

Indian Society and Media: Reading and Understanding

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Abstract

India is the second largest country on earth with a society which has a large number of divisions. Hence, the structure of the society is a steep one vertically and broad horizontally. An attempt will be made to point out to some frames which will be able to help us to read, understand and analyze the Indian society. Some of the frames and or approaches which will be discussed briefly in this session are: Karl Marx's Historical Materialism frame; Richard Hoggart's frame to analyze from the point of human relationships that exist in a society; Raymond Williams' proposal in the Long Revolution and other references; and The critique of William's position by E.P Thompson There will be an attempt to position or locate the media in the Indian society. This will be done in the second half of the paper.

Key words: Indian Society, Media, Political Power, Vulnerability

INTRODUCTION

India with a population of 1.3 billion is the second largest country on earth. It is a complex and a layered society from many perspectives: urban and rural, educated and uneducated, disease and health, rich and poor et cetera. Its huge diversification makes for one difficult to size it up. The variation within one variable or element is enormous. Overall, one can conclude that it is a society which has a large number of divisions. It has a mechanism by which the layers are divided further and continue to do so. Hence, the structure of the society is a steep one vertically and broad horizontally. It is a country which changes

constantly but remains at the same spot. *Status Quo* is the qualifying status of this nation. More changes mean more the same. How to read such a society? Where to begin?

India has certain attributes of all other society. Some of these are: It is a democratic republic; It has a written constitution; It has completed 16 general parliamentary elections so far after gaining independence in 1947; It is a secular state but citizens can practice their own religions; et cetera. It is difficult to read, and therefore, to understand. An attempt will be made to point out to some frames which will be able to help us to read, understand and analyze the Indian society.

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- Karl Marx's Historical Materialism frame;
- Richard Hoggart's frame to analyze from the point of human relationships that exist in a society;
- Raymond Williams' proposal in *the Long Revolution* and other references; and
- The critique of William's position by E.P Thompson

There will be an attempt to position or locate the media in the Indian society. This will be done in the second half of the paper.

I. Marx's Historical Materialism

One frame that the sociologists and cultural Studies experts employ to read and understand a society is Karl Marx's theory. In simple term, Marx said that capitalism is an economic system that exploits the labourers (termed as proletariat) by the owners of the capital (termed as bourgeoisie) for profit. Because of this exploitation and alienation of the proletariat, there will be a time when they would organize themselves and dislodge the bourgeoisie from power through a revolution. Thus they will capture the state power and bring equity and equality. This was found to be true in one case. This was in Bolshevik Revolution in Russia in 1917. In all the other cases in 1848, known as the year of

war, in the European continent, the proletariat could not be successful. The problem is not with the historical materialism of Marx but with the understanding of it. One needs to contextualize this at a time and location. It was also understood that capitalism would remain fixed with all its characteristics. It is not. The grouping of both the classes of proletariat and bourgeoisie are not monolithic. They are composed of people having a psyche/ mind each. This psyche/ mind cannot function uniformly like inanimate objects. As people change, the changes are also called for in the methods and approaches.

Moreover, capitalism was able to provide space for the proletariat, known at a later time *working class* to include people who had different attributes other than the factory workers, strictly known and defined as the proletariat. The working class also had *surplus value* and *surplus time* to lead their lives differently. These diversifications of the working class would never bring oneness like that of the proletariat.

In addition, since there were many values and practices of bourgeoisie adopted by the working class, therefore, the question of organizing the working class (read proletariat) has become next to impossible as the exploitation by the bourgeoisie was never felt by the working class as that was by the proletariat. (Lawrence, 2017)

However, one needs to remember the teaching of Marx: that the society is

layered and there is exploitation at each layer. This awareness has helped the development of perspectives and theories in Sociology, Economics, Political Science and Philosophy. All these disciplines were able to conduct studies to find new areas of the investigation after Marx's *Historical Materialism*.

RICHARD HOGGART

Another way of understanding the society, particularly the Indian society is what Richard Hoggart, the founder of *the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies* said that it is **Fate** that governs the activities of the people. People think that the contours of their lives have been pre-decided. They need to accept life as it comes. The basic philosophy of Fate is: How things happen to the lives of the people, and not how they can make things happen in their lives. Richard Hoggart came from a working-class family background in Leeds mostly inhabited by the factory workers. The residents there had little aspirations to come out of the vicious circle that their lives were in. Marx believed in opposite that the people must take charge of their lives. A highly religious – minded nation with strong belief in rebirth, India is an apt country which fits into Hoggart's frame. The citizens here believe that they need to go through multiple re-births to be able to get free of the life - cycle. They strongly believe in **Fate**. (Lawrence, 2017)

Richard Hoggart also believes that life is inclusive of all the daily activities which people undertake — these are high as well

as mundane. But these form a structure for people to be identified with.

RAYMOND WILLIAMS

Raymond Williams in his book *The Long Revolution* proposed a very ordinary way of looking at the society. He said that people in communities share some common practices and they consider these to be the norms for them to be followed and have an integrated life with the sound relationship among themselves. He termed this as a **Whole Way of Life**.

He also said that there are many practices of various kinds. But no single practice is a determinant of character of a society. The society evolves naturally. But he said that there are elite (rich) practices and practices of the poor. The relationships between these two groups take shape over a period of time with **the structure of feeling**.

Williams came from a small town near Wales. He grew up in the community that had these traits of low middle class. Economic factor was not governing the structure of the society, nor the class. He was an inside man, hence he was more influenced by what he saw and felt. The structure of feeling comes out from that lived experience. William emphasized that one needs to see the society holistically. He termed it to see as a whole way of life. (Lawrence, 2017)

E.P. THOMPSON

However, his critic E.P. Thompson, in his book *The Making of the English*

Working Class said that the society of Raymond Williams was evolutionary. People within a society interact among themselves and surge ahead. According to him, in William's society, there is no struggle — the society moves placidly like a flow. Whereas, he emphasizes, that the life in a society is full of struggle and disruptions. It is these disruptions that make the society develop and grow. He said that instead of a *whole way of life*, it should be a *whole way of struggle*. He termed his society as a fruit of struggle, whereas Williams said that it is evolutionary.

But both of them were not in favour of Marx's analytical idea of base-superstructure and revolution. The society is much more complex. These complexities cannot be encompassed within a simple formula of base – superstructure. Williams while talking about the complexities of the society mentioned about three conditions existing at the same time: *dominant, residual and emergent*. The society always will have a dominant force which would be visible and felt. At the same time, there will be many residual aspects from the past existing in the society. These cannot be and should not be ignored as these may contribute to the formation of the new society and culture. The emergent society will still be nebulous, yet to take a concrete shape and appear as a dominant one. Say for instance, when we talk about the generation next, or the *internet- native* versus *internet migrant*; say religion — Marx completely ruled out any place of

religion in the emergent societies, as he termed it as opium. But, religion and religious feeling have been part and parcel of all the emergent society and have modified itself to fit into the emergent society. He, therefore, was very clear that analyzing a society or reading a society would require consideration of both economic and social structure and practices and all other practices.

We need to understand that all the dominant practices could not wipe out the other lesser practices. The non- dominant groups and little cultures which make the society will have to be given space and these are to be given enough of physical, social and psychological space to be stable for growth. The **Melting pot** has become possible in the USA for this approach. (Lawrence, 2017) So, from these thoughts and perspectives of Marx, Richard Hoggart, Raymond Williams, and E.P. Thompson we need to understand that:

- Reading a society and a culture is difficult not because it is rocket science but because our mental frame is not broad enough. The mind always absorbs the practices of the majority and powerful. Therefore, while reading a society and a culture, we need to see and consider all the elements holistically.
- Marxism alerted us that there are always exploitations. The powerful and, the owners of the resources would always move for more profit at the expense of the weak, the marginalized and the dispossessed.

Our society is a prime example of a society that is acutely replete with exploitation, dishonesty and violence. I had a visiting professor in the department from the University of Turin, Italy. His assessment was that India is one of the most violent societies on earth.

- From the discussion, it was also found that societies, in general believe in **Fate**. Our society again is an example of that as our people believe in rebirth and all their struggles are because of their wrong doings in the past life.
- Society and culture are to be looked into with three broad conditions: dominant, residual and the emergent. There is a complex flow of these in a society. However, many times, it can be concluded that India lives in the past and is comfortable to be in that mode. We, as a nation, believe that the golden age has happened and it was in the past.
- The current image of the society is very dismal. There are certain parameters which a modern society considers to assess the quality of a society.
- Health budget for 2017 —————
2.27%
- Education budget for 2017 —————
3.8 % (6% suggested by Kothari Commission)
- Homeless people as of 2017 ———
1.77 million
- Illiterate people as of 2017 —————
287 million (37% of the world) (PTI, 2014)

II. MEDIA

The article **19 (1) a** of the Indian Constitution has given us “... the right to freedom of speech and expression.” This includes the press freedom. The press (all media) is free to inform and educate the citizens.

However, there are problems. In a report by an international and credible organization **Reporters without Borders** has put India at the 136th rank out of 180 countries in the World Press Freedom Index. India was at 133rd rank last year. So it has slipped further by three ranks in a year. This ranking speaks itself about the state of affairs. India has 798 TV channels. It circulates 100 million newspapers daily. These may show the largeness of the number. But the ranking reflects the quality of the papers. Many poor and small countries are way ahead of India like Costa Rica (6th), Uruguay(25th), Ghana (26th), South Africa (31st), Haiti (53rd), Mongolia (69th), Malawi (70th) , Bhutan (84th), Brazil (103th), Nepal (100th), Afghanistan (120th), etc. (2016 World Press Freedom Index, 2017)

This is definitely not a position which can make a nation proud, particularly when India claims to be the largest democratic nation on earth. Democracy and free press go hand in hand. Press freedom ensures democracy, and the quality of democracy is dependent on the

freedom of press. The **Reporters without Borders** wrote in its India report:

“With Hindu nationalists trying to purge all manifestations of anti-national thought from the national debate, self-censorship is growing in the mainstream media. Journalists are increasingly the targets of online smear campaigns by the most radical nationalists, who vilify them and even threaten physical reprisals,” the report said. (<https://scroll.in/latest/835698/india-ranks-136-on-world-press-freedom-index-slips-three-places-since-2016>)

As earlier stated that the politics and media have interpenetrated in each other’s domain, particularly political power has engulfed the press freedom, thereby weakening its resolve to carry out its social responsibility with corresponding authority. The ownership of the media platforms is the key issue today to ascertain the status of the press as an independent institution.

THE NEXUS BETWEEN POLITICAL POWER AND MEDIA HOUSES

Let us have a look at the ownership of some of the news channels. The owners are the political leaders, political relatives or the political parties. (Thakur, 2013)

- (The then) Congress health minister Himanta Biswa Sarma’s wife Rinki Bhuyan is the chairperson of News Live and Rang.
- In Karnataka, tourism minister Janardhana Reddy and health minister

Sriramulu Reddy own Janashri along with a couple of newspapers.

- Kasturi TV is owned by former chief minister H.D. Kumaraswamy.
- Suvarna TV of the Asianet group is owned by Rajya Sabha MP Rajeev Chandrashekhar.
- Sakshi TV is owned by Jagan Mohan Reddy along with NTV and TV5 in Andhra Pradesh.
- Studio N is owned by Narne Srinivasa Rao, a businessman related to N. Chandrababu Naidu.
- Odisha TV is owned by Baijayant Panda of the BJD. Other channels in Orissa are also owned by the politicians
- Indiavision in Kerala is owned by Muslim League Secretary M.K. Muneer.
- In West Bengal, CPI (M) controls TV-24 Ghanta. Trinamool Congress has Kolkata TV.
- Sukhbir Singh Badal owns PTC and PTC News in Punjab along with PTC Punjabi and PTC Chak De.

The nexus between the politicians and the newspaper is strong. Aditya Thakur in his article in hillpost.in lists the following newspapers which support political parties in one way or the other.

- *The Tribune*: It is known to be a pro-Congress newspaper.
- *The Pioneer*: It is a pro-BJP and pro right-wing newspaper.

- *The Statesman*: It is a left-wing anti-establishment newspaper.
- *The Indian Express*: It split into two newspapers. The old Indian Express is now pro-Congress, whereas, the New Indian Express supports the right-wing ideologies.
- *The Hindustan Times*: It is a pro-Congress newspaper
- *The Times of India*: Though a nationalist newspaper, it is a pro-Congress paper.

Another phenomenon that has become a new normal is **Paid News**. Aditya Thakur in hillpost .com writes, "It is evident that the business of news has completely taken over the social service part of news. Paid news is not a secluded event that happens now and then, but rather it has become the norm. When political news is just paid advertising, it is no different in business, Bollywood and sports news as well. As it is most news channels, newspapers, media houses and publishing houses are owned or controlled by politicians of different parties."

MEDIA AS AGENTS OF POWER

From this one can deduce that the social responsibility of the press as a duty is lost to the business interest of the media and owners have blessed the new era of journalism.

The line between the social duties of the media and political interest has been blurred. The two now set the political and economic agenda of the society. In reality,

the media has become the agents of power as stated by J. Herbert Altschull.

The issues to be covered and how much of these are to be covered or not to cover at all are decided jointly by the owner and the political agencies. Such coverage only serves the interests of the elite and powerful in the society. The press over a period of time has become totally subservient to the political authority of the country.

Therefore, any reading of the society and understanding of the same will be misleading. Media do not reflect the struggle of the society. The cases in point are demonetization, GST, and suicide cases of the farmers across the country. (Altschull,H.J.,1984)

IN-HOUSE CULTURE OF PLATFORMS

In addition to this development in the arena of media and fall out in social responsibility, there is another aspect which now acts as a predicament to social responsibility for media. It is the in-house culture of media houses.

The coverage of an event goes through several stages before it is published. Reporting is only a part of an event before it becomes a news item. There are two broad principles that work in this process: i) the ideology/ philosophy of the organization are kept uppermost in the mind of the journalists. What to report? How to report? What to highlight while reporting? What not to report? All these are guided by the ideology of the organization. So, from the beginning, the

ideology starts working on the reportage and thereby the political tilt gets embedded in the report itself. The other important principle point is: ii) the professional method of reporting. These are established norms and structure that the professionals of any media organization follow, such as how to report a news item, the structure of it, etc. Therefore, there are various structures that have evolved over a time and have been accepted as a formal structure. These restrict the professionals to innovate or try other alternatives if there are any. (Hall. et.al)

There is one more aspect in the guidelines of reportage. It is the selection of items. Those who are familiar with the working of a media organization, particularly a news organization, would know that a large number of items are not picked up for reporting at all. Those that are reported are modified to suit the ideology of the organization and this directs the decision makers to place the items in the newspaper. Therefore, selection, as well as, placement of the item is an important in-house cultural aspect of the organization. (Hall.et.al)

While processing reports for publication, the media persons and journalists pay attention to contextualize the items, so that the published items would make sense to the audience. The audience is the crucial components of the whole process of item selection, modification and consumption. Many a time the media persons assume the

characteristics of the people, audience and social norms without investigating into these. This assumption may mislead the journalists and media persons; and therefore, create misconception among the people. Again the responsibility of media is not served.

The time-tested qualities of news such as *impartiality, balance and objectivity* - are all guided by the owners. The ideology of the owner determines the practices of a media organization. The ideologies decide what is significant and how it is to be established. The overarching impact of ownership guides the whole production of news and its publication. One, therefore, can safely conclude that all the values of news item like transparency, impartiality, balance are artificially determined. No consideration of social responsibility and duties to the public in general is made. The media has reached a point where it can be anything but objective.

VULNERABILITY OF THE NEWSPAPERS

The current political and social atmosphere is not conducive enough to report the facts and communicate the reality to the audience. If one does not tread the path that has been laid out, one is in danger of getting summarily wiped out. Recently, in '*the wire*' site (<https://thewire.in>) in new media, one could hear the story of one Santosh Yadav who used to report for *Dainik Chattisgarh* and *Dainik Nav Bharat Times*. He reported

on an incident that occurred in September 2015 in which the Naxalites blasted a convoy carrying the Congress Party members, many happened to be senior members of the party. Mr. Yadav got the news of the blast from the police —but later he was hounded by the police saying that he got the news from the Naxalites and was charged as Naxal sympathizer. After 522 days of incarceration in jail, he was granted the bail in February this year. The case is on. He has to present himself to the local police station regularly. He was beaten up in the jail several times. He has been writing about lack of food, medical facilities, and roads in the naxal afflicted areas. He reported repeatedly about the absence of even minimum development in these areas.

The story of Santosh Yadav as presented in *the wire* in the new media site on 17th April 2017 elaborates the state of affairs of social responsibility of media in our country.

There are some major decisions that the governments take at the state and central level... such as recent decisions of *demonetization*. There have been merits and demerits of such decisions. The media have had sporadic reporting about the fall out as well as the benefits that occurred from such decisions. But no comprehensive logical information and the analysis thereof were presented in the mainstream media in a sustained manner. This is an example of a missed opportunity for properly educating the public about issues by the media. The lost jobs as a

result of such decisions and the distress that people go through never find space and time in the mainstream media. Again, the media never informed people as to how stashed away black money was recovered.

In Orissa, a TV journalist, Tarun Acharya, a stringer with Kanak TV channel was killed in the month of May this year. He had reported about the employment of the child labourers illegally in a cashew factory. Only one culprit was nabbed, the other two are yet to be caught.

Santanu Bhowmik, a local TV journalist in Agartala, Tripura was abducted and killed while he was covering the violent clash between the CPIM workers and the Indigenous People's Front of Tripura (IPFT). The agitation was with regard to the demand of a separate state for the tribals in the state.

The media platforms are moving away from its social responsibilities. It is to be realized that when media shirk away from its responsibility, it weakens the quality of democracy of a nation.

NEW MEDIA AND ALTERNATIVE SPACE

There are some alternative platforms available, spaces within the mainstream media are being squeezed out and some other new spaces are emerging. There is an enthusiasm about these new entrants and spaces in the media world. But these are yet to launch themselves as a wave.

Some of the characteristics of these spaces are:

- They operate with many to many centers and hence less control over the content. Many versions and many views are available at the same time.
- There is no central control on the operation and the content of these platforms. Hence the content and views may not be credible.
- The views put out on these platforms are not well considered because there is a tendency in these platforms to compete in the real time.
- No procedure has been adopted by these platforms to authenticate the content and hence trustworthiness is low.
- Since it is not controlled by a centre, it has become free for all. Hence, people express their personal grievances and trolling has become the order of the day.

These new sites are nebulous and lack the inner strength to be credible pillars yet.

But these are making noise and creating chaos. Their presence is being felt now. It is hoped that these new platforms would emerge as a new order sooner than later.

CONCLUSIONS

The reading of the Indian society requires a deep observation by the analysts. It also requires being above the feelings of castes, creed and religion as these may hamper the procedure of observation. It is also necessary to be alert about various political, social and economic developments in the society. Hence it is a tough job to analyse any society. Some of the frames have been discussed in this article earlier.

The media in India is not in a good shape. Quantity does matter but the quality of the quantity matters. The media is now in the hands of the political and economic power. Hence it is not free to report its observations impartially and honestly. A lot of this reporting is constructed. The reality loses out. Hence, the quality of Indian democracy is under a cloud.

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