

Role of journalists in regional integration

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In recent years it is being claimed repeatedly and vociferously that we live in the Information Age and that today's free media have become the purveyors of such vast body of knowledge as never before. It may look that the claim is self-evident and incontestable. Yet I think it needs certain serious qualifications. Mere overload of information without proportion and perspective remains just information, it does not translate into enlightenment and wisdom. The fact is that today's free medium is also corporatized medium devoted to serving Wall Street's interest. Western power-centres have themselves declared their journalists "embedded." These correspondents filing reports from the war front at great risk had no freedom during the Iraq war and could only write or broadcast what was cleared by their respective controlling authorities. They have betrayed not only the poor countries but also the poor in the rich countries. This is also clear from the very half hearted and niggardly coverage of Occupy Wall Street Movement of the poor. And about the interest of the giant western media in the affairs of poor countries, the less said the better. The docility and obeisance of western media during such emergencies are incredible. It was the Third World journalists and not their peers in the west who read the real motive behind the Iraq war –not fear of WMD or terrorism or the need to establish popular rule in Iraq but its oil resources. Western journalists and commentators are the ultimate in gullibility and conformism. (Forget mavericks and dissidents such as Robert Fisk, Noam Chomsky, Arundhoty Roy and Rodney Shakespeare). The Information Age has not brought peoples and communities closer. Rather it has driven the wedge deeper and undermined tolerance and harmony. 'Clash of civilizations' is a phrase invented by the present-day media. The western media have only been strengthening prejudice by promoting notions such as Muslims are terrorists, Hindus are invariably cast-ridden, Christians are crusaders. In this situation

journalists of regional countries are saddled with two-fold task: countering the twisted projections of Asian and third world countries by the western media and highlighting the needs and priorities of regional countries.

The present-day cult of Globalisation has elevated greed and profit into a principle. Private profit and social good do not go together. And no longer is it just profit making but the present creed is profit maximization. Private media are welcome but blinded by the compulsion of profit maximization they are wont to overlook the most pressing needs in regional countries. These needs and problems are endless but the most dominant ones must receive due coverage. The foremost is poverty, then comes run-away population, healthcare, terrorism, drug, poor connectivity, political instability, income gap, marginalization of women and other underprivileged groups. The western media do not care a damn if South Asian countries are trying to bridge the gap of centuries with the west within decades.

Woman's empowerment is an area where South Asian countries, including this country have made impressive progress. But western media have no concept of woman as such. To them a woman is nothing but a "model". The media in South Asia must act in close cooperation to give true shape and perspective to the hopes and aspirations of millions of poor in these countries. We can encourage private TV channels but they should show more social responsibility. South Asian countries look towards India, as they should, for many things including media responsibility. But here India has failed miserably. If 95 percent of footage is taken up by Bollywood and show business I am constrained to remark that the common Indians have been abandoned. Indian TV channels are only catering to consumerist cravings of the rich while poverty remains unmitigated and debt-ridden farmers commit suicide every now and then. The common people do not patronize the mega shops and so the private TV channels have no need for them. If India, the land of Gandhi and Nehru, is today steeped in corruption and consumerism, a main cause is perhaps the private TV channels. Tune in to any private TV channel and you see only Amitabh Bachchan. It is Bachchan, Bachchan and Bachchan, 24 hours a day and seven days a week.

Justice Markandey Katju, Chairman of the Press Council of India kicked up a row a few months ago when he castigated the Indian TV channels and wanted them to be leashed by a media council or some such body in the line of the press council. Katju said, "I have a poor opinion of the media", he said and added that "they should be working for the interest of the people. They are not working for the interest of the people and sometime they are positively working in an anti-people manner." He said "80 percent people are living in horrible poverty, unemployment, facing price rise, health care (problems) and you (media) divert the attention from those problems and instead you project film stars and fashion parades as if they are the problems of the people." He gave an example of how subtly the media can sow disaffection between communities. "Whenever bomb blasts take place in Bombay, Delhi, Bangalore, within a few hours almost every channel starts showing that an e-mail or an SMS has come that Indian Mujahideen has claimed responsibility or Jaish-e-Mohammed or Harkat-ul-Ansar or some Muslim name," he said. "You see e-mail or SMS...any mischievous person can send but by showing it on TV channels you are in a subtle way conveying the message that all Muslims are terrorists and bomb throwers and you are demonizing the Muslims...99 percent of people of all communities are good people." He said.

If TV is a vehicle of education it must show social responsibility. Bangladesh can also draw its lesson from India's predicament. We do not believe that the media should be controlled but it is being controlled anyway by corporate interest. If control is bad, corporatization of the media is far worse. The journalists in South Asian countries must brace themselves for a new pro-people role, pro-development role through mutual collaboration.

They should work for promotion, progress and prosperity of the people of SAARC countries. Also, they should put forward arguments if as in European countries visa-free movement of people among SAARC countries can be made possible without hampering security of any.