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From the ringside

Media and society: Reconciling contradictions

THE ASPEN Institute India made a credible beginning last week with a well-attended interactive session on “Media and Society”. Apart from the interventions by the panelists, which included T N Ninan, Vikram Chandra, Arun Maira and myself, there was a question and answer session with an audience comprising of diplomats, corporate sector, civil society and the media. Jamshyd Godrej, chairman, and Tarun Das, president, ASPEN Institute India, outlined the innovative features of the ASPEN style of work and the rich India programme which is in store.

What is ASPEN? The ASPEN Institute was founded in 1950 as a prestigious think-tank in Washington for “fostering enlightened leadership, appreciation of timeless ideas and values and open-minded dialogue on contemporary issues”. The original ASPEN Institute offered an executive seminar founded in 1951 which was inspired by the University of Chicago’s Great Books Programme. That programme “challenged business leaders with readings from the past and present thinkers followed by intensive discussion and debate”.

ASPEN also runs several prestigious programmes like a public programme in Colorado, the Henry Crown fellowship offering “value-based education to young leaders”, the Socrates Society Forum for Young Leaders, a strategy group, a business and society programme, a global inter-dependence initiative, a round-table on community change, the Ethical Globalisation Initiative, an International Assembly of Women Ministers to name a few. Its international chapters include ASPEN Institutes in Berlin, Rome, Lyon and now the latest in Delhi. Over time, the India Chapter could become a powerful voice to deliberate on our contemporary challenges.

The session on media and society raised inevitable questions. First, on media imperialism namely, the concerns that with increased globalisation, media conglomerates create large entities making it increasingly difficult for small local media to survive. Apart from eliminating local flavour and challenging the cherished values of smaller communities they become the forerunner of new forms of cultural imperialism. Uniformity of consumption and lifestyle patterns bring both perceptible and imperceptible changes in attitudes which can erode societal identities.

Second, the issue of preserving media autonomy from media tsars where commercial economics smothers individual views and perceptions as constituting real dangers. There is no firm dividing line between media management and media operation; there is an increasing tendency for media barons to micro-manage, sometimes constituting an internal threat to media freedom.

Third, the flourishing debate particularly in the US, between Liberal bias versus Conservative bias need closer examination. Bias is necessarily a pejorative

expression but media predilection include a host of societal issues;

I Media predilection relating to forms of governance, organisations and institutions irrespective of country and social context. Given renewed global emphasis in promoting democracy as the most preferred form of governance, the criticality of challenges in enabling countries to make a non-disruptive transition from other forms of governance need empathy;

I Media predilection on preferred forms of economic organisation. While the current mantra of adopting market deregulation and increased competition for enhancing efficiencies and productivity is understandable, the role of State ownership of public goods and nature of regulatory institutions have multiple challenges. Countries with different organisational patterns need orderly transition for adopting market-based principles and the nature of transition cannot be uniform. The role of the State and parasitical organisations remain embedded in the social ethos making attitudinal changes difficult and cases of periodic market failures with serious human consequences need sensitive analysis.

I Media predilection on what is perceived to be secular attitude, conflict between minority and majority communities, issues of social hierarchy, social stratification often necessitate value judgement.

In addition to the above, exercising choice on issues which are global versus national or national versus regional or those with a dominant local pre-occupation need a depiction which can achieve appropriate balance. Furthermore, given increased competition, commercial economics drive media to seek advertisement revenues and in the process obligate them to serve corporate interests. The enticement for revenue enhancement can result in replacing societal interests with interest of special groups particularly those which constitute the source of advertisement incomes.

Related to the above is the issue concerning media sensationalism. A crime or an accident or a local event can be blown out of proportion to reflect the interest of viewers for enhancing circulation which could be disproportionate with what could be considered reasonable. The role of media advocacy versus media reporting remains opaque. The selection of news, its depiction, its profiling, its replication, result in choice options which constitute the media bias.

It is this that Eric Alterman, the author of *What Liberal Media? The Truth About Bias and the News* describes as the contradiction in choices to be made. So does the book of Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky entitled *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* when it argues “the pressure to create a stable, profitable business invariably distorts the kinds of news items reported, as well as the manner and emphasis in which they are reported. This occurs not as a result of conscious design but simply as a consequence of market selection; those businesses who happen to favour profits over news quality survive, while those that present a more accurate picture of the world tend to become marginalised.”

The classic issue of whether media merely depicts the society or society is shaped by the media will remain contested. However, with increased global integration, the seamlessness of transaction and quantum changes in technology is altering traditional media paradigms. The multiplicity of choices which newer technologies

offer, the growing power of the Internet and deeper penetration of erstwhile traditional societies create new forms of conflict. In India, increased tele-density, penetration in rural areas and rising literacy levels are significantly adding to the readership which create new options. The rapid growth of electronic media and increased readership for print media which can combine news and analysis will create both competition and synergy. The rise of regional channels and growing relevance of the vernacular press is re-shaping the context and reach of our media. Its advocacy role is being increasingly sharpened as our society adjusts to higher growth, changing consumption habits, altered expectations and varied yearning for “news”.

In the Indian context thus, media and society is entering a phase of new opportunities and challenges. The traditional equation between media and society will strive for a new dynamic equilibrium; an equilibrium in which the predilections and biases need more appropriate reconciliation. There are of course no easy answers in reconciling these contradictions.

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