

A PRO-ACTIVE MEDIA ENRICHES PARLIAMENTARY DEMOCRACY

N. Bhaskara Rao

Founder and Chairman, Centre for Media Studies and

P. N. Vasanti

Director, Centre for Media Studies

Parliament and media are two sides of the same coin of democracy. Free elections alone are not enough for sustaining democracy. A free-press is as much and indispensable for the very relevance of Parliamentary system. The two are complimentary. They sustain and mutually reinforce each other. If media is Fourth-Estate, Parliament is the pillar of the (e)state. Unlike in the case of media's relations with the Government, the relationship between Parliament and media should never be adversarial. The legitimacy of democracy depends on independent media as well as its reach and how much concerned it is and how effectively it could mold and mobilize public opinion. The Parliament and its functioning itself has received a new impetus recently with the spread and proliferation of media, particularly television in the country and its extensive coverage of Parliament proceedings. In the process democracy itself has deepened its roots in the country. In fact, the very perception of elected representatives and the very standing of Parliament has undergone qualitative change recently. Electronic media taking to 'live' coverage and review of the proceedings of Parliament, beyond the "question-hour", has added a new dimension. Infact, media coverage of Parliament has helped broaden the very scope of Indian democratic traditions and practices and the very system of democracy and the institution of Parliament.

All mass media together reach around one-third of over 620 million voters in the country and reach little over half of voters who had actually voted in the election to Lok Sabha (1999). Not only the reach of modern mass media need to increase much beyond but also the voter-turnout in the elections to Lok Sabha and assembly elections. Where as pilot studies have indicated that more affluent and educated (and more exposed to media) are less likely to vote and that among them the perceptions about politicians in general, and elected representatives in particular, is demotivating more than mobilizing more Voters. Those who see Parliament coverage on TV nurtures such feelings. Since educational levels and urbanization is on the



increase, we should be concerned about this phenomena of undermining representative character of our Parliament. Media could help sustain Voter-turnout beyond 60 percent levels by inspiring voters to be assertive. There are occasions recently when critics have felt that television studios in New Delhi have become parallel fora or extensions of Parliament with frequent presence of MPs, including Ministers and leaders of parties, debating before cameras to a feeling of pre-empting the debate in the Parliament the following day or week. Media coverage should not add to such an aversion-phenomena.

MORE MEDIA COVERAGE

There has been a decline of late in the space devoted for Parliament coverage in the newspapers, from about a page or more 20 years ago, to about five percent of news space of daily newspapers today (on the days of Parliament). This percent however goes up marginally when the proceedings in the House are dramatic and deviating or disturbing.

All India Radio (AIR) has been broadcasting for decades highlights of deliberations separately for Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha although only for 5 minutes. Obviously in such a short duration it is not possible to give details and do justice to all participants. Nevertheless, AIR makes special effort to refer to as many names of members who participated in the discussion during the day. The priority cannot be for the details of the discussions. AIR surveys indicated that listenership to Parliament reviews, including weekly Sapatahik Sameeksha, was never beyond 2 per cent. Long hours of live broadcasts of no-confidence debates however had more than 10 per cent listenership particularly in rural India. The low listenership could be because of a clash in the timings between these broadcasts and peak hour TV viewing.

A Centre for Media Studies (CMS) monitoring study of TV news channels (2003) brings out that coverage was more of statements of Ministers rather than about discussions leading to or as followup to such statements. And that coverage outside the Parliament House was as much with one to one interviews with Ministers and leaders on issues involving the debate inside the House. During the recent monsoon session (2003), for example, regional parties were hardly covered of their performance in the Parliament, except at the time of no-confidence motion. The channels give far more coverage to walkouts, walk-ins, disruptions and the like than for the Question-Hour. Daily newspapers, on the other, give a better coverage of Question-Hour as appropriate to the State of their circulation. NDTV's report on utilization of MP's funds



and Aaj Tak's expose on security of the Parliament (using an imposter for Sathrugna Sinha) are two examples of proactive media coverage of Parliament.

In the monsoon session, for example, there was hardly any coverage of any of the economic issues. The coverage was mostly to do with Ayodhya, Arunachal Pradesh, CBI, CAS, PAC, Kashmir-Kargil-Fernandes, and media revelation on soft drinks. On 2 or 3 days when Parliament was in session, news channels had no news to report in their main bulletins of the day. Channels have a tendency of limiting to certain "telegenic-faces" from political parties for bites and short-cuts images as well as for studio discussions. Unlike newspapers, TV make icons and stick with them no matter what the occasion or even the issue is. That is how it has been "more of the same" despite proliferation of media and current affair programmes.

MEDIA-SENSITISED MPS

Instances of Parliament Members raising questions based on media reports, particularly in the newspapers, has been on the increase recently. In fact, quoting from or flashing one or other newspaper has been a frequent affair in the House. With increased competition between newspapers and TV news channels, on the one hand, and among newspapers and TV channels themselves, on the other, there is deliberate effort on the part of media to "sensitize" and even try to set the tone for Parliament deliberations. In fact, based on media coverage, many MPs go about getting their priorities for participation in the Parliament. Nevertheless, thanks to television coverage of Parliament, some of the Members, old and new, have molded themselves as serious and more responsible MP's and distinguished themselves. In the process preparatory efforts of members has significantly improved their representativeness. Parliament coverage by television channels has lead to capsule way of presentation by news dailies also. Parliament coverage has also contributed to certain "appetizer effect" of TV news. That is the more one watches television news, the more one is likely to read the earliest newspaper thereafter to confirm or clarify and look for more details than what is carried in the television news, related to Parliament.

MEDIA ORIENTATION OF PARLIAMENT

Proliferation of private TV channels has added to "media – orientation" of Parliament, its décor and deliberations. Dressing pattern of Members, their speaking style, and even references in the speeches have become specific (with names of places, instances, etc) and more pointed. But then media coverage, particularly live



coverage has lead to more frequent violation of House rules and regulations has changed the very complexion of coverage. Nevertheless, perceptions about MPs and public standing of Parliament could be said has become more transparent. But in the process a bit tarnished as the footage of some of the untoward (more frequent) incidents is being repeated in two many bulletins.

The coverage of State Assemblies by television channels has added further to this phenomena and some of the unfortunate events (as in UP Assembly, Gujarat) involving violent exchange (including chairs, micro phones, etc) and live coverage of the same, remain fresh and have caused adverse mind set of viewers about politicians in general and the Parliament in particular.

In a democracy political parties and political leaders are the key players and harbingers of democracy. Confidence and, credibility in them is indicative of robustness of democracy itself. That is how media coverage of political parties and leaders, specifically in the Parliament acquires significance. As noted editor and author Kushwant Singh has observed recently about media coverage of politics has become "at best a source of shock and amusement" as it is more a "circus". Unfortunately, quite often the live coverage of Parliament (as well as Assemblies) does give such an impression. Political leaders should be more concerned of this phenomena and in this regard media could help take a "more concerned" view of Parliament and sensitize the larger constituency to bring to fore the tendencies in the functioning of the House that need to be decried.

PARTICIPATION BEYOND VOTING

Media and Parliament together nurture and sustain democracy and make democracy relevant to people and participatory beyond voting once in 5 years or so. In the process media helps strengthen Parliamentary traditions, promote and support responsible representative concerns of Members of Parliament. For the television channels should have far more serious and analytical approach in covering Parliament than at present. They could aim at children with quiz and more participatory and more interactive programmes with involvement of a larger public to enhance the scope of representative character of discussions in the two Houses of Parliament as well as in Legislative Assemblies in the States. Media should encourage and uphold "good Parliamentarians". Respect in Parliament would in turn amount respect in the very freedom of press. Hence media should be concerned about any trend which amount disregarding or denigrating the Parliamentary traditions and democratic culture in the country. In this



regard Members of the House should have lot more concern for transparency in the functioning of Parliament as well as of a free and independent press.

Unlike more than a decade ago when senior journalists used to cover Parliament, today it is the turn of juniors, in fact Parliament reporting has become a training ground for cub reporters and irrespective of their familiarity with House rules and regulations. This is also because TV cameras (and loudspeakers) are outside the Parliament hall so that senior journalists could pick up from the business of the House as and when "serious discussion" comes up. Also, news agency copy is used more often for capturing deliberations of Parliament. For, the news agency reporters are there in the press galleries through out the day. Also, there is a tendency of "sharing of copy" by journalists of different media establishments across the country. This means more of "same reporting" by as many.

On the other, the discussion programmes with representatives of political parties in the Parliament just before, during and immediately after each of the session has soothing effect on the very democratic culture and enhancing the scope of the deliberations in the House. Media helps on an ongoing basis involvement of people in the democratic process and provides much need feedback on its functioning. They have been doing it in different ways. Newspapers and channels of late increasingly carry "surveys" of all kind on issues of the time as if they have representative relevance and character when infact they are "deceptive surveys" in more than one way and often misleading the very legislative process in the country. Let there be no doubt that such surveys are not substitutes to deliberations in the Parliament and Assemblies. At the most they are a good beginning towards broadening the very scope of democracy. "We the people" and "Big Fight" like debates by TV channels on the other go a long way in bringing out pros and cons of issues and supplement deliberations in the Parliament. But why should such programmes remain prerogative of cable TV households. Nevertheless, theoretically both MPs and media could claim "direct mandate" from the people.

There is no occasion in recent years when media has to be reprimanded for its (mis)reporting of Parliament debates. The frequency of stopping live telecast in the middle of Question-Hour or the number of instances of "expunging" certain remarks of one or other Member by the Speaker has been on increase and yet there are hardly any occasion when media has gone against the guidelines of the House Advisory Committee with journalists representatives.



Recently Speaker of Lok Sabha (as well as Assemblies), have more than once expressed anguish at the tendency of media politicizing Parliament reporting and, even more, neglect of "pro-active" discussions in the House. And, many Members of Parliament, across political parties, keep blurting out their anger at the media for ignoring their participation in the House on substantial issues to do with their respective constituency and of national relevance. Where as, on the other, some members are picked up by cameras, irrespective of their participation. Even the presiding officer of Rajya Sabha (Vice President) had quipped of such preoccupation - of trivializing Parliament reporting. The Committee system on which our Parliamentary practice depends, has of late become a media causality. For, the Committees attract only when there is a scandal or controversy or politics are involved. This is because the Indian media scene has gone through a dramatic shift recently both in terms of content and concern with Media content becoming more and more market driven.

News media need to project credible accounts of deliberations of Parliament as they are serious and are often complex. Dumbing- down of Parliament news as short-sound-bites and as fast-cut images will not do justice for the understanding and appreciation of the concerns of MPs. Infact, going beyond the news bulletins, Parliament discussions need more background and analysis. Based on various CMS surveys it could be said that Parliament debates deserve far more and adequate reporting and discussions with out subjectivity of media. This is despite that about a quarter of news bulletins of channels and as much of daily newspapers is party politics. Democracy not only needs journalism that resists hyping differences and divides but which gives a fair chance to pluralism in view points and lot more representative character in the coverage.

