

Adversarial media good for democracy

by N. Bhaskara Rao

ANDHRA PRADESH has been witnessing a confrontation between those in power and the news media. A classic one at that. Both have responsibilities and their respective constituencies. One gets elected to perform and to do so transparently. The other derives its strength from the numbers it reaches on a daily basis, with certain concerns and responsibilities. They need to maintain their relationship in such a way that each one does the job in the best possible manner. Neither derives credibility or moral superiority by taking a stand of arrogance or self righteousness.

If I understood the accusations of the Chief Minister pointing to specific newspapers in the context of the "outer ring road controversy" and the earlier instances, including in the State Assembly, the anger was more about the scale of coverage and the hype. Being a regular reader of *Eenadu* and also a researcher on the subject, I am not surprised the newspaper sustains its durability and credibility too.

Why else would the Chief Minister have bothered to name it? But I see a certain lack of understanding of the compulsions of individual news media and the information order in the new media paradigm. For, the new regime is driven by 24-hour news channels and formulation of public policies and discourse under the constant glare of cameras. With plurality in news media, Gobelism no longer works today. Transparency has a better chance.

In a democracy political leaders come and go, while news media continues to serve as institutions. The political leaders are expected to have their distinct styles and strategies to deal with such adverse coverage with certain finesse and sensitivity. They could as well gain from the examples set by our leaders.

In tact and courage there is no one to match, till date, Mrs. Indira Gandhi. In 1977 she braved the worst antagonists - the newspapers - and went to polls, brushing aside forewarnings of public opinion

surveys of this author; notwithstanding all she said about the news media earlier.

Recall how after the initial antagonism between Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru and the famous cartoonist Shankar Pillai, their relationship blossomed with neither one yielding. And how Rajiv Gandhi backtracked honorably and, in the process elevated himself in political sagacity by reversing, not once, but a couple of times, important initiatives during his regime - bowing to news media's fierce criticism.

Today more effective tools are available for elected leaders to deal with, and often benefit from such situations. More specifically, in the present case, the situation is being further complicated by one's own making. For, it was the same news-

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paper which gave all out coverage for the padayatra and the groundswell that the long march created helped install Dr. Rajasekhara Reddy firmly in power.

That being the case, a political leader is expected to have some wit and be magnanimous and try to get the most out of such adverse coverage. For a mass leader with firm grounding in grassroots politics, like Dr. Reddy, adversarial relations with news media would be more desirable than support and cooperation from the news media.

There are nevertheless certain genuine concerns about the way the news media in general functions today in the country, as if liberty of the press is not "subject to restrictions operating in a very narrow sphere". It, of course, assumes that media is fair, free and responsible and operates under certain checks and balances, a hallmark of the Indian Constitution. It is

expected that media observes certain standards of objectivity and responsibility and be responsive as is inherent in the concept of Fourth Estate. That is what the *Lakshman Rekha* is all about.

Freedom and democracy requires both a certain responsibility to the larger public and certain standards of behaviour — both on the part of the elected leaders in decision making and the news media. It is often however the news media that is accused of violating the "*Lakshman Rekha*" and called upon not to cross such a line.

The concept of *Lakshman Rekha* implies that there is need for certain equilibrium between relationships and responsibilities of various pillars of democracy and that each of them should restrain themselves from going overboard or loose track of boundaries separating their functioning, within the parameters of the Constitution, written and unwritten.

A *Lakshman Rekha* implies operating not only with certain responsibility and accountability but also with certain concerns for the consequences of what is being done, or not done today, on the larger values concerning freedom, objectivity, equity and ethics. *Lakshman Rekha* involves both legal and ethical dimensions. Nevertheless, most elected democracies in the world have one or other restraint on the operations and priorities of the media.

The role and relevance of news media relate to their concerns and contents. Until a few years ago, these were to do with the "Fourth Estate" notions and media's stand as a "watchdog". For, that is how the news media has been enjoying certain privileges and societal status. The news media are expected to have larger and long range concerns, not just market compulsions or go by competitive pulls or personal scores.

This is where *Eenadu* has scored and distinguished itself. But a new definition, new news values and new priorities dictate the media today in the country. It is in this process that the question of a *Lakshman Rekha* arises. In the long run, news media will be credited far more for their role in deepening democracy in India and for enhancing its very scope and significance.