

Social Justice Conference

Ramlila Maidan, New Delhi

26, 27 November 2011

Popular Front of India

National Seminar

People's Right to Justice

26 November 2011

Media: People's Voice or Corporate Handmaiden?

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I am really honored by this invitation to address the national seminar on Right to Justice, being held as part of the Social Justice conference by the Popular Front of India. I was asked to speak on the role of the media and how it works as a handmaiden of these retrograde forces that deny justice to the multitudes in this country. The media is an active partner in tis game of power, where a minority which rules over the resources of this country and keep the strings of power in their hands keeping the majority in chains and distress. This fact is known to us all, and it is here we also need to look for alternatives-- for ways and means to liberate ourselves. I think it is time for us to think about such national alternatives in media even as we are conned and critical about the media terrorism being practiced on the people of this country by our mainstream media.

When I say that it is time to look beyond merely complaining about the media's step-motherly attitude and its partisan positions, blatant lies and prejudices when it comes to matters relating to the Indian minorities, dalits and other subaltern sections in our society, I do not mean that it is a meaningless exercise. The criticism is valid and it is very important too, and it is also possible that such criticism carried on for long, with consistency and objectivity, could bring some results and some soul-searching on the part of the practitioners of our mainstream media. In fact, the secular-minded media practitioners in India did play a major role in exposing the massive and heinous crimes committed on the people of India by the right-wing Hindutva forces or the trigger happy police or violent troops whether it be in the Gujarat genocide, the killings in Kashmir or the murderous spree on Christians and other minorities in places like Orissa and Karnataka or the inhuman assaults on the tribal populations in various parts of north, central and south India.

But such efforts, howsoever much sincere or important they may be, can have only a cosmetic effect. Such media expose's that come once in a while, like a manna dropping from heaven, like a sudden rain in a desert land of scorching sun, can provide only a temporary relief. It could even prove to be, as Marx had said in a different context, the opium for the masses actually preventing them from taking

definite steps for real and tangible remedial measures. In fact the mainstream capitalist media is adept at making such occasions of grave public anger, mass frustration and terrible experiences of injustice,

-2-

flagrant violations of human rights, etc, into a public relations exercise, painting itself as the real custodian of human rights, minority rights, and the real watchdog of a genuine people's democracy, while in fact what they are doing is to keep thousands of such incidents under the carpet, going to town with all fanfare focusing only on one or two incidents that actually serve their own purpose.

Hence it is very important for us to remember that we cannot rely on the mainstream, commercial media to find a solution to the problems we, the majority of Indian people, are facing in our lives today. What we have in India is an urban-centric, middle class controlled, elitist media which cannot ignore its class interests. In the age of globalization and global media market, we must also realize that the problems go much deeper: Our media is solely dependent on the massive resources pumped in by the global market forces, and their ideology and politics is dictated by the global capitalist and imperialist forces who are the real forces who keep us down, who are denying us our democratic space, who are using the tactics of shock and awe to browbeat us and our brothers and sisters in every part of the world. The mainstream politics is now part and parcel of this global political evangelical force, who are keen to export democracy to pagan lands and willing to recruit our leaders into their global campaign as foot-soldiers with strategic alliances like the recent Indo-American nuclear deal which made some of our leaders very happy, made them feel very important... This is an imperialist stranglehold that envelops the entire world, and the struggle for liberation today is a global struggle because in a world of global finance capital and global communication and media networks, we cannot hope to fight alone, we cannot hope to liberate ourselves without joining forces with our brothers and sisters fighting elsewhere.

Let us now examine what has happened to our own media in the past decade or so, when it joined as a junior partner of this global forces of finance capital. We have seen a new kind of media alliances, with major western media organizations taking the leading role in running our own national media networks. We have today such groups in television like the CNN-IBN, the CNBC-TV18, Times Now, etc, which are highly influential and massive news organizations which are directly linked to such western media groups like the CNN, CNBC or Reuters with financial and editorial control. Our Government is now more and more willing to water down the strict rules with regard to media ownership and control, abandoning the idea that the media should serve our national interests.

The much-talked about reportage of Mumbai terror attacks had proved how seriously destructive and pernicious could be the consequences of such foreign controlled journalism, with irresponsible and jingoistic people running our news organizations. There has been a big public outcry about the way some of these channels covered the incidents and at least one major TV channel was demanding an immediate military attack on our neighbouring country, Pakistan, declaring it

was that country and its leadership who were responsible for the attack. One channel even declared that Enough is Enough, and reminded the country about the Israeli forces pounding the poor people of Gaza as a model for retaliatory action! We should remember with great concern that in the aftermath of the Mumbai attacks, the country had been taken almost to the brink of a military encounter with Pakistan simply because of this irresponsible 24-hour journalism and the jingoistic nationalism that was the staple feed of these poison pills of mass communications.

It also to be remembered that those who run such massive media organizations have lost all their contact with the people of India. Some of these people used to be the finest journalists this country has

-3-

seen in the post-Independence days, but today we should know that they are nothing but the stooges of a global finance capital, doing whatever the interests of their masters dictate, because it is their purse-strings that control them.

I am not making a false allegation against anyone here. Just look at the exorbitant salaries that many of those top persons in Indian mainstream media enjoy today: They even run into crores of rupees and how could an independent media group, with limited resources, pay such stratospheric salaries to these people? Where does the money come from? They do not generate even a fraction of this money, but they are bank-rolled by global forces, forces inimical to us, forces that would want this country weak and divided, forces that are at the centre of a neo-colonial aggression.

Hence, the need for a search for effective and meaningful alternatives in media. We need to work hard for alternatives because this is the need of the hour, this is essential for the protection of the freedom of this country, for the preservation of the unity of the people of our motherland, to prevent this country falling into the trap of the imperialist global strategy with the help of an all powerful and all-too-willing mainstream media.

However, it is easy to speak about media alternatives, but when we approach it from a practical point of view things get really tough. We do have many models today, from the celebrated Al Jazeera which gives a counter point to the western media, to London's Independent, which emerged out of the efforts of a group of conscientious media-persons in Fleet Street who resisted the Murdochisation of the mainstream English media. Here in India, we do have many such models, like the Tehelka, which came out of the resistance put up by sensible sections of our middle class people who opposed the bulldozing of the organization by the right-wing Hindutva politicians who ruled this country. But even they are now being drawn into this capitalist class with their offerings as is evident in the recent allegations about their close alliance with the Goa mining lobby.

We need to think hard and deep about it. Is it possible for us to develop alternative media organizations simply on the goodwill of some well-meaning people? Can such organizations be truly independent, because after all they do depend on charity? I do feel such organizations can only be ephemeral, they may be useful but in the

final analysis they would wither away under pressure, because they are really establishments with clay feet.

Hence the need to explore whether we can find a model which can ensure true independence, truly dedicated to the people, developed with resources and intellectual capital of the most organic variety, that will withstand and fight on, come what may.

Let me, with great humility, say that in Kerala we have been able to build a daily newspaper with genuine public participation, with its roots deep among the people it serves and represents.

In the past six years our daily, Thejas, has emerged as a powerful newspaper which commands respect and credibility among its readers and the general public, and opinion-makers and those who hold power do listen to us because we speak objectively and truthfully, without mincing our words even as we refuse to accept the line of sensationalism and spicing up of news and views. We know that sensationalism helps to sell and make waves, but we also know that ultimately it could prove to be our undoing.

-4-

The first thing we did, when we planned this newspaper, was to identify our strengths and weaknesses. We knew we had a mass of people who support us, who looked up to us to deliver a newspaper of their own. We also knew we had no big names, no media celebrities, none with star value with us to make us look big and glamorous in the media world. But as I said elsewhere in an article, we turned our weaknesses into our strength and our deficiencies into our core competency. We had none with professional or technical training, we had very few people who could guide us in these complex operations and it was beyond our means to hire the best and the well known. So we decided to train a batch of young people in all departments of media operations and within a few months of rigorous work, we were ready with a band of young people who could take up these tasks. We had a few people who could guide them and give them a sense of purpose and direction, but the main idea was to empower them to take upon themselves these difficult and historic tasks.

It involved huge risks because with such an inexperienced team you could end up in deep troubles, you could commit big mistakes. But we knew eternal vigilance was the price to pay for such an adventurous course and looking back I can tell you, it paid off. Today we have a team of professionals who have won many awards in the past three years, and can match the best in the profession. What we have done in these years is to demystify media activities and make them accessible to the young boys and girls from the subaltern sections of our society who had no prior experience in these elite professions.

But Kerala remains a small part of this huge nation. Elsewhere in this country, things are bad beyond belief, and we need to seriously think of developing such models at the national level, so that our people can come together, they can dream together and perhaps they can put up a resistance against the atrocities they face

every day, every hour of their lives. For this to happen, we must give shape to their own media organizations that are genuinely independent, receive sustenance from the people, run by young men and women who are organically linked to the masses unlike those rootless gentlemen we see in our mainstream media who, even as they live in India, think and feel and act like the descendants of those who once came to colonize this country.

I hope this conference will help us put our energies and resources together to build something bold, something refreshingly original that would serve the dispossessed sections of our society.

Thank you.

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