

Into the Deep

Every year thousands of biased reports, not excluding half-lies and plain lies, are dished out by mainstream media people with the tacit arrangement of power brokers and big business under the grandiose banner of freedom of press. No paper, independent—or overtly not-so independent—is immune. But this time India's vast community of liberals and democrats, looked visibly disturbed over the Niira Radia tapes and the decline of, what they call, journalistic ethics. Perhaps they would like to nurse illusion in a situation where all play part in corrupting this system. After all they cannot have a world of James Augustus Hickey, the father of Indian Press, who set the principle of "open to all parties, influenced by none" about 230 years ago. The hard reality is that in every dispensation, democracy or dictatorship, news and truth are not the same thing. Much is made of the media's function as a watchdog. Also, what is said about freedom of the press which, in the Indian context, is essentially derived from Article 19 of the constitution, doesn't reflect the ground reality. It cannot. The reason is simple. The media are big business with close links to other corporate interests, and as such wary of exposing their own kind. Then market incentives, advertising revenues to be precise, quite often clash with vigilance. It's an open secret that corporates always try to sway the emotions of masses and make their tools of them. In essence 'freedom of the press belongs to those who own one'.

Manipulative market forces seem to have put a check even on journalists who want to speak out and take positions on contentious issues, risking their carriers. No wonder nobody took any serious initiative to find out why the charges of contamination against Pepsi and CocaCola fizzled out without much furore.

For one thing, in India, the scope of media, particularly the printing versions, influencing and mobilising public opinion against burning and anti-people issues is still very limited, notwithstanding a quantum jump in technological progress. As per the National Readership Survey 2001 (NRS 2001) there are at best 178 million adult newspaper readers in India. Things may be marginally better today. In other words, India can boast of 45 copies daily newspapers per 1000 population, according to a liberal estimate, which compares very poorly with social needs. Then public awareness in this hapless country, largely depend on mainstream politicians who in the first place, are responsible for manipulative journalism. Human Rights Groups believe that communicating information will actually have an effect on their audiences. Despite limitation and manipulation by vested interests and security establishments, massive amount of information on atrocities, is generated even by the big-business media but public response is hardly adequate to combat the menace.

Free Press in the service of society is a grand myth and media barons, Indian parliamentarians and the advocates of the unique nature of Indian plurality as guaranteed in the constitution, propagate this sacred myth day in and out to strengthen their purpose.

The point at issue at this juncture is how to protect people from the press. In this connection what Mother Teresa (1910-1997), recipient of Nobel Peace Prize, said is self-revealing: 'Facing the press is more difficult than bathing a leper'. Then Noam Chomsky didn't harbour any illusion while elaborating media's objective to defend the economic, social and political agenda of privileged groups that dominate the domestic society and government.

Meanwhile, WikiLeaks, has done a splendid job by leaking thousands of secret diplomatic cables exposing bitter truth while creating quite a sensation across the globe and hopes for

the future of journalism. Nearer home Rahul Gandhi, the future of Nehruvian dynastic democracy, was caught on the wrong foot in a US-embassy originated cable in which he was found more concerned about hindutva terrorism, not Pakistan-sponsored islamic terrorism. That hindu fundamentalism is more dangerous than islamic fundamentalism is the popular notion among the hindu left, otherwise represented by a motley crowd of Gandhians, communists, socialists, regionalists, caste-champions and dozens of democracy-flag bearers. But Mr Gandhi went a step further by virtually giving a clean chit to Pakistan in its nefarious game of communalising polity in some-parts of the country. Terrorism cannot be discussed in isolation. It has its economic base, with national and international dimensions. For the hindu right, their nationalism, or what they would like to portray as patriotism, revolves around Pakistan and muslims. In today's global village, all political parties, hindu right and hindu left alike, are united in allowing American and Western multinational corporations to loot India's natural resources and yet they are nationalists.

What doesn't appear in the mainstream media is more important than what appears. If a few scams and government activism associated with it, are making currency in recent weeks it is because conflicting interests in the ruling circles make the tricks exposing the limits of democracy and dubious forces that act behind the scene to run that show business. In Indian democracy the media offer only a notional space for dissenting voice. And with the march of globalisation this space is being systematically curtailed in every national domain. This order doesn't serve that genuine need of the people; instead it serves to link audiences and advertisers and the elites who have money power to advertise. Investments, made for sound business reasons and boosting profit at any cost, even by surrendering national interests, do not really offer new hope and an alternative way forward. □□□