



Role of media in upholding human rights

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Working in public interest, a sensitised, independent and responsible media helps develop a real democratic and responsive society through public awareness for promoting a culture free of religious intolerance, sectarian and ethnic divide, insecurities, injustices, economic deprivation, discrimination against women, children, minorities, farmers, consumers and other disadvantaged factions of society. In a conflict zone such as the North East Region of India, the role of media as an upholder of human rights cannot be over-emphasised when various forces inimical to the nation's interest are in operation here. In public interest and in the spirit of democracy the media is honour-bound to bring to the people and uphold their right to information the thought process of those inimical forces trying to destabilise the country. Doing this it is no easy balancing job to be at the same time being also cautious in reporting information that could incite violence and excite people to support those forces. A journalist community sensitised on democracy and human rights strives to create a social order which prohibits killings, mutilation, kidnappings, torture, humiliating and degrading treatment either by the outside forces or the administration.

In a conflict zone, however, insensitivity to human dignity on the part of both the electronic or print media is occasionally noticed -- often in their urgency to report incidents of bomb blasts by insurgents, communal or any other violence as they happen. Commercial considerations for attracting more viewers to the TV channels or readers to newspapers also cannot be ruled out for sensational visual presentations ignoring the dignity of the dead. Visuals of gory dismembered victims of the explosions or riots with close ups are shown repeatedly not only offending the sensibility of the

viewers, but also more so violating the dignity of the victims and the privacy of their families. The visuals possibly are shown with the good intention of arousing public protest and revulsion for such senseless violence, but the truth when shown insensitively loses its impact. Restrain and caution are the watch words here when showing such visuals as absence of warning about them offend and shock the viewers. Such visuals particularly have a negative impact on children often confusing them, rob them of their innocence and create a fear psychosis among them that their village, town or state is an unsafe place to live in.

Violent visuals have a further dangerous consequence of giving an unnecessary sense of bravado to the perpetrators of violence for continuing with their attacks as a show of strength. In the case of communal tension, violent visuals run the risk of instigating the base instincts even of the moderates in the warring communities to participate in violence against each other.

As journalists of both the print and electronic media have a social responsibility to maintain social order even as they report on issues of public interest, scribes have to be vigilant against themselves so that they do not instead become a cause of further violence or even spark discord among different communities through their irresponsible reporting. Though media is doing its job of bringing to light any violation of human rights and individual freedom, yet it can focus and be sensitised on the rights of the people taking up the cause of "Protecting their Right to Know".

Journalists being the most effective individuals to promote democratic norms and protect the right to know of the people, it is a sensitised journalistic community that can also monitor, report and help protect human rights.

Sometime ago during my journalistic assignment to cover an international conference, I had asked a very senior official of one of the countries about the proceedings of the meeting. The official was unwilling to talk initially. But upon my insistence this is what he had to say : “my position is like a young girl being raped. After sometime the girl starts enjoying the rape”. Shocking and completely irrelevant to my queries. This is where journalists step in and intervene to change such chauvinistic attitude which reflects the prejudiced mindset against women’s human dignity and self respect. The media puts international and national human rights standards to practice by telling people everywhere what democratic and basic rights they have and how to claim and defend them. Well-informed and vigilant people insist on the effective measures to enjoy their basic rights of equality of status, opportunity, equality before law, social, economic and political justice and freedom of thoughts, expression, belief and faith. The media, whether electronic, print or on-line, as a public interest entity helps people in attaining such rights by exposing all sorts of human rights violations.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights is the basic international manifesto that guarantees inalienable and inviolable rights of all members of human family. Countries that agree to this Declaration and other legal instruments on human rights are legally bound to bring national legislation, policy and practice in line with the provisions set forth in these international instruments and to respect and ensure the rights and freedom of individual citizens.

Though media is doing its job of bringing to light any violation of human rights and individual freedom, yet it can focus and be sensitised on the rights of the people taking up the cause of “Protecting their Right to Know”. Working in public interest, it is only a sensitized, independent and responsible media that can help develop a real democratic and responsive society through public awareness for promoting a culture free of religious intolerance, sectarian and ethnic divide, insecurities, injustices, economic deprivation, discrimination against women, children, minorities, farmers, consumers and other disadvantaged factions of society. Working journalists also need to ensure prompt, genuine and fair reporting on other thorny issues such as illiteracy, child labour, oppressive socio-cultural norms and lack of access to equal opportunities for all, besides environmental degradation.

Striving for prompt reporting and monitoring of the issues relating to democracy and human rights by enhancing extensive coverage on the two issues, the journalists are encouraged to raise voice against the atrocities and human right violations taking place

anywhere. The newsmen reporting violations not only to their respective media -- be print, electronic or online -- should also report them to local administrations and the Human Rights Commissions for their onward submission to the high-ups to seek justice for victims. It would not be a bad idea for associations of journalists to collectively lobby with local leaders, parliamentarians and bureaucrats for assurances regarding effective implementation of human rights instruments and for adoption of any such covenants.

Training on how to deal with news items of victims of rights violations would further go a long way in developing a sensitised journalist community on democracy and human rights related issues, particularly reporting on transparent election process, on HIV and AIDS issues, violence against women, commercial sexual exploitation and abuse of children, exploitation of farmers, minorities and consumers.

Instances of violation of human rights is noticed in reportings about rape and molestation cases. By mentioning the name of the victim in the news copy adversely affects her dignity and future by the unwanted negative publicity. The name of the rapist or aggressor, however, should by no means be left out as this is a deterrent for future aggressors.

Print or TV advertisements showing women as objects also covertly violate the human rights of women to dignity and honour. We often don’t realise this. In an advertisement for a car what is the role of a female model seductively lying on the vehicle? The media here can help change the social mindset that objectifies the female gender and also remove the prevailing perspective of women as mere objects of male desire.

A vigilant media during their line of duty reporting about human rights violation themselves do not become the victims of such violation from an unexpected quarter. Journalists can become victims of violence committed by officials or private agencies and organisations. In such an eventuality, to protect themselves journalists have to raise their voice for their safety and well-being.

Journalist associations and journalism schools can take proactive action by training and motivating journalists to deal with human rights and poverty related issues and help the people organise themselves so that they may work to develop their areas on self-help basis and attain the empowerment they need. Being relentless observers and monitors of human rights and democracy, journalists need to take care to ensure a rights based approach to reduce vulnerabilities, ensure fundamental rights of the people are promoted for peace, well-being and social

justice of current and future generations. A media that reflects and shares the concern of society and the country on the important issues of the civil society and public interest also ensures protection of human rights and promotion of democratic norms.

Lastly but not the least, the state human rights and women commissions' role in upholding human dignity by mobilising public opinion in favour of democracy and human rights cannot be overlooked. Frequent workshops and training courses can be conducted by the Commissions for media persons to

impart techniques on how to monitor and report violations of democratic norms, human rights, poverty, governance, healthcare, environment, human development and insurgency issues for promotion of a non-violent and tolerant culture. Workshops and seminars can also be on how to write on the rights of vulnerable sections of society like women, children, farmers, consumers and minorities for protection of basic rights and civil liberties of every person to express his or her views, obtain information and hold ideas regardless of frontiers.