

Role and responsibility of media in 21st century

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Speaking at Mumbai Press Club last week the Chief Justice of India N V Ramana reminded much hyped sentiment about media and journalists. He said "freedom of press is valuable and sacred right enshrined in the constitution" and that "a fearless media is essential for an efficient working of democracy". Journalist's duty today is "akin to dancing on razor's edge" he echoed. Should this speech also remain as a mere remainder? The need is that we confront the reality and find ways even at this late hour of bringing back media and journalists of their pride of place. Way back in 1999 (Frontline), I brought to the attention of the nation this emerging scenario which led to the present situation somewhat like "the frog is already in snake's mouth". But nothing has been done since to restrain the trend, including by any of the stakeholders.

Without realising recent structural changes that have crept into economic and political scene of the countries one cannot expect the role and responsibility of media that the CJI had talked about. More so in the context of traditional societies on fast-track as in the case of India with deep roots of its culture. If societal functions and relationships have become market-driven and monetary-based, can we expect the media to be an exception? It is a misnomer today to think of social responsibility of media. That very idea itself is being reinterpreted. Media today is responsible to investors-first. In the process, it is neither independent nor a fourth-estate institution. But it pretends to claim and cling on to such a conventional role as if in a survival strategy. It has become more a "marketing media" on behalf of one or other investor or power with least transparency. Yet media wants to remain a "mover and shaker" of one time, long ago. It is somewhat like we hang on today to "we the people" idea when in fact it is already a situation of "we the political parties" which is under control and command of public policies and priorities.

Threat of Technology driven social media to conventional media is more visible now. If the news media do not gear up to the new challenge, they obviously suffer beyond a mere threat. It is going to be an ongoing-never ending tussle with newer technologies penetrating even much faster, becoming cheaper and easier to avail by a larger public. This also is creating two way and reinforcing networks. This makes participative potential of individual more evident although deceptively. But all this to the extent of

isolating younger ones further from the roots and basics, dividing communities and diluting "We view" further. This in turn deprives news media from community concerns, an essential future of conventional public media.

What should worry concerned citizens more is that no moderating movements or mediating interests are evolving out of the larger civil society, academics, journalists and of course the government sources to bring some balance, some relief to mass of victims of the hidden persuaders which today includes both newer and conventional media. In that process, Independent news content providers, which includes journalists, are getting eased out or disconnected. As the Chief Justice of India described last week it is a "vanishing" trend! The control and command of politics and economy are narrowing the dichotomy between social and conventional media without any convergence. This trend has grave implications to where we are heading claiming as a participatory or parliamentary democracy.

A way out of this ticklish syndrome that mass media of all type is in today could only be by reinstating "balance of power" idea in the society and by restoration of formal "checks and balances" notion in governance. How that is possible without "the line" between the government and the political party becomes obvious. Do our political leaders today realise what the consequences eventually would of the current trend in public policy making? Even the content providers, journalist fraternity more particularly, do not seem to visualise as if they are engrossed in survival instincts. Forming yet another Council or Commission, as suggested by a parliamentary committee last fortnight, could only be symbolic. All that as if we have reconciled to journalism becoming extinct or propaganda as the order of the day. No more hidden or remote! And no more accountabilities or even responsibilities, it is only rights and privileges!

Now it is for citizen themselves to safe guard from any onslaught of public media.

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