

The Indian Mass Media System: Before, During and After the National Emergency

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Introduction:

The last few years have witnessed an unprecedented turn of events in the socio-political climate of India. These socio-political changes have brought about corresponding changes in the character of the Indian mass media system, especially in the freedom and independence of the Indian press. In June, 1975, Indira Gandhi's government declared a state of emergency and suspended civil liberties. Immediately after this declaration, the government tightened its controls on the Indian mass media, especially on the newspapers which had reputations of being free and lively.

In March of 1977, a new government, with Morarji Desai as the prime minister, took over the political power. During the campaign, Desai and the other leaders of his coalition made pledges to the electorate that they would restore civil liberties and freedom of the press as soon as they achieved leadership of the nation. And indeed, the general political climate of India changed when Desai's government acquired power; Desai and the others appear to have fulfilled their pledges of restoring press freedom and counteracting the damage that was done to the mass media by Indira Gandhi's government. However, the real problems of the Indian mass media which stem from flaws in the rudimentary structure and philosophy, are far from being over.

This paper, therefore will deal with the following important aspects of the recent metamorphosis of the Indian mass media; Indira

This article was written before the recent Indian elections which swept Mrs. Gandhi and the Congress Party back into power with a two-thirds majority in the 524-seat parliament.

Gandhi's methods of controlling the mass media and her concept of mass media freedom in India; the efforts of the Desai government to restore mass media freedom; and problems of the India mass media system.

Indira Gandhi and the Death of the Free Indian Press

National Emergency and Press Censorship:

During the Summer of 1975, as Indira Gandhi became increasingly more threatened by the mounting criticisms of her government, she declared a state of emergency. Immediately she took control of the press, prohibiting their reporting of all domestic and international news. The government expelled several foreign correspondents (mainly American and British) and withdrew accreditation from more than 40 Indian reporters who normally covered the capital. In recent years, this has probably been the most important development in the life of the Indian press.

From the very beginning of independent India, the Congress Party of India remained in power in one form or another until March 1977. At the inception of national independence, the country adopted democratic principles and pronounced India a democratic socialist nation. However, several incidents that occurred during Indira Gandhi's reign indicated that the country was drifting away from parliamentary democracy.

The declaration of a national emergency, which is justified under the Indian Constitution, lasted for about 19 months. The emergency was declared as a result of mounting political pressure exerted upon the government from opposing political parties which were striving to fight corruption, inflation and economic chaos in the country. Indira Gandhi's government, rather than taking this as a political challenge, resorted to declaring a national emergency and imprisoning the opposition party leaders, including all dissenting voices from the media. The fundamental rights of the Indian people were suspended, and strict controls were imposed on freedom of speech and press.

According to the Right of Freedom—Article 19(1) of the Indian Constitution, Indians have the right (a) to freedom of speech and expression, (b) to assemble peacefully and without arms, (c) to form associations or unions, (d) to move freely across the length and breadth of the country, (e) to reside or settle in any part of India, (f) to own or dispose of property, and (g) to carry on any lawful trade of occupation.¹

It is obvious that, unlike the American Constitution or others in which freedom of the press is mentioned as one of the fundamental rights, the Indian Constitution doesn't specifically mention freedom of the press. However, the fundamental Rights Clause of the Indian Constitution treats freedom of the press as an integral part of the larger "freedom of expression." Based on the First Amendment Act of 1951,

the Indian courts, in the past, have considered press freedom as a fundamental right.

The second part of Article 19 of the Indian Constitution enumerates limitations on the various types of freedom. It mentions that the "states shall be authorized to make any law restricting the exercise of the freedom of speech in the interest of the security of the state, friendly relations with foreign countries, public order, and decency and good conduct."² The states have also been authorized to restrict press freedom "in order to check slanderous articles and promotion of disaffection towards or contempt of court."³

Indira Gandhi's government use the "security of the state" and "promotion of disaffection" as its defense for imposing strict control on the press. And with the airwaves already under government ownership, Indira Gandhi successfully controlled the mass communication system in India for over a year and a half.

During censorship, most of the nation's domestic dailies, however, gave up the battle for press freedom. Their pages were "filled with fawning accounts of national events, flattering pictures of Gandhi and her ambitious son, and not coincidentally, lucrative government advertising."⁴ But two tough, prominent publishers of English-language dailies, *The Indian Express* and *The Statesman*, fought courageously against Indira Gandhi's opposition of the Indian press. Despite some bold fights and stubborn stands taken up by these publishers, it was quite clear that Indira Gandhi had as strong a grip on the Indian press as she had on Indian politics, at least during the government-imposed emergency.

India, a nation which had always cherished democratic principles and had admired Mahatma Gandhi's ideals of a democratic society, was quickly set on the road to dictatorship. For Mahatma Gandhi, freedom of the press was "a dear privilege."⁵ He urged the editors to express their ideas fearlessly:

We must devise methods of circulating our ideas unless and until the whole press becomes fearless, defies consequences and publishes ideas, even when it is in disagreement with them, just for the purpose of securing that freedom...It is a negation of one's calling for an editor to have suppressed his best thoughts.⁶

However, Indira Gandhi's call made editors suppress their best thoughts, and for the Indian mass media, freedom became a matter of history.

Methods of Press Control: Indira's Way

Like other dictators in history, Indira Gandhi's first attempt was to impose "thought control" on the populous. For her, this was to be effectuated not merely by controlling the Indian mass media but also by moulding the media to her own purpose. It has now become a well-known fact that during the emergency Indira Gandhi had a firm grip

on the Indian mass media. This was especially true since radio and television in India are government owned and operated; for Indira, there was the simple matter of controlling the newspapers in order to achieve a total control of the mass media. She used at least three methods in manipulating the newspapers: (1) allocation of government advertising; (2) shotgun merger of the news agencies; and (3) use of fear-arousal techniques on newspaper publishers, journalists and individual shareholders.

The Indian newspapers depend a great deal on governmental advertising; without such revenues, it would be difficult for many Indian newspapers to stay in business. Unfortunately, this has kept many of them vulnerable to government manipulation. The large scale possibility of such manipulation, however, was not fully demonstrated until Indira Gandhi's government decided to take advantage of this unique circumstance. In the beginning of censorship, when a few leading newspapers such as *The Indian Express* and *The Statesman* refused to abide the governmental censorship, the government withdrew its advertising support from these newspapers. Later on, this type of financial castigation was used on several other rebellious newspapers.

The second and perhaps more profound way of manipulating the news flow resulted from the governmental decision to bring about a shot-gun merger of the four privately-owned Indian news agencies; the main purpose behind this merger was to alter the management and control of the Indian news agencies and thus to control much of the content of the leading newspapers. Since these agencies had been acting as the gatekeepers of information, it was essential for Indira Gandhi and her Information and Broadcasting Minister, Mr. V.C. Shukla, to control the gatekeepers. To effect such a merger, the government carried through various successful tactics. First of all, pressure was put on the members of boards of these agencies. Then the financial squeeze was applied to the agencies themselves by withholding governmental subsidy. Thirdly, the government introduced the threat of cutting-off the teleprinter services, the lifelines of a news agency. For example, the government-owned Post and Telegraph Department ordered to impose a suspension of services to the United News of India if it resisted the merger. The manipulation of these four news agencies was so effective that hardly a voice was raised to resist the governmental perfidity. Soon after this, Shukla reported to the Indian parliament that these four news agencies accepted the merger "voluntarily."⁷

A third and an equally effective method applied by Indira Gandhi was to use fear-arousal techniques on the newspaper publishers, editors, reporters and shareholders. Such techniques were imposed by making false charges with regard to tax arrears, possible reductions in newsprint quotas, imprisonment of publishers and their immediate

families, threats of shutting down the press, and removal of governmental housing and other facilities for Delhi-based journalists.⁸

In any event, after 19 months of national emergency and the control of the mass media, Indira Gandhi became so confident of her continued success that she called for a parliamentary election in March of 1977. Simultaneously, she also removed press censorship. The results of the national election, however, turned out to be frustrating for Indira Gandhi, her son, as well as for some of her closest advisers. An overwhelming public outcry against the atrocities of Indira Gandhi's regime brought about a coalition government of several small political parties. The effects of the Desai government in regard to restoring freedom of the mass media in India will be discussed in the latter section of the paper.

Indira Gandhi and the Free Press System in India

Since India achieved its independence from Great Britain in 1947, the country has struggled hard to maintain a free and lively press system. Some even believe that freedom of the press in India has steadily increased during the years following the achievement of independence.⁹ While referring to the lack of freedom in most of the third world countries, Francis Williams wrote that, except for India, the prospect for press freedom in most of Asia was bleak.¹⁰ Others like Passin,¹¹ Grimes,¹² Rivett,¹³ and Davison,¹⁴ have also praised the degree of freedom enjoyed by the Indian newspapers. Richard Nixon, in a 1969 study place India among the top "three" along with Singapore, Malaya and Lebanon.¹⁵

India is the world's largest democracy. Therefore, any change in its press freedom can potentially exert a significant influence in other parts of the world. For example, according to a 1975 survey released by Freedom House, a non-profit organization, the percentage of the world's population living in societies with a free press declined from 35 to 19.8 percent in 1975. The principal reason for this decline was the imposition of press censorship in India on June 26, 1975. The report of this survey mentioned, "India's severe restrictions of press and civil rights reduced by 40 percent the number of people in the world living in a democratic society... That decline represents the worst loss since the organization (Freedom House) began assessing political and civil liberty 24 years ago."¹⁶

Indira Gandhi's repression of the Indian mass media didn't only reduce the number of people living in free societies but also strengthened the existing trend of increasing governmental control of mass media in the countries of Asia, Africa and South America. "India was the last of the major poor nations of the world to succumb to this trend, having previously been a democratic island in a sea of authoritarian and military regimes."¹⁷

Indira Gandhi's justification for the repression of the Indian mass media was based on three major assumptions. (1) economic

productivity and social justice are more important than civil liberties and freedom of expression: (2) the press in India was acting in a manner that seriously hindered the state in its efforts to promote economic productivity and social justice; and (3) a drastic contraction of civil liberties and press rights will advance the state's ability to promote those causes.¹⁸

Commenting on Indira Gandhi's rationale for press censorship, Henry Hart wrote:

...We do think it premature to pose a choice between freedom and economic justice before we know whether the immediate contraction of civil liberties and suspension of elections will further economic productivity and redistribution. This is a predictive question to which social scientists have their contributions to make.¹⁹

Indira Gandhi's action in this regard does raise an intriguing question. If the control of the press was so vital to creating a climate propitious for rapid economic development, then, why did she wait for over a decade to impose control on the press.

Actually, a government White Paper that discussed misuse of mass media during the emergency provides a series of evidence contradicting Indira Gandhi's so-called efforts for enhancing growth and social justice. According to this report, some of the major reasons for imposing strict control on the Indian mass media was: to stamp out dissent; present the "positive picture" of Indira Gandhi; and build up her son, Sanjay Gandhi, as the great leader and her worthy successor.²⁰

Restructuring the Mass Media: From Indira to Morarji

Soon after the government of Prime Minister Morarji Desai (popularly known as "Janta Party" government) took over the political power in India, it announced three distinct steps toward restoring freedom of the Indian mass media. These were: (1) to establish a committee to study misuse of mass media during the internal emergency; (2) to establish a working group to study the question of converting All India Radio and Doordarshan (television) into autonomous institutions; and (3) to establish a committee to study the feasibility of restructuring the existing news agency (Samachar).

On May 21, 1977, a one-man committee was established; the committee was headed by Mr. K.K. Das, a former secretary of the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting. The committee was asked to look into the following matters: misuse of censorship provisions; harassment of journalists; allegations in regard to certification of films; manipulation of mass media including news agencies; and other relevant matters. The Das committee's report, based primarily on official records, was submitted to the government on June 22, 1977.

The evidence presented in this report suggests strongly that Indira

Gandhi's government made a widespread misuse of the mass media.²¹

As mentioned earlier, radio and television in India are government owned and operated. Because of this, the broadcast media succumbed to Indira Gandhi's control much before the print media. A White Paper on Misuse of Mass Media indicates clearly that Indira Gandhi abused All India Radio and Doordarshan (television) for blatant partisan and personal ends mainly in order to crush dissent and promote personality cults.²²

In pursuance of its election promise to free broadcast media from official tutelage, the Janta Party government appointed a 12-member working group headed by B.G. Verghese, a famous journalist, in August of 1977. The working group submitted its report to the government in June of 1978. It was recommended in this report that both radio and television broadcasting in India should be placed under a single autonomous corporation called National Broadcasting Trust (NBT) with a highly decentralized structure. The working group noted that the establishment of the trust should take place by an Act of Parliament, pending a constitutional amendment, to ensure the organization's autonomy and independence.

The working group also proposed that a 12-member board of trustees should be placed at the apex of the National Broadcasting Trust. The trustees were to be appointed by the president on the recommendation to the prime minister from a list of names forwarded to him by a nominating panel consisting of the Chief Justice of India, the Lok Pal and the chairman of the Union Public Service Commission.

In addition, a licensing board has also been proposed for issuing licenses to franchise stations, such as universities. The licenses would be issued for three years and would be renewable at the end of every three years.

In order to insure financial security and autonomy of the organization, the committee recommended that initially, the government should make up the revenue deficit for five years. Thereafter, the NBT should be self-sufficient (the committee doesn't make it very clear how NBT can become self-sufficient) or should raise additional resources by charging for broadcast time made available to various users, including the central and state governments.²³

It is interesting to note that the question of providing a complete autonomy to the broadcast media in India was debated even before the last national emergency. About 13 years ago, when Mrs. Gandhi was the Information and Broadcasting Minister, a similar commission (known as Chanda Commission) was established to examine the problems of radio broadcasting in India and to make recommendations to the government. At that time also, Chanda Commission had recommended an autonomous corporation for All India Radio. However, no concrete action was taken on this

recommendation.²⁴

The critics of the Indian mass media have maintained consistently that the broadcast media must be kept free from governmental influence. However, such need was not realized fully by the public at large until Indira Gandhi's actions shattered the credibility of the broadcast media. It should be mentioned, however, that an autonomous corporation alone will not be a panacea; the broadcast media must be insured of a true independence. It must be kept aloof from governmental intrusion and exploitation.

A third and an important step taken by the Desai government in a wave to restore mass media freedom has been related to the restructuring of the only news agency called Samachar. Through some shrewd political and economic maneuverability, Indira Gandhi's government merged the four privately-owned Indian news agencies. The main purpose of this merger for Indira Gandhi was to control the leading daily newspapers in India. These Indian newspapers, like the newspapers of other countries, were dependent upon the services provided by the four news agencies. The merger actually eliminated professional competition among news agencies and created an absolute monopoly by Samachar.

In view of the monopolistic nature of Samachar, Desai's government appointed a 12-member committee on news agencies which was headed by Kuldip Nayar, a noted India journalist. The committee which submitted its report sometime ago, has proposed two separate news agencies—Shandesh in English and Varta in Hindi. These two news agencies would be carved out of Samachar. Varta has also been proposed to provide news services for India's several regional language newspapers. This proposal has suffered from some harsh criticism. The critics believe that the creation of two separate news agencies for two different language newspapers wouldn't encourage sufficient competition among the news agencies. In their views, there should be at least two news agencies within each language newspaper. It seems essential that the restructuring of Samachar must generate sufficient amount of healthy competition among the news agencies. Therefore, Nayar's committee report does not fulfill the requirement for creating competitive news agencies.

Taking into account the effects of the Desai government for remodelling the Indian mass media, it seems crystal clear that the government had embarked on some of the essential initial steps. However, these steps are still in their infancies. Thus, the task of creating a free and independent mass media system in India is yet to be accomplished.

Problems of the Indian Mass Media System: An Overview

It would be erroneous to blame Indira Gandhi entirely for the recent upheaval in the Indian mass media system. The mass media problems

in India are of perennial nature; Indira Gandhi, therefore, simply exploited the intrinsic weaknesses of a system that is built on a vulnerable foundation. More specifically, the Indian mass media system has suffered from the following four major flaws: (1) a lack of well defined national mass communication philosophy and policies; (2) a lack of public awareness of the importance of free mass media in a democratic process of nation building; (3) diffidence of commitment on the part of publishers and editors to oppose truculent attacks by government; and (4) mass media dependence on government for newsprint and advertising.

The Indian press system was born in 1780 when James Hickey started his *Bengal Gazette* in Calcutta. The broadcasting system, on the other hand, didn't begin until 1927. Both systems of mass communication were started on a footing that was free of governmental intrusion.

The press system, that participated vigorously in fighting against an alien authority (British rule), became the main instrument for Indian social reformers and nationalists to gain national independence. Although at that time, as it is even today, it was an elite press, limited circulation, yet it affected a wider range of audience including the government. The early philosophy of the press, thus, was based on a definite cause i.e., to gain national freedom.

Although the press system has developed significantly since its early days, it has failed to emerge with a cohesive philosophy and principles that are vital to maintaining its own heritage. In absence of this, the Indian press system left its door wide open for governmental intrusion which proved, at last, perilous to maintaining its freedom and responsibility.

The Indian broadcasting system, which was started as a private venture, didn't last beyond 1930. In 1932, the government decided to run radio stations and has continued since then. Television broadcasting, that started on an experimental basis in Delhi in 1959, simply followed in the footsteps of radio broadcasting system.

The Indian broadcasting system has suffered the vagaries of governmental manipulation much more than the press system. Consequently, the development of the broadcasting system has not only been slow but has occurred in an atmosphere free of concrete philosophy and policies.

The lack of a well defined national mass communication philosophy and policies, therefore, has created meager public support for a strong mass media system in India. This is further corroborated when one examines the causes of lambent behaviour of the Indian public during a polemic censorship imposed on the mass media by Indira Gandhi's government.

Since its inception, the India mass media have been tuned to the needs of a small intelligentsia rather than the masses of the people.

This seemingly has also contributed to a tenuous support by the Indian public for a free and responsible mass media system. Since the Indian mass media have been the preserve of the intelligentsia, there is little wonder that the media failed to muster significant public support against Indira Gandhi's press censorship.

The fault, however, doesn't lie on the Indian mass media as much as it does on the government with regard to a lack of national mass communication philosophy and policies. The government, in the name of planned social and economic development, has made the Indian mass media overdependent on governmental decisions. This, consequently, has made the media vulnerable to manipulations by the people in political power. Indira Gandhi's successful control of the mass media therefore, becomes a case in point.

The government has attempted to control the press indirectly in two major ways: (1) allocation of newsprint; and (2) governmental advertising. As early as 1965, Seth argued that in many underdeveloped countries with lesser foreign exchange resources the press is not as neglected as it is by the Indian government, and that the control on newsprint is a control on information.²⁵

For example, in 1972, Indira Gandhi tried to limit the amount of newsprint used by the larger English medium dailies. She also attempted in a variety of other ways, to restrict the development of the "Jute Press" or commercial press.²⁶ The "Jute Press" newspaper that successfully fought the 1972 restrictions argues that this limitation would "cut at the roots of democracy." Since the large newspapers were "the only medium" of mass communication in India, and "the only counterbalance to the ruling party's views."²⁷

For Indian newspapers, the government is the single largest advertiser. Advertising and editorial material are often in a 50-50 ration in many papers, though they vary from about 40 percent in small papers to over 60 percent in bigger ones.²⁸

Chancel Sarkar, criticizing the governmental manipulation of the press through advertising, wrote in 1965 that "government's advertising policy has undertones of political pressure and indirect control."²⁹ As mentioned earlier, Indira Gandhi refused to jump on her bandwagon. For example, when the *Indian Express* chain voiced opposition to her policies, its advertising suddenly dropped from forty column to seven column.³⁰

Summary and Conclusions

The leaders of the Desai government took the first step to redeem their pledge for restoring freedom of the mass media by Indira Gandhi and her colleagues. They helped develop several proposals and recommendations with regard to restructuring the news agencies and broadcast media.

Desai's government set up the second Press Commission (the first Press Commission was set up in 1953) which submitted its report in 1979. The commission examined the pattern of relationship between the government and the press—particularly in regard to access of information. It also explored the means of safeguarding the freedom and independence of the press against pressures of all kinds including governmental pressures.³¹

However, it seems paramount for future governments that in order to create a free and independent mass media system, it must work beyond the simple fulfillment of electoral pledges. It is quite obvious that in no society, including the United States, does support for the freedom of mass media come from the general populous; rather, such support emanates primarily from elites, opinion leaders and relatively high status groups. Future Indian governments therefore, must strive to muster support for a free mass media system from such groups. Their efforts should be directed at achieving a mass media system not just for today, but for the future as well. Their goal must reflect a total commitment to a mass media system that would be able to apostate undesirable governmental pressure, irrespective of political parties that may be in power. In a parliamentary democracy, such commitments are vital to insuring freedom for the mass media.

Footnotes

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