

Whose Media, Whose Freedom?

*A presentation by P V Satheesh, Director, Deccan Development Society, Hyderabad, India
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I must begin with an unqualified apology for addressing this august assembly on a slightly negative note. Having been a media practitioner and a media teacher in the past and currently a development activist working with some of the most impoverished and marginalized communities in South India, I cannot but ask the question, *Whose Media and Whose Freedom?* Over the next few minutes let me clarify what I mean by this phrase.

I come from India which is undeniably, a vibrant democracy, where nearly 750 million voters are engaged in the largest adult franchise on the planet. As a voting population this is 30 times more than the total Australian population.

Media has been an integral part of this system of democracy. India's freedom struggle that started in early 1900 was inextricably linked to the institution of media which fiercely fought alongside the freedom fighters for the country's independence. When the country gained freedom in 1947 Indian media was gratefully accepted as the Fourth Estate and Freedom of Expression was a Right enshrined in the Indian constitution under Article 19A. Some great personalities raised free India's media to glorious heights by articulating their concerns, analysis and very high standards of journalism.

Since the mid 1990s India saw a veritable media explosion. This explosion can be understood through a bit of number crunching.

- As on date the country has nearly 450 television channels and 74000 registered newspapers; 320 radio stations.
- Nearly 100 million newspaper copies are sold every day in India.
- 120 Indian million homes have TV with a viewership of nearly 420 million.
- Indian media is generally seen as very influential and powerful. Particularly the TV. In the last five years TV has been able to force a number of reviews of the judicial verdicts.
- But in the midst of this freedom and power enjoyed by the media, there is a discomfort that it has become too exclusivist on the one hand and retrograde on the other. It is seen as an extremely elite oriented and market controlled industry with only a passing concern for the majority of Indian population.
- These numbers give us an illusion of diversity and pluralism. But in reality, especially the TV serves a non diverse and non pluralistic point of view monoculturing the minds of its viewers. And in many cases trivializing issues.
- Local and rural communities, the poor and farmers have completely lost their space in this media. This number accounts for nearly 650 million people. Hence the increase in the channels has very little direct impact on the projection of the issues that has a bearing on the poor and excluded sections of the society.

- India has a very large number of people who can be categorized as excluded and marginalized. They include dalits and the indigenous people. Nearly 200 million or 17% of Indian population is dalits and 80 million are *adivasis*, the indigenous people. Together they make for close to 25% of the Indian population.
- About 360 million women live in Indian villages.

Most of this population has no voice in the media. That is close to about 450 million people. More than double the population of Australia. Imagine that the total Australian population has been shut out of its media. What will that speak of the credibility of the media? Regional media has become the copycat of the big media. They set the agenda, they frame the rules and they play by it. A juggernaut as it were.

This has led to the question *Whose Media, Whose Freedom?* Unless the media starts taking the majority of the Indian population very seriously by giving them a large space, media freedom itself becomes meaningless to a very large section of Indian people.

It is also being acutely felt in recent times that if the rural people continue to be forced to stay only as consumers of media that is produced for them by others, the media freedom will lose its value for a major section of population. And if the big media keeps on deciding what people should know, that knowledge becomes useless.

One way out of this problem is seen as making rural people active producers of media and liberate themselves from the position of being passive consumers.

This has resulted in a new emphasis on Community Media. If community media does not become the face of our nations, the entire force of democracy will be lost.

There is very little of Community TV in India. Especially the ones that are owned by the marginalised.

I have the privilege to have established and working closely with the first Community Media Group called DDS Community Media Trust in South India, composed completely of rural dalit women, all of who come from economically very poor backgrounds and are non literate.

I also have the privilege of setting up the first Community Radio in India called *Sangham Radio*. It is an all women, all dalit radio station, directly offering a solution to two major problems of exclusion I discussed earlier.

I must pay a tribute to the UNESCO for supporting this media effort of ours in the mid '90s. In fact when the then UNESCO Asia Pacific Communication Advisor Mr James Bentley sat down with the DDS community of rural women in a small village called Pastapur in Andhra Pradesh in South India, and discussed about the need for a Radio of Their Own, the women came up with a set of amazing arguments. When juxtaposed against the Toronto Platform for Action adopted in 1995 on 'Women and the Media,

Access to Expression and Decision-making' what the non literate women in Pastapur were saying was incredibly similar.

The Community Media effort at DDS was born out of these consultations. Most of the women who run this media today are non literate, belong to the classical less than \$2 a day earning populations.

The issues being addressed by these groups have started redefining what a free media can do for those who are generally excluded from the influential section of the population and the larger media. So opening up closed spaces for people, has, more than empowering them, has empowered the media itself.

Right now in India there are a total of 13 stations which can be called community radio stations run by civil society organizations that directly work with communities.

This new media owned and managed by the local rural communities is also setting up new signposts for media freedom. The issues they are tackling, the articulations they are making, the perspectives they are bringing are so refreshingly different. In fact through their own media freedom, they are seeking out a larger freedom for their cultural identity, their linguistic identity, their food and farming sovereignty and a host of such issues which are sidelined by the mainstream media.

Through their articulations the communities of the grassroots media can address the issues of environmental, ethical and climate crises that the DG UNESCO flagged this morning. Stuff that the mainstream media does not even understand the concept of, let alone articulate it. Even when the mainstream talks about climate crisis it varies so dramatically from a community perspective on climate crisis

The communities of the disprivileged are a source of enormous knowledge which they constantly share with others through their media. This knowledge is alien to the mainstream. Therefore given a chance the Community Media can create a different knowledge society that is beyond the confines of the computer monitors of the experts who form the major source for the mainstream media.

I plead with all of you to tune into this new freedom of media which has a huge bearing on the populations of the South. And make them active partners in securing freedom of their communities a larger context of freedom for the excluded peoples of the world.

Right to Information is a radical parliamentary legislation in India. Through the help of this Act anyone can demand information from the Government and can get it within a couple of weeks. Refusal to give out the information sought can result in a conviction and imprisonment of the government official who refuses to provide the information. As speakers in this morning plenary said, RTI cannot be allowed to be appropriated by media for itself. It has to be the Right of Citizens. This comes as a huge boon for media freedom, especially for the community media which may never acquire the power and clout of the major media in securing information especially from the government sources.

RTI and Community media together might be able to provide such information to the communities and bring a new freedom that the small people never enjoyed before.