one of the first major political investigative journalism stories. Here we can observe how the print media including The Hindu and Indian Express followed certain standards of journalism rigorously to create a major impact on Indian politics. In the eighties when many investigative stories were broken sensational reporting was not the norm but strict adherence to facts and ethics was the principle. For example in the famous Kamala case where Indian Express reporter Ashwin Sarin purchased a woman named kamala to expose human trafficking, prior information was already provided to Judges of Supreme Court about the expose. Thus we can see that ethical journalism was one of the factors leading to a vibrant Democracy.

Case-study- 3 Media Coverage of Sushant Singh Rajput Case.

Bollywood actor Sushant Singh Rajput passed away at the age of 34 on June 14, 2020, in Mumbai. He was found dead in the bedroom of his Mumbai apartment by his friend and flatmate. Mumbai Police said Rajput died by suicide. The death of the celebrated actor sent shockwaves throughout the country and the case was deeply investigated, first by the Mumbai Police and later by the CBI. The media instead of reporting the facts of the case sensationalised the case and converted the case into a media spectacle. The upcoming Bihar assembly elections led to political parties turning the case into political fodder. They accused ruling government of Maharashtra of covering up the case and botching the investigations. The Political slugfest was ably supported and amplified by the television channels. Insinuations were made that Sushant's girl friend Rhea Chakravarty was involved in the murder. This led to demands of a CBI probe which was finally accepted by the Supreme Court of India. The CBI failed to establish any wrong-doing by Rhea. The Sushant Singh case is a classic example of media ethics being trampled upon by vested interests.

In the aftermath of the actor's death in June 2020, a number of television channels went overboard with the coverage, naming and shaming the accused, and concluding the cause of death even before the police had completed their investigation. The Bombay high court observed that 'media trials' can obstruct the administration of justice, and is in violation of programme code under the Cable Television Network Regulation Act, impacting the ongoing investigations.

The court said reportage by television channels, especially Republic TV and Times Now, after the actor's death was "contemptuous". The judges, however, restrained themselves from initiating any action.

Analysis- When we come to the present era the state of Indian media and Journalism has changed completely. The Sushant Singh Rajput case highlights the total disregard for ethics and values by the media especially Television media. A complete media trial was conducted as pointed out by the judges of the Bombay High court. Television media also indulged political parties and their vested interests to sensationalise the case. Trial by media impedes the interests of justice and also puts Indian Democracy in great danger.

Case-study 4- Press and Corona virus Pandemic

The Covid 19 pandemic began in China in December 2019 and spread to the rest of the world by March 2020. The Indian Government imposed a stringent lockdown to prevent the spread of corona virus. The Lockdown was strictly enforced but there was no stopping the spread of the virus. We analyse media coverage of the pandemic and Government response to criticism of its handling of the pandemic.

Indian media had become polarized over the years, and sometimes coverage critical of the government is painted as an attempt to tarnish India's image. By creating a new template for media-government relations, the government had, over the past few years, tried to de-legitimize the media as an institution, while at the same time attempting to co-opt a select few media houses to be part of the ruling establishment.

For instance, when hospitals in Delhi were clamouring for oxygen supplies, several "government friendly" television channels blamed the ongoing farmers' blockade in the outskirts of the capital for the inordinate delays. Several news channels have debated whether anti-India lobbies were out to discredit the country and if this was a conspiracy.

The Second Wave

Just before the second wave hit India in March 2021 political parties continued with their election rallies, amassing crowds of thousands despite the number of cases steadily rising. The Election Commission of India could also be held responsible for the surge in cases as it oversaw elections in four states and a union territory over the past month and allowed large rallies and road shows that served as incubators of the deadly virus. A medical expert even called Prime Minister Narendra Modi a 'super spreader' for holding political rallies. Yet the television media, instead of being critical of the rallies, ran live footage of election sloganeering.

By April 2021 India's official count of COVID-19 cases had surpassed 20 million, with more than 300,000 infections and 4,000 deaths reported daily for the past three weeks. Yet many experts believed that the situation on the ground was far worse than what official statistics indicated.

Censorship of Media

The Indian government is ordered social media sites such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram to block posts that criticize management of the renewed nationwide public health crisis brought on by the corona virus pandemic.

A majority of the tweets pulled down by Twitter were critical of the government's inability to secure medical supplies, hospital beds and oxygen.

The government said the posts were removed because certain users were using Twitter to spread fake or misleading information and create panic about the COVID-19 situation.

"This decision has been taken to prevent obstructions in the fight against the pandemic and a breakdown of public order due to these posts," said an official with the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology.

In February, Twitter blocked more than 500 accounts linked to the ongoing farmer protests against agricultural reforms after the government issued a legal notice.

Following the removal of social media posts the Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath directed officials to take action under the National Security Act, and seize the property of individuals who spread "rumors" on social media, claiming that hospitals were struggling to maintain their oxygen supplies.

"Is this not a veiled threat to the media to not report what is happening on the ground? This has a chilling effect," a local journalist from Lucknow told DW an international media outlet. Uttar Pradesh police had registered an FIR against the director of a Lucknow hospital and others after the former released a notice saying there was an oxygen shortage.

Analysis- In the above case study we can clearly see that Government pressure and control on media has increased and television has succumbed to the pressure. It is only print media that offers some resistance to

the government on attacks on freedom of expression. So media management by the central and state governments and media shaping pro government narratives have become the norm.

CONCLUSION

We have looked at four media case studies to understand the state of Indian media in the past and present period. Media is an important institution in a Democracy. It acts as a bridge between people and government. So it is very important to maintain the independence of press for Democracy to survive. We can see in the first two case studies how media followed the ethics and principles of journalism. The last two case studies tell us how a steady deterioration has occurred in media standards and ethics.

The media industry must strive to go back to a period of true independent media. Only if they follow sustainable ethics can a sustainable social and political Democracy can be created. People of the country must encourage newspapers and television channels which follow the principles of Journalism. They must also boycott and abandon news channels and news media which control political narratives and polarize the society. Consumers and Public must realize the importance of truly independent and ethical media.

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