The modern times have seen a major breakthrough as far as the media’s role and reach is concerned. There was a time not so long ago when media was limited to newspapers and people would wait 24 hours to get an idea of what was happening around them. The last decade-and-half has seen the rise of multi-media, with TV and Internet emerging as big players. News now is like instant coffee, 24 hours, seven days a week and 365 days a year. You don’t like the coffee, change the flavour - you want news of a different kind, switch your TV channel or the webpage. In this scenario, and faced with huge threat from TV and Internet, newspapers have also changed face: they are pacier, more frivolous and more in-your-face than ever before. The media now is the most powerful tool in the society as it helps form opinion and helps the weakest in the society to air their voice. Its reach and imprint has also grown multifold and people are also dependant on the media for each and every small need of theirs. Just that the media needs to be responsible and sensitive.

Being accredited as the fourth pillar of Democracy has laid a greater onus upon it to work in the best possible way, thereby helping the nation in adhering to the norms of being a welfare state. As press progressed from its
preliminary stage to the one it has achieved now, it witnessed phases of all the eras. From being an alien product, it went on in becoming the means adopted by the freedom fighters to realize the dream of a free India. It was press that went on hand in hand with Tagore and Bose to voice their call for Independence. It was press that conveyed the motives of young revolutionaries to British. The might of Press can be understood from the face that the Father of the Nation, called the press the guiding light, which he believed was an excellent means to unite country thereby strengthening the foundations of the movements against the British.

Mahatma Gandhi reached out to millions of people across the world through his communication skills and journalistic approach, put an ever lasting impact on Indian National Movement’s and waging a battle, single handily against mighty British. He took journalism as a medium to educate the common masses and to install patriotic feeling in their hearts for the cause of others. In his journalistic career, which roughly spanned four decades, he wrote articles on various topics, simple and clear with passion and burning indignation. Gandhi was not a journalist in the popular sense of the term. His life and writing had a symbiotic relationship with each other. Gandhi wrote with a purpose. Writing for him, was not a writer’s pursuit for creativity for a role, it was a duty bound to perform. He
vouched for the freedom of the press, but at the same time he was critical of the tendency of the journalists to pick up the bits from here and there and dish them up for the purpose of creating sensation was, according to him, back door journalism.

Press thus was not a profession, rather a practice, preached by those who believed in its potential to rise above the multitudes and restore order and justice in a democratic set up. As media progressed, it widened its arena. The motives and objectives were no more limited to a nation or a group, but the whole world. Thus the media, since then, has been playing a pivot role in bringing the whole world under one roof. This was the onset of globalization, where in there were extensions of all the genres, namely print, broadcast and radio, and the latest being the Internet.

Global journalism is the product of the digital technology provided by the big international companies, the multinationals. Some of these huge companies are news corporations; but an increasing number aren’t. They are more to have electrical pods or washing powder, or Hollywood, as their foundation but incidentally also own an international media corporation. The standard of information and its dissemination also seems to have suffered. Media Barons have western origins and empires
and as a result the informational gratification of the third world countries is being forsaken for lucrative deals. Since media graduated to a global level, it was expected to play a much more responsible role, but, it somehow seems to have lost in the fray of commercialization and misplayed responsibilities and priorities of the media persons. The sufferers in this ethical battle are of course the viewers, who have over the years become puppets at its hands for it the media that influences their lives so intrusively. Agreed that the journalist, atleast some of them have had the courage of forfeiting temptations and practicing in depth as well as investigative journalism, but on the whole, the media today is clearly aware of this mighty position that it has gathered and has started to act superfluously. The media has yet to come to terms in resisting the temptation of building brand images, which blur the other aspects of reality on vital issues like combating communalism and problems of the common people. Media organizations must realize the need to draw out a system to prevent the necessary process of investigation degenerating into a “trial by the media”.

Never hang a person till prove guilty. That has been the dictum for long as far media was concerned but recent years have seen a sharp U-turn where a minute-by-minute blow has coined a new term for the media: ‘Present-tense Journalism’. There have been several cases where, in an
effort to be ahead of their competition, the media has resorted to reporting false claims and counter claims without fully verifying the facts. This will obviously raise many a question over the credibility and utility of the media as besides news, they also form the opinion of the society. Investigative journalism should be mindful of the reach of the media and its role in the society. Many instances come to mind in recent years, like the Tehelka Tapes and Operation Duryodhan which proved an eye opener for all of us. But the moment certain media twists the evidence for their own convenience and to make their story authentic, the problem begins. We do get to see the glass half empty in specific stories but only when the glass is also shown half full will the media have done their job.

India is no longer a land of snake charmers. It is one of the booming economies in the world today, as too as one of the powerful voices internationally. All this would not have happened but for the change in the social setup across the country. The mass reach of the multi-media has created an impression on the minds of the Indians, across all ages and genres, and created Brand India. Today, countries like the US, UK and others want to do business with India. They want to open shop in India. They want to accept and embrace the Indian-ness because they have realized the power of Brand India. Satellite TV in the early 90s led with the way. India wanted to progress. India
wanted to shed its old skin. India wanted to compete with the best. India wanted to be a step ahead of the others. The emergence of multi-media gave impetus to that dream and showed us how it could be done. The tolerance level among different genres in the country went up, people became more aware of their needs and roles and the media gave them the platform they craved for.

The media also acted as the watchdog of the society, highlighting corruption and the Government and bureaucratic level. The Government was on its toes, aware it can’t pull the wool over anybody’s eyes now and the impact on the society was such that democracy became the biggest tool in our hands. The most encouraging signs of the media were its penetration into rural and semi-urban areas. The youth there got the focus it needed and most success stories being scripted today have come from such backgrounds. Even though the evils of caste, creed and religion haven’t died down completely, the percentage of eradication has gone up. People are more worried about their bread and butter, civic amenities and education for their children than the social taboos the country reeled under for ages altogether.

Here lies the responsibility for the media. It has to play a constructive role and realise that present-tense journalism will just be a short cut to doom. The basics for
the media will remain the same - truth and nothing else. Many feel that the multi-media are in its infancy right now and will learn from its mistakes as time goes by. May be a mature media will push the social and political reforms in our country with double force. It’s good to conclude that the glass is half full than being half empty. There is hope that the dream for the Indians will turn sweeter.

Thus media, the fourth estate has an onerous role of transforming the society and leading masses. In fact a country’s socio economic set up can be gauged well by the status that it accords to its press. Media especially in a democratic set up needs to exercise itself as an independent body, sans any control. This independence and freedom must not misused by its beholders. Thus is a grave need for the media fraternity to play a constructive role in the society. A role not tarnished by the prejudices of commercialization and growing market domination. At the same time, the same onus can be allocated to the consumers of this media, who are alert and intelligent enough to choose the kind of informational package that they are served by their media. Thus with the coordination of the source (media) and the receivers (viewers/readers/listeners), a nation can go a way ahead in deciding its fate.
Thus media needs to become participatory in its approach and live up to the ethics that have been associated with it. It has to restore the sanctity attached to it and shed away the prejudices that unshackle it. It needs to rely its potential and channelize it and not to misuse its authority and influence, at least not in Gandhi’s India.

CHANDIGARH

MANOJ RAJAN

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