

Role of Media in maintaining Peace and Harmony with reference to India

Dr.Debjani Roy¹

¹Assistant Professor and Head
Department of Journalism and Mass Communication
BKC College
Bonhooghly, Kolkata, West Bengal
Email: debjanighosh66@yahoo.com

Abstract: *The press is the most important, effective, extensive, popular and convenient, cheapest and the surest method of molding and formulating public opinion. It is the most important of the elements which constitutes public opinion itself. The media is the most powerful single influence today helping to mould public opinion with regard to the need of fostering friendly and harmonious relations between various communities and religious groups and thereby promoting national solidarity. Right from the days of British rule the media has been a great supporter of communal peace and harmony. Media played an effective role in the early anti-partition movement launched by Indians as a response to the administrative decision to partition of Bengal in 1905. The various agencies of mass media condemned all the incidents and maintained communal harmony despite tensions between nations. In India Media is a powerful medicine and if the medicine is used properly it can heal many ills and if misused it can become poison. The role of media in promoting communal harmony means information dissemination which combats propaganda for riots, intolerance or racism. Media promotes harmony, understanding, tolerance, friendship among individuals and groups and eradication of racial discrimination and racial prejudice.*

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Introduction

Media is the fourth pillar of our country like India where India is considered as the biggest democracy of the world with mixed cultures and religions. The development has increased the

Role of Media in maintaining Peace and Harmony with reference to India

magnitude and complexity of societal actions, rapid social change, technological innovation, rising personal income and rising standard of life and decline of traditional forms. The mass media is used as, "an instrument", both more powerful and more flexible than anything in previous existence, for influencing people into certain modes of belief and understanding within society. The newspaper was responsible advisor to the public. Its first duty was to provide the news, 'uncolored by any motive'. Its second duty was to present 'a certain view of public policy' which it believed to be for the good of the state and community. It treated life as a 'serious matter'. According to Wick man Steed the printing and the selling of news is a social service'. It is an aid administration and a spokesman of the public. It will bridge the gulf between the public and the government and the governed. Media holds a special position because its raw material is really the public mind and it trades chiefly in 'moral values'. Over the last century, India has been rocked by communal, caste, linguistic or regional violence, of this; communal riots have assumed dangerous proportions from the beginning of eighties. The innumerable incidents of small or big proportions have sharpened the communal intensity leading to an emotional upsurge in the country, which added' to the communal tension. The responsibility of the media in such situations is undeniable. Unfortunately, the Press has not always covered these events dispassionately and objectively.

How modern media reacts to situations?

The modern media often indulge in sensationalizing of news. Media channels are more worried about their TRP ratings rather than the issue of social responsibility. And this trend is needed to be changed. If you take the role of media in coverage of communal riots in the past, riots of late 60's, the violence of 1980-81, the separatist movement of mid-eighties and early 90's, the incidents at Ajothya, Mumbai, and Gujarat the media played different kinds of roles. During these periods, the media which enjoys the utmost freedom of expression, has a great and vital role to play in molding public opinion on correct lines in regard to the need of friendly and harmonious relations between various communities and religious groups and thus promote

Role of Media in maintaining Peace and Harmony with reference to India

national solidarity. The role of media in such situations is peace-makers and troubleshooters. The present day situation of our country demands an active. Recent communal conflicts in Karnataka, Kandhamal in Orissa shows the need of media's involvement in promoting communal harmony. Because the people of other parts of the country come to know about those incidents only through media. The Wardha commission states that media, both print and electronic, had also to exercise restraint and screaming headlines should be avoided. The press maintains that truth must be the basis of consideration in matters of contempt of court cases. But the media does not hesitate to report untruth when it suits its interests. The age we live in, newspapers must continue to pursue a higher purpose than mere profit making. And, this purpose is best served when a newspaper, without fear or favor, keeps its readers fully informed and provides space to a plurality of views. The responsibility not to sensationalize events. The responsibility to guard communal harmony and national unity. The responsibility to strengthen the social fabric of our multi-religious and multi-lingual country. The media of our country has matured into an institution where its initiatives and instruments can stop the spiral of hatred and obfuscation, which, in itself, constitutes a threat to international peace and security. Media should give more space to cover wide ranging of articles regarding communal harmony. They should cover festivals celebrated in certain parts of the country where different communities together join and celebrate.

How media is a threat and opportunity for media?

In the present times, with the advances in technology, the reach of all forms of media when transnational media targets a global audience, issues and controversies become a global event. Therefore, any controversy created by an irresponsible act of any media organization can spread all over the world. While governments started contemplating more regulations on the media in the name of communal harmony and national integration, media organizations too once again stressed the need for redefining ethical boundaries in day-to-day journalism in the era of new technology. The Media can greatly facilitate thought and discussion. It can advance the progress

Role of Media in maintaining Peace and Harmony with reference to India

of civilization. The primary responsibility of the Media thus is of creating an informed citizenry in order to empower society and strengthen democracy and along with this it should also play an active role in enhancing social, religious and communal harmony for the betterment of the community, the society, the nation and the entire humanity as a whole print & electronic) has become all-pervasive, wide and deep. The mass media has become the single most potent medium to shape public opinion. It can vulgarize or brutalize the society. Or it can help lift the society onto a higher level. A good and responsible media is a nation talking to it. In a diverse country like ours, which has different hues and shades of cultures and diversities, the role of media becomes all the more important. Communal disharmony and conflicts are fuelled by fear, suspicion and hatred. The different channels of media are the transmission channels through which fear, suspicion and hatred spread. The biggest challenge is to merge the religious, linguistic and regional identity into a national identity, while maintaining the other identities and cultures. Media has the potential to play a very important role in bringing this change.

Media's role in times of conflict and harmony

The reporting by the Media in times of conflict acquires all the more importance since events do not travel. Reports do. It is the account or the image of an event that arouses passions among millions of readers and TV watchers. The communal riots in Gujarat after the Godhra tragedy were probably an event which was exhaustively covered live through print and electronic media at the national level. Media credibility emerged from Gujarat reporting as bruised as the psyche of the victims from religious violence. A similar case in point here is the media reporting on the Muslim growth based on the data on population growth culled from India Census 2001. The media sensationalized the issue by reporting prominently and provocatively on their front pages that the minorities' population growth had increased. The seeming rise in the Muslim growth rate was in reality a false impression created by the fact that the census could not be carried out in Jammu & Kashmir in 1991, and in Assam in 1981 - and that, since the former is a Muslim majority state and the latter has a sizeable proportion of Muslims. The political storm which

Role of Media in maintaining Peace and Harmony with reference to India

resulted from the media reporting of this census figures was based on an illusion created by misleading statistics, which the print media left unexplained and did not prominently report even after the furor began.

Media being a channel having wide reach and penetration with high retention value and immense potential to influence public opinion, the reporting in times of peace is a long term investment in keeping intact the communal fabric of the country. During the harmony and tranquillity, the media owes the responsibility of reporting the instances, endeavours and experiences of communal harmony with the same fervor as they do in case of conflict. The media should prominently carry reports, articles, documentaries, serials, films showcasing the success stories in forging communal harmony. Media's role in modern society is unchallenged. In India media's positive role can be gauged from the newspapers publishing reports about the Godhra massacre. The media covering the incident had played an important role in extending cooperation across the community barriers. This fact was established by two of the Baroda based organization Shanti Abhiyaan and People's Union for Civil Liberties which had been following the vernacular press and English newspapers to analyze the report of the incident throughout the period of the Godhra massacre. Many a times, the newspaper plays a lead role through peace giving headlines and news like the Gujarat Samachar that quoted in its 11th March 2002 edition that Lilapir durgah devotees included all Hindus and Muslims and talked about Elol village being an example of communal harmony. Newspapers have always been a medium for communicating solution, knowledge and thus have succeeded in maintaining a good balance in its reporting and constructing, encoding and representing realities.

Media has always been a source, arena and resource for gathering, selecting and presenting realistic interpretations. Media was also ahead in covering most peace and anti-war campaigns. Information supporting peace has flowed in through television, magazines, radio, literature, art, music, films and through various other cultural activities. Not to forget the advantages of internet and its contribution towards peace building and peacemaking by providing education and swift innovative communication that served in arousing people and improving social and living conditions worldwide. In future, these medium would be able to achieve computer aided peace and harmony that would overcome barriers and tensions between cultures,

Role of Media in maintaining Peace and Harmony with reference to India

societies and countries. A global consciousness in minds of people would be achieved then. Any form of transfer of information and knowledge plays an inordinate role in shaping the political consciousness among people with even little experience and understanding which would continue in future also and thereby directly contributing in building communal harmony. With growing time and with developed and advanced approach these forms of media would draw more audience into an alternate world and experience, thus contributing the internet media role in advancing peace and harmony.

Media's role in providing information

Media plugs the information gap during a situation of communal tension by covering the events and bringing to light the happenings to all parts of the country. The Journalists from news papers and television channels have risked life and personal safety to bring first hand information on communal tensions across the country. With news pouring in 24 hours a day, the media has bridged the time and space gap in respect of information. The media has made the best use of technology in this regard. This is evident in the live coverage of events. For instance, the news of riots in 1984 in Delhi and 1989 in Bhagalpur took quite some time to reach the other parts of the country unlike the news of say Gujarat / Mumbai. The availability of information in real time is a must for checking communal tendencies. The media coverage acts as an agent of social control over anti-social elements who are exposed in the pictures both still and motion shot by the media. The media has closely followed the story of Graham Staines and Zahira Shaikh in the fight to justice. The media also managed to trace an alleged eye -witness of the 1984 anti-sikh riots. The media has brought off some sting operations unearthing the role of various people in the various tense communal situations. The media has a role to play in highlighting the maladies of communalism and suffering of the common man as a result of communal hatred. The media in India has to act responsibly. In this age of cut-throat competition, the various news channels tend to sensationalise news items often leading to disastrous consequences. During the Gujarat riots the media came out with many sensitive pictures of the riots. These pictures have been made use

Role of Media in maintaining Peace and Harmony with reference to India

of by communal elements to whip up communal passions and attract and recruit vulnerable sections of the population into the communal ideology. It is seen that the pictures of Gujarat and Babri Masjid have been used extensively to motivate youth to take up arms for carrying out terror attacks as revenge for the same. The subsequent investigations during the blasts at Ahmedabad, Hyderabad, Jaipur, Delhi and Mumbai have revealed this. The news channels went on to air erroneous reports on the bomb blasts in Mumbai. The various channels looking to pull off a scoop reported that blasts had taken place in areas where actually there were no blasts. During such situations, with cell phones also jammed, people look up to television channels for accurate information. In the instant case, the wrong reporting caused more panic and commotion among people. Recent is the allegation made against two local newspapers of Mangalore, namely, Karavali Ale and Vijaya Kirana where by the news papers have been accused of instigating communal sentiments by publishing wrong reports and also provocative images during the recent communal tensions in Mangalore. This is not a new phenomenon. The media has been used to propagate communal literature even during British time is also seen that many a times, there are articles and opinions brought out in the media which are biased or which are vulnerable to communal interpretations. There have been instances where the media has taken sides instead of unbiased reporting. Further, there are newspapers which openly support certain ideologies and political parties which claim to follow these ideologies. There have also been instances of under-reporting.

In a country like India characterized by diversities, it is not sufficient that the different communities exist side by side. There has to be something which all the people of India come about to share. This is the feeling of belongingness to an entity larger than that of their community, which is India. The Indian identity has two parts, the individual identity of each person whereby each individual relates to his own community (uniqueness) and the overall identity of being an Indian whereby each individual shares commonality with individuals of all other communities. The easiest way of communicating the same to vast sections of the country is through media.

Role of Media in maintaining Peace and Harmony with reference to India

Positive and Negative aspects of Media

Media has the greatest influential power. It can shape people's attitude and expression. It can shape the country in particular and world at large, making it better place to live in or the worse place to live in. The media can create terror or comfort by giving discouraging or encouraging news. Many believe that the media should be truly free and should not be restricted by cultural constraints or public emotion and moral values. An enlightened media should strive to inform the public, to create and sustain as a wide range of interests as possible and encourage debate, which involve accurate and impartial presentation of news and views and evaluation of conflicting ideas. Today the culture is affected by new values emanated out of print media, television, internet and cinema. Media has important role to play in preserving and supporting culture. It should not lose itself to the demands of the market and the politics of the day. The newspaper doesn't realize or overlook few small but equally important things that would not only have short term implication but long term impact. Media should ensure that no word, no sentence and no article give an impression that the majoritarian ethos as the national ethos, and the predominant culture as the mainstream culture.

On numerous T.V. channels we see debates, the programmes like "Devil's Advocate" hosted by Karan Thapar, "We the People" hosted by Barkha Dutt, and articles written by Vir Singhvi in Hindustan Times are live examples of the breath taking debates. The editorials of several national and serious newspapers are making an impact on the thinking of the educated community. They bring to fore the real living conditions of the minorities and their actual needs. In this process they act as interface between the larger community that is the mainstream community, government and the minority. This is how they create a talking platform. The media can act as a medium and mechanism, but change has to be brought by the people themselves. Independent media is criticized by the rioters, as well as the Government for portraying the meticulous targeting of minority establishments and households in the attacks. The

Role of Media in maintaining Peace and Harmony with reference to India

administration often came down heavily on independent media because the coverage did not suit its interest.

Conclusion

Media should facilitate inter religion communication and talks among the religious leaders on the issues of social importance. They should bring forth the best of the practices and cultural diversity of all the communities. Media should publish good books, movies and other material which promotes the communal harmony. There are many movies and books on communal riots, but merely a handful of movies and books on the theme of communal harmony. This has been created because media is money driven. The Press has not always covered these events dispassionately and objectively. Without going too far back in the time, if we analyze the situation since the 90's, some section of the media got carried away by the turn of the tide. Elsewhere, the militants and terrorists were openly glorified for serving the cause of their community. Media has the capability to focus attention on social issues and current events resulting in a common experience which itself contributes to a feeling of closeness and integration. If the media audience becomes suspicious that they are being exposed to falsehood or motivated propaganda then the media tends to lose credibility. On the contrary, if the media enjoys credibility and trustworthiness, their audiences get influenced without being conscious of it. The media should not take the role of a preacher as people generally shun such an approach. The media should reflect the extant social conditions. If a person has been seeing or experiencing people of different communities living together, interacting in various social situations, the acceptance of similar situations and characters becomes easier in life.

Media is an instrument which can be used both ways. As media can help in achieving harmony, it can also be used to spread hatred and distrust between communities. It is a question of who uses what and how it is used. The media will promote integration and harmony when they act responsibly and work under reasonable control. Media's effectiveness is closely linked

Role of Media in maintaining Peace and Harmony with reference to India

to people's access to it. With the proliferation of electronic media and news channels, majority of the population is able to access some form of news media. Even the illiterate who couldn't read print media has now access to television and radio. In fact, media is one of the powerful tools to promote communal harmony. It is supposed to promote democracy, equality, tolerance, and other positive social values through different documentary, case studies etc. But market driven media culture has reduced the credibility of its real work. Most mass media are now covering news items of violence, anti- social act and broadening the divide among different religious groups. Media has the potential to play a role in molding public opinion on correct lines in regard to the need of friendly and harmonious relations between various communities and religious groups and thus promote national solidarity. The media should strictly adhere to proper norms and standards in reporting or commenting on matters which have a bearing on communal relations. The role of media in such situations is to be peacemakers. The media should also be cautious not to falsely give communal color to incidents which might occur in which members of different communities happen to be involved.

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Role of Media in maintaining Peace and Harmony with reference to India

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