

CONTEMPORARY JOURNALISTIC TRENDS – A GANDHIAN CRITIQUE

CHAPTER – I

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

It is a matter of common knowledge that human being is a gregarious animal. Every animal has an inherent urge to communicate. Man is considered as the only animal capable of communicating by means of the language, in the true sense of the word. Information exchange has been going among the homo-sapiens in one form or another, since the very origin of the institution called the society.

In the annals of human progress, communication techniques underwent steady development. In the early days, this growth was very slow. With the advancement of science and technology, the pace of growth of communication techniques also increased in reaps and bounds. The last two centuries are considered as an era of communication revolution which embraced a variety of fields, unheard of in the past. Human communication is mainly classified into four major categories: Intrapersonal Communication, Inter-personal Communication, Group Communication and Mass Communication. Television, Radio, Cinema and Newspaper are the most prominent among the important mass media.

Communication through the medium of the paper is an ancient means of dissemination of knowledge. The invention of the printing machine by John Guttenberg gave a new impetus to the process, accelerating and accentuating. Elegantly printed newspapers took the place of crude manuscripts. People whole-heartedly accepted and

adopted the new trend in communication. Anything printable came to be considered as News. A widely accepted definition of news is: “News is an account of a recent event or opinion which is important or interesting”.¹ News is in a way current history. News comprises all current activities of general human interest and the best news is that which interests most readers. Though the concept of news is very old, the word ‘news’ is relatively recent in origin. In English it appeared as ‘newis’ in 1423, ‘newyes’ in 1485 and evolved to ‘newes’ in 1523. It was only after 1550 that it became ‘news.’² The four letters of the word news have been described as representing the four directions – North, East, West and South.

“Journalism is defined as the art and science of using words for the communication of news items.”³ At the same time, the field of news business is a field of service and encompasses creative work, search of knowledge with a potential for healthy competition. Opinion creation and lending new dimensions to knowledge are two of its avowed objectives. Besides it seeks to criticize the wrong doing of those in power, entertain the mass to enlighten the public. Journalism with the free press plays a vital role in shaping the trends and development in contemporary and future societies. In almost all countries, the Press is considered as one of the main pillars of the government. It is invested with the prestigious position of the ‘Fourth Estate’. Judiciary, Legislature and Executive are the other three Estates. Freedom of the Press is an inseparable part of democracy.

The history of journalism in India is closely linked with the colonial rule. It cannot be denied that during the colonial regime that the Press played not a small role in making the common people aware of fundamental human rights which, incidentally led to the structural and cultural change of Indian Society. In India, the vernacular dailies have also played an important part in Nation-Building. Kerala is the

most literate State in India. This comparatively small southern State has quite a good many newspapers and journals to its credit. In this study an attempt is made to identify some major but unique trends in the field of journalism in Kerala. Commercialisation of news papers, sensationalising news items, attaching undue importance to advertisements, deviating from the journalistic principles and ethics, undue importance given to party politics, etc., are some of the major, pitfalls in Kerala's journalistic field. These aberrations are sought to be identified by the researcher through case studies conducted both in a village and in an urban areas.

Indian Journalism in the post-Independence, let alone the critical Emergency period, has lost much of its charm. It is mainly due to the commercialization of news papers. Running a newspaper involves a huge investment. Most of the newspapers are run or financed by rich capitalists with an avowed profit motive and ulterior objectives. The most powerful side of a newspaper, the editorial review is naturally initiated by prejudices and partisan attitudes. Globalisation is the last straw that breaks the camel's back. In this age of globalization and information revolution, it is not easy for newspapers to exist without commercial considerations. But the danger lies in the thought that the newspaper is only a consumer product. This attitude emerged in India in the middle of 1980's.⁴ The perverted argument is that the newspaper is no better than toothpaste and that it should be viewed as a commodity like any other. There is no sanctity about a newspaper, much less about journalism. There is tough competition in the field and success is judged by the ability to sell the product. The ultimate result of this approach is that it will adversely affect the freedom of the press, the life blood of democracy.

Sensationalising news items is very common in present day journalism. Entertaining people by hook or crook to ensure wide

circulation is a serious menace. News is invested with the aura of a story. Important items of news often made comical to attract common people. The basic principle of journalism 'Facts are sacred, comment is free' is ignored. Glorification of social evils and violence is a usual practice. The language used to present such news items is often vague and ambiguous. Publication of interviews with anti-social elements by the newspapers glorifying terrorists and criminals is quite injurious to the interests of a healthy society. Though the Press Council of India gives strict instructions against such practices, they go unheard. The 21st guide line of the Press Council of India warns the journalists against sensational and provocative writing.⁵ Though the guidelines and instructions are clear, the newspapers ignore most of them because of the cross commercialism and cut-throat competition. They distort the truth and sometimes resort to stark falsehood.

Undue importance being attached to advertisements is another curse in the newspaper field. Advertisements are directly related to money. So in the present situation advertisements are a necessary evil. Besides they have an informative value. But the danger starts where the newspaper management considers advertisements more important than news. The advertisers influence the editorial content of a journal both directly and indirectly. The newspaper is a social product. It enjoys the status of the Fourth Estate in a democratic country like ours. These things are ignored when we give over importance to advertisements. To make matters worse, advertisements of harmful items and dangerous drugs find place in these columns of our newspapers. Even fraudulent methods are used to promote such products. The welfare of the society is being totally ignored.

Some newspapers publish advertisements under the guise of news cheating their readers. Canvassing advertisements is called space marketing. Here also journals indulge in unhealthy competition.

To make space marketing easy the news and the advertisement sections work hand-in-hand in an unholy collaboration. This has become a universal phenomenon. The policy of the media is decided according to the advertisement interest. The editorial section may object to this practice. This is called 'newsroom versus board room' by media experts.

The fundamental objective of journalism is to serve the people with news, views and information on matters of public interest in a fair, accurate, unbiased, sober and decent manner. To meet this end, the press is expected to conduct itself in keeping with certain norms of professionalism and ethics. Almost all these principles are widely recognized and accepted. But unfortunately today we see flagrant violation of newspaper ethics. This affects the credibility of newspapers as a whole. BBC news editor-in-chief Tony Burman pointed out, 'every news organization has only its credibility and reputation to rely on.'⁶ Some experts say that if they deviate from ethics and principles, journalism will become a dead profession. Dead in the sense that idealism, which made this profession a noble calling, is no longer there. The fire that transformed the pen into a mighty weapon in the hands of those in an earlier generation seems to have gone out in this new era governed by the market. Its cutthroat practices erase even the semblance of a commitment to ideals and principles in the contemporary media world. It is money that matters in the market economy and media is seen just as one among many industrial concerns available to those looking for first buck.

A major part of the space in newspapers is utilised for politics now-a-days. Most of these political news are negative news. Censorious news attract more readers just as negative talk gathers more listeners. Newspapers have the capability to guide political parties to the right track. But seldom do they utilise it becomingly.

Politically biased reports and reporters abound in our present journalistic arena. Developmental efforts are often blocked on political considerations. In the Kerala society, Political negativity and violence seem to have gripped the psyche of the people. Irresponsible newspapers and political parties are equally responsible for creating this situation. Here we need a new enlightened approach to resist the harmful politicisation of our newspapers.

What are the remedies for these journalistic aberrations? The search for an answer to this question will lead us a great person who lived in this country a century ago. That man was Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869-1948), the Father of Our Nation. Though he was not a professional journalist, he wrote quite a lot on every subject in the universe. Mahatma Gandhi was one of the greatest visionaries whom Mother India has ever produced. Gandhiji was a versatile genius – a political leader, economist, philosopher, religious reformer and educationist and above all, a sage of mystic wisdom who conducted many experiments in the field of journalism also. All his experiments were tests on Truth. He believed that journalism should be founded on truth and non-violence and should be used as a weapon for social transformation. Gandhiji's journals 'Indian Opinion', 'Harijan', 'Navajivan' and 'Young India' carry great and valuable messages to publications, journals and journalists. He practised everything that he preached so much so that 'his life itself was his message.'

Gandhiji could give full justice to all the main objectives of the media, i.e., to inform, to interpret, to evaluate, to educate, to conscientise, to inspire, to create opinion, to lead, to create desirable attitudes, to criticise and to give great values to contemporary society and finally to the human race. Here we can see that the media helped to generate a feeling of nationality and a sense of purpose.

In fact, Gandhiji had brought in many new elements which resuscitated the field of journalism. It was his human approach which gave his writings a unique character. His voice was the echo of the conscience of humanity – not just the voice of a pamphleteer. He wanted to bring about a real change in the country and the world.

Gandhiji believed, “The sole aim of journalism should be service. The true function of journalism is to educate the public mind and read the mind of the country and to give definite and fearless expression to that mind.”⁷

According to Gandhiji, a journalist must be a nationalist, a party loyalist, or a faithful adherent of his class interest, but his loyalty should primarily be to his readers. The public has the right to know the truth. It must be informed objectively of what actually is happening. If the paper loses the confidence of its readers, it has lost all that is worth in journalism. The subject matter Gandhiji chose was down to the ground. He was able to put the villages of India on the wider canvas of Indian writing. Unfortunately, Gandhiji’s contribution to journalism has not received the due recognition it deserved. Almost all of his ideals remain a distant dream.

The journal ‘Indian Opinion’ was launched in 1904 while Gandhiji was in South Africa. Sjt. Mansukhlal Naazar was the first editor. In the beginning it used to be issued in Gurjarati, Hindi, Tamil and English. ‘Indian Opinion’ was a mirror my life,” Gandhiji wrote in his autobiography.⁸ Gandhiji gave the lessons of Satyagraha through the journal. There was hardly an issue of Indian opinion for 10 years without an article of Gandhiji in it. Gandhiji wrote: “It made me thoroughly understand the responsibility of a journalist and the hold I secured in this way over the community made the future campaign

workable, dignified and irresistible. In the very first month of 'Indian Opinion', I realized that the sole aim of journalism should be service." ⁹

In the beginning 'Navajivan Anasatya' was a magazine published from Mumbai . Later the name of the magazine was changed as 'Navajivan'. It became a weekly from 1919. The place of publication was shifted to Ahmedabad. By the name Navajivan, Gandhi intended the renewal of the Gujarati language, literature, people's life and those of the nation.¹⁰ The magazine gave due importance to political affairs. Many translated articles were also published in Navajivan, mainly from Bengali. Gandhiji did not believe in writing books to express his views. He wrote about it in his journal. Many great persons wrote their articles in Navajivan. Many social issues were discussed in the magazine.¹¹ Navajivan was published with a 'no profit, no loss approach' by Gandhiji.

Gandhiji took over 'Young India' from Jamandas Dwarakadas in 1919. His aim was to fight against colonial rule and empower people's struggle using the journal. The circulation of the journal increased to forty thousand. From the very start, Gandhiji set its face against taking advertisements in the journal. "I do not think that they have lost anything thereby. On the contrary, it is my belief that it has in no small measure helped them to maintain their independence,' Gandhiji wrote about his decision in his autobiography.¹² Through these journals, Gandhiji educated the people about satyagraha. In 1922 Gandhiji was jailed because of writing against the Government. Both 'Young India' and 'Navajivan' were banned. In 1931 this publication was revived. It continued till January 1933.

Gandhiji realized the necessity of starting an English weekly which has a circulation all over India. G.D. Birla was ready to sponsor such a journal. Thus on 11th February, 1933 Gandhiji started the

Harijan.¹³ The circulation of the weekly increased soon and it became self sufficient economically. Harijan was also published in other languages. The Hindi edition was Harijan Bandhu. This was the most popular among the Harijan publications. Eradication of untouchability and inequality from the society was the main motive of the Harijan. Illustrious persons like Mahadev Desai, K.G. Mashruwala, Jawaharlal Nehru, R.R. Diwakar, C. Rajagopal Achari, Kaka Kalekar, etel, wrote with Gandhi in the Harijan. The weekly was a source of inspiration to other publications and newspapers of that time. Every week Gandhi gave an important message through the Harijan. Almost all other papers republished it. In 1940 Gandhiji stopped the publication of the Harijan to protest against the Communal Award. In 1946 it was restarted and its publication continued till 1949.¹⁴

One can look at Mahatma Gandhi's journalistic forays in either of two ways; as a moralist who took to journalism or as a journalist who undertook a moral crusade. He never commercialised his journals. There never was an editor like him before and there never will be another like him in the future. The aberrations of contemporary journalism can be remedied taking lessons from Gandhiji's journalistic experiments. To him journalism was not a profit making commercial venture but a good means of public service. He wrote: "Journalism should never be prostituted for selfish ends or for the sake of merely earning livelihood or worse still for amassing money."¹⁵

Gandhiji was against sensationalising news and occurrences. He wrote the truth without exaggeration or distortion. He strongly condemned the unethical practices of his fellow journalists. On one occasion he remarked: "The newspaperman has become a walking plague. He spreads the contagion of lies and calumnies."¹⁶

Gandhi's attitude towards advertisements was that of a crusader; one cannot even imagine such a resistance in this era of consumeristic culture. Advertisements adversely affect the consumer. They cause a rise in the prices of goods and services. There is hidden portion behind every advertisement. Today the advertisement interests control the media. Here one cannot hesitate to admire the foresight of Gandhiji. Advertisements are now becoming a threat even to the freedom of the press. As an ardent fighter of the freedom of the press, he took a firm stand against everything which went against the freedom of the press.

Gandhiji insisted that the press must follow certain 'dharmic' (moral and ethical) principles. He wrote, "The press was called the Fourth Estate. It was definitely a power but to misuse that power was criminal."¹⁷ In this age of media supremacy, the need for adopting a fair code of conduct is more imperative than ever before.

Politicisation of news items is another curse of our times. Though Gandhiji was also a great politician he never tarnished his journals with politically biased opinions. Here also our present media need a correction. Today, there is a tendency to spread false news due to politically biased approaches of reporters and media owners. Remember that Gandhiji appreciated the good qualities of English men even when he was fighting against them.

In short, we can say that Mahatma Gandhi's journalistic experiments have greater relevance today than ever before. Day by day we are realising that. The main duty of the media is to lead the society to a better tomorrow. Here Gandhian principles and his experiments are worthy models for all of us to emulate and practise.

1.2 Selection of the Topic

There is a saying that media makes the man. The famous American writer William Fore opined that 'media is the myth maker'. Abraham Lincoln, one of the greatest exponents of democracy remarked, 'Nothing can succeed without public opinion'. The role played by the mass media in the contemporary society is very significant. In this study I propose to deal mainly with the print media. The press, a powerful weapon and corrective force of the society has stood by certain norms and standards from its very beginning. In course of time, many factors made it deviate from the original stand. The response of the media to issues has changed considerably. An unholy haste to the detriment of truth is destroying the credibility of the press bulletins. In the urge to provide entertainment more important issues get slighted or ignored. To earn money by hook or crook is tarnishing the very image of the press. Dissemination of news is considered as a purely commercial undertaking and the reader is reduced to the level of the consumer. The great power inherent in the press media is often misused to promote selfish interests.

Any one who seeks to find a way out of this precarious predicament may well turn to Gandhiji's pioneer work in the field of journalism and draw inspiration from it. He could succeed in using the media very effectively in his time. Gandhiji's journals illustrated the stupendous power of the media. He once remarked: "Journalists must be prepared for any sacrifice while serving public cause".¹⁸

This study seeks to place greater emphasis on the press in Kerala, the most literate State in the country which has the highest rate of readership, about four times more than that of Hindi speaking area. Here, now-a-days not a major newspaper has stopped

functioning owing to financial crisis. Fabulous schemes to attract and lure readers are being implemented by almost all the major newspapers, resulting in an unhealthy competition among them. But the pity is that most of these gigantic enterprises do not seem to ignore the welfare of the common people. Major issues like environmental problems, social evils and the spread of the consumer culture in this small State do not receive adequate attention of the press. At the same time they are competing with one another in producing more sensational news items. In this study, the researcher proposes to probe into these journalistic trends and tries to find out Gandhian solutions to the aberrations spotted.

1.3 Objectives of the Research Work

The objectives of the research work are:

1. To study the contemporary journalistic aberrations in general and those in Kerala in particular
2. To study relevant thoughts of Gandhiji on Journalism and make a thorough investigation into his journals – ‘Indian Opinion’, ‘Navajivan’, ‘Young India’ and ‘Harijan’
3. To find out the relevance of Gandhiji’s journalistic concepts in our present condition
4. To understand how Gandhiji could manage to conduct his journals in a ‘no profit, no loss’ scale even when he kept away advertisements from his newspapers
5. And finally to evaluate how Gandhiji used his journals for social changes and assess the extent of commitment expressed by him to realise his professed ideals such as truth, non-violence, satyagraha and sarvodaya through journalistic experiments.

1.4 Significance of the Study

News is accurate and timely intelligence of happenings, discoveries, opinions and matters of any sort that affect or interest the readers. But today the common people do not have any control over the mass media. Media houses are very large business institutions.¹⁹ The main objectives of media are to inform, to educate, to transform, to entertain and to restructure the society. But the contemporary situation is that twisting these objectives. An impartial view from the balanced mind is not common today. News and views which are inaccurate and far-fetched are published without the least prick of conscience. Journalists and media owners are responsible for such a state of affairs. We have to help the media to get out of this crisis and reinstate the earlier atmosphere of sanity and responsibility. The need of the hour is to envisage an approach which enables the media to have an easy access to the material and use of its responsibility ensures that the media does not manipulate it to mislead the people to serve selfish interests. At present the electronic media has not grown enough to reach out the common people. Even now the print media is still the main source of knowledge dissemination. Hence the need to make sure that journals of all kind, especially news papers keep a sense of honesty, decency, fairness and responsibility in the larger interests of the nation.

The present study is aimed at detecting and analysing the problems of the print media and to find out Gandhian solutions to them. Like any other approach to Gandhian values, the journalistic approach to Gandhism must be wholistic, for Gandhiji, himself was one who loved to view the world as one organic unit and all aspects of life are interrelated. This study further seeks to probe into the peculiarities of Gandhiji's journalistic approach and experiments and

how far they can be made use of to emancipate the press from the clutches of the manifold problems arising out of the rapid and drastic changes occurred in recent times world wide.

1.5 Hypothesis

In this age of competition, the print media shows some undesirable trends and unhealthy tendencies. These adversely affect the society. These journalistic aberrations must be remedied. Contemporary journalistic field has many things to learn from Mahatma Gandhi. He was a man of ethical journalism. His journalistic experiments have greater significance now than ever before. 'Indian Opinion', 'Young India', 'Navajivan' and 'Harijan' were the journals edited by Gandhiji. They are living examples of Mahatma Gandhi's journalistic genius. His language, approach and value-based prophetic voice have no parallel in history. The ideals put forward by Gandhiji such as Truth, Nonviolence, Sarvodaya and Satyagraha are ever relevant. These values reflect in his journalistic contributions too. An exposition of the relevance of Gandhian approach particularly in the field of journalism, is very much useful, nay, necessary in our contemporary realities.

1.6 Methods and Tools of Data Collection

In this study, both primary and secondary data are collected. An analytic study of the literature related to journalism, interviews, questionnaire, observation, discussions, etc., are used for data collection.

Primary sources

The primary data were collected through interview and observation. Information was gathered through interviews with quite a number of regular newspaper readers. For this an interview schedule

was prepared. An interview guide was prepared for the media persons. It included their expectations, experiences and the problems they were really facing in their field.

Though the area of study is the whole of Kerala, the interview with common readers has been mainly done in Ramamangalam village and in Kochi city. Before starting the interview, the purpose of the interview was explained and it was assured that the information given will be used for study purpose only. The schedule was pre-tested in the research area and necessary changes were made before using it for the final study.

Secondary Sources

The secondary data were collected from various media institutions. A large number of newspapers, journals, publications text books, periodicals, etc., were used for the study. Information received from the internet has also been used in this study. Kerala Press Academy provided some valuable information about newspapers.

Sample Design

Out of more than fifty newspapers in the State, prominent ten were selected for the field study. Forty journalists were interviewed using the interview schedule. The researcher interviewed one hundred newspaper readers in the village and another hundred readers in the urban area. The opinions of some eminent media persons and scholars were collected through email and from internet.

1.7 Area of the Study

The geographical area of the study is the State of Kerala. The study is focused on the major newspapers of Kerala which are published in Malayalam.

8. Limitations of the Study

Research studies on the media in the State are limited. So very little literature is available. In-depth studies are almost nil. There is a saying that no two journalists have the same view about anything. So almost all opinions are relative. Some of the media persons and organizations hesitate to reveal the actual problems. Some are not prepared to give the figures, particularly about the circulation.

Many of the readers are ignorant about the aberrations of the newspapers they rely on. Hence a broad generalisation and the collection of data from all categories of people are virtually impossible. It is very difficult to find out reliable studies and authoritative research works in this area to serve as a model.

The study is limited only to newspapers. People get information from Television, Radio, Weeklies, Magazines, Internet and even from their mobile phone. So the study based only on newspapers is not complete in any sense. The information channels are so broad in our contemporary world. Yet, print media has a great role in society.

Most of the materials were collected in the vernacular, namely, Malayalam and sometimes I was forced to give a freelance translation to establish the ideas presented. This indeed is a limitation since exact translations were not available.

1.9 Scope and Limits of the Study

The strength of democracy lies in the effectiveness of the freedom of expression. As Thomas Jefferson remarked, 'where the press is free and every man is able to read, all is safe'. In a democratic country like India, the press is one of the major corrective forces. Unfortunately, today this corrective force has become a corruptive force to a large extent. Here we can see the relevance of Gandhiji's

voice. The Mahatma upheld many values in his four journals. Gandhi succeeded in using the media very effectively. He had a great vision of the future of the press.

In this changing media environment, journalism has become more complicated, technology based and specialised. Any media activity is a high speed process today. Here money, technological advancement, human intelligence and creativity meet together. Newspapers are large scale commercial ventures. So we cannot expect to meet an editor like Gandhiji at the helm of an ordinary paper. Another thing is that, Gandhiji's papers were part of a great movement. But today's newspapers are not the part of any social movement. Needless to say that, the modus operandi will differ considerably.

As stated earlier, this study is based on a sample survey. Like any other sociological survey, it has several limitations. Any study in the media field faces an ideological struggle between the various aspects and concepts of the problems also. Yet, an earnest attempt has been made to reveal the contemporary journalistic problems and to find out Gandhian solutions to them.

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