

Written by Sanjay Baru
Monday, 18 April 2011 20:24

बजिनेस स्टैंडर्ड के संपादक और प्रधानमंत्री मनमोहन सिंह के पूर्व मीडिया सलाहकर संजय बारु 17 अप्रैल को चवाई शारदा प्रसाद मेमोरियल लेक्चर में मीडिया, बजिनेस और सरकार पर बोले. दल्लि के इंडिया इंटरनेशनल सेंटर में हुआ इस आयोजन में कई जानी मानी हस्तियों ने हस्सि लया. यहां हम संजय बारु के भाषण क पूरा टेक्स्ट प्रकशति कर रहे है, जो अंगरेजी में है. पढ़ें-

- SANJAYA BARU -

I first met H.Y. Sharada Prasad in 1982 in the very room in which I later sat in the Prime Minister's Office. He knew me only as Rama's husband! I was in Delhi on a visit from Hyderabad where I was a University lecturer and went to call on him because Rama had asked me to.

I would meet him occasionally during my days at the Economic Times and Times of India and tried hard to get him to write for the editorial page of the TOI, when I was in charge of it in 1994-96. He always declined the invitation with a smile. Finally, when he chose to write a column I had already left TOI and it was M.J. Akbar who managed to get him to do so for The Asian Age and Deccan Chronicle.

Perhaps as a consolation he called me one day and told me that he had informed Encyclopedia Britannica that he would stop writing the chapter on India that he had written every year for close to fifty years, and henceforth they should approach me for the chapter.

I was flabbergasted, flattered and honoured.

The editor of Britannica wrote me a warm letter saying that I must be someone very special because after a "life long" association with EB, "Mr Prasad has chosen you to inherit his annual contribution to the Britannica." I have written that chapter since, every year."

Written by Sanjay Baru
Monday, 18 April 2011 20:24

On 2 June 2004 I joined the PMO in the morning and called on “Shouri mama” (as Sharada Prasad was called by his friends and family) the same evening to seek his blessings and take his advice. He spoke to me at length about the office itself, and the significance of every nook and corner.

“You are sitting in the same room in which Jawaharlal Nehru first sat as Prime Minister,” he told me, referring to the corner room next to the cabinet room. Nehru had to wait for a month to move into what is now the PM’s room, since that room’s earlier occupant, Girija Shankar Bajpai, would not vacate it till the room assigned to him was ready, that being the present principal secretary’s room.

I too had occupied that very room briefly till I moved into the much larger adjacent room, the one Shouri had occupied with great distinction for almost two decades. After letting me know that I was sitting in Nehru’s first room in the PMO, he added with a mischievous smile, “of course Natwar (Singh) also sat there!”

He regaled me with stories about the various occupants of the PMO during his decade and a half there, about their egos and their foibles. He gave me valuable advice on how I should discharge my duties both as media advisor and speech writer that stood me in good stead throughout my four-and-a-half years in the job.

On a couple of occasions when I had difficulty convincing the PM and his senior aides about my media strategy in dealing with an issue, I would call Shouri and having received his endorsement of my plan inform the PM that Mr Sharada Prasad has approved my idea. The PM would instantly fall in line and allow me to go ahead, over ruling the dissenters. Securing Shourie’s imprimatur was enough.

For a man who wielded a powerful and elegant pen for the Prime Minister of India, who had the unquestioned trust and confidence of a powerful Prime Minister like Indira Gandhi, who had travelled around the world with her, hearing her read out his prose, whom generations of Indians had seen in Films Division documentaries and front page photographs sitting next to Mrs Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi, here I was with him on my first day in the PMO in his two-room, Punjabi Bagh DDA flat.

Written by Sanjay Baru
Monday, 18 April 2011 20:24

Every day of my four-and-a-half years in the PMO, I would recall that first evening that I spent with Shouri.

Don't fool yourself, I would tell myself, you may be here today, but one day you too will have a modest apartment to retire to. Shouri was among the very few who worked with Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi who had no Vasant Vihar or New friends Colony or Maharani Bagh house to leave for his children. It is the combination of his wisdom and simplicity, his prose and wit, his deep knowledge of both India and the world that makes him a truly unique occupant of that all powerful corner of Raisina Hill. This memorial lecture is dedicated as much to Shourie as to the values he embodied.

One of the things that Shouri said to me when I met him the evening of my first day at the PMO was that during his long tenure at the PMO he kept in regular, almost daily contact, with key interlocutors in just five newspapers – Hindustan Times, Indian Express, The Statesman, The Hindu and Times of India. That was a different world.

While India reported less than 500 newspapers in the years Shouri first came to deal with them, and only one television channel, by 1991 there were 923 newspapers and still only one TV channel. But Shouri regarded dealing with just the top five English dailies adequate to influence the rest of the media. These five, he presumably believed, set the tone and the agenda for all others to follow. It is also possible he believed having these five on one's side is what mattered as far as the PM was concerned.

In 2008, the year I left PMO, the Registrar of Newspapers reported that 2,337 newspapers were in circulation in India. In 2004 there were already several news TV channels, but by 2008 the number had more than tripled. By the time I left my position in mid-2008 I would normally be dealing with at least a couple of dozen newspapers and TV channels every day. The era when one could happily say that the PM's media advisor kept in touch with just five top English newspapers was long gone. Not only had Indian language TV and print become more important, but even English language TV and print had burgeoned and the internet had arrived.

It was during my last days in office that I acquired a Facebook account and Outlook magazine

Written by Sanjay Baru
Monday, 18 April 2011 20:24

put me on their cover, along with some celebrities, for being the first PMO official with a Facebook account. Twitter had not arrived by the time I left office. Today Shouri would not be able to recognise, much less relate, to the media scene in India. My 84-year-old parents take pride in letting me know that they neither watch TV news, nor spend more than a few minutes reading a newspaper. They have opted out of daily news.

But, the rest of India has not. Nowhere has there been a bigger boom in media than in India.

At the last World Association of Newspapers convention in Hyderabad in 2009, India was hailed as the great global hope for media, especially print. The WAN invitation to the Hyderabad convention said:

“Developing literacy and wealth are part of but far from all the story: Great credit needs also to be given to Indian newspaper professionals, who are re-inventing the newspaper to keep it vibrant and compelling in the digital age..... Although broadband and mobile are booming in India, print newspapers are growing right along with them. The country has more daily newspapers than any other nation and leads in paid-for daily circulation, surpassing China for the first time in 2008. Twenty of the world’s 100 largest newspapers are Indian. Newspaper circulation rose a further 8 percent last year.”

Salivating at the India numbers, News Corp top executive James Murdoch told a FICCI–Frames conference in Mumbai last month that “India’s media industry is a ‘sleeping tiger’ waiting to be awakened.” He described global media firms as “grey and tired”. “The impressive achievements of the last two decades have not even begun to fulfill the potential of this great land,” said the son of media mogul Rupert Murdoch.

This boom is witnessed in every language, with Hindi’s Dainik Jagran emerging as the great success story in print media. But with growth have come its wages. The quantitative expansion of Indian media continues to outpace its qualitative development. Extreme inequality in compensation structures means there are some journalists who get world class compensation that would be the envy of even developed economy media, and there is a mass of under-paid staff, many of whom with low skills and lower motivation.

Speaking at the Silver Jubilee of the Chandigarh Press Club in September 2005, Prime Minister

Written by Sanjay Baru
Monday, 18 April 2011 20:24

Manmohan Singh said:

“With the rapid growth of media in recent times, qualitative development has not kept step with quantitative growth. In the race for capturing markets, journalists have been encouraged to cut corners, to take chances, to hit and run. I believe the time has come for journalists to take stock of how competition has impacted upon quality. Consider the fact that even one mistake, and a resultant accident, can debar an airline pilot from ever pursuing his career. Consider the case that one wrong operation leading to a life lost, and a doctor can no longer inspire the confidence of his patients. One night of sleeping on the job at a railway crossing, an avoidable train accident, and a railway man gets suspended. How many mistakes must a journalist make, how many wrong stories, and how many motivated columns before professional clamps are placed? How do the financial media deal with market moving stories that have no basis in fact? Investors gain and lose, markets rise and fall, but what happens to those reporters, analysts, editors who move and make markets? Are there professional codes of conduct that address these challenges? Is the Press Council the right organization to address these challenges? Can professional organizations of journalists play a role?”

Apart from the problem of quantitative growth outpacing qualitative development, there is also the challenge of conflicting objectives and a clash of cultures. News media has become subsumed into the larger business of information and entertainment. This is in large part a consequence of the growing dependence of media, especially news media, on advertisement revenues, though India still has a substantial segment of the market that is still willing to pay for news.

One of the consequences of this growing dependence on advertising revenues, as opposed to subscription revenue, and the competition from competing media is that news media has become increasingly a mish-mash of news, views and plain entertainment.

A recent FICCI- KPMG report, Hitting the High Notes on the Indian media and Entertainment Industry in 2011 not only unabashedly refers to ‘media and entertainment’ as one industry, but also points to the growing inter-linkages between the two sides of business. News is entertainment and entertainment is news! And, the stakes are high.

According to KPMG, the Indian Media and Entertainment (M&E) industry stood at US\$ 12.9 billion in 2009. Over the next five years the industry is projected to grow at a compound annual growth rate of 13 per cent to reach the size of US\$ 24.04 billion by 2014.

Written by Sanjay Baru
Monday, 18 April 2011 20:24

A PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) report titled 'Indian Entertainment & Media Outlook 2010' predicts that the industry is poised to return to double digit growth to touch US\$ 22.28 billion growing cumulatively at a 12.4 per cent CAGR to 2014.

Apart from the phenomenal growth prospects, which have become the envy of media companies around the world, and therefore attracting many of them to India, it is important to also note that there has been a vertical and horizontal integration, along the technological spectrum, of news, entertainment and communication. Print, TV, radio, film, music, gaming, mobile telephony, internet and banking and finance are all getting integrated. New technologies will integrate the businesses and the markets even more.

The KPMG report adds, "While television and print continue to dominate the Indian M&E industry, sectors such as gaming, digital advertising, and animation VFX also show tremendous potential in the coming years. By 2015, television is expected to account for almost half of the Indian M&E industry revenues, and more than twice the size of print, the second largest media sector. The contribution of advertising revenue to overall industry pie is expected to increase from 38 percent in 2007 to 42 percent in 2012."

When news and entertainment become two sides of the same coin, indeed some would say the same side of one coin, with advertising revenue being the other side of the coin, and when the distinction between news and views gets blurred, journalism enters an uncharted territory where there are as yet no professional yardsticks to judge either purpose or performance. But it is not just the integration of businesses that is having an impact on media. It is the integration of business with politics and politics with business that is now shaping news media, and not just at the national level.

Tamil Nadu is a particularly good example of the complete backward and forward integration of media business and politics. The ruling political party dominates print, TV and film production and distribution. In Andhra Pradesh the Y.S. Rajashekhar Reddy family was well on its way to achieving this kind of integration of business interests in media and politics.

Written by Sanjay Baru
Monday, 18 April 2011 20:24

The relative ease with which the Karunanidhi-Maran families in Tamil Nadu and the YSR family in Andhra Pradesh, to a lesser extent the Pawar family in Maharashtra have acquired substantial stakes in media, entertainment and politics is a pointer to trends at the national level. There have been reports that the Congress Party plans to start its own TV and print media businesses. The Left walked down this path in Kerala but was unable to achieve the kind of dominance that DMK has succeeded in acquiring in Tamil Nadu.

The FICCI-KPMG Report shows that while there has been a phenomenal expansion of the media business, in almost every major language segment and in most states 3 dominant players together control between 65 per cent and 75 per cent of the market. In other words, the media pyramid in India is highly skewed. A few newspapers/ channels at the top of the pyramid, controlling close to three-quarters of the readership and/or viewership and a large number of small players below sharing the rest of the cake.

Part of the problem in regulating the media business arises because of the growing links between politicians, political parties and the media and entertainment business.

In Andhra Pradesh, for example, the top two media companies, with print and television business, are Eenadu and Sakshi – the former owned by the pro-TDP Ramoji Rao, and the latter owned by YSR Rajashekhar Reddy's son Jagan.

In Tamil Nadu the power and influence of Kalanithi Maran's Sun TV is even more brazen. Indeed, the DMK as a party has acquired enormous control over the entire media business including circulation, cable network and film distribution.

In Maharashtra, every media company has its own political interests. Across the country in almost every State, including the North-East, the nexus between politics, business and media is very close and pervasive.

With such visible and known links between political parties and media companies, what is the kind of regulation that government qua government can impose? Indeed, in a democracy the question does arise whether government or even a quasi-official body should have any powers at all to regulate media.

Written by Sanjay Baru
Monday, 18 April 2011 20:24

This market structure is ripe for oligopolistic practices and it has been alleged for a long time that such practices have become all too common in India. Very often the intense rivalry and competition between professional journalists in rival media firms masks the implicit collaboration and non-compete clauses – including deals on advertising, circulation and hiring of journalists – between the firms themselves.

Indian media needs a framework of reference to define what constitutes a competitive structure, what policies amount to being restrictive trade practices, how can such practices be curbed and who curbs them? Has the time come for the Competition Commission of India to consider a framework for regulation of cross-media ownership, predatory pricing and other restrictive and unethical business practices, including the phenomenon of ‘paid news’, in the media and entertainment industry?

A few years ago when the former chairman of the Securities and Exchange Board of India, G.N. Bajpai, convened a meeting of all editors and suggested that the media accept a SEBI code for journalists reporting on markets and companies, a majority of the editors gathered there opposed any SEBI imposed code and instead offered to come forward with a code of their own that media companies could adhere to. Nothing has been heard on the subject since.

Institutions like the Press Council of India have lost their élan, and the Editors Guild of India has become a club of former and future editors with little influence on those presently occupying the hot seat! The inability of the Editors Guild to reverse the phenomenon of ‘paid news’, which it campaigned against, even though many members of the Guild were in fact guilty of the crime, illustrates this better than any other example.

A related issue of internal governance that has profound implications for freedom of press is the nature of editorial control in media. Just as politicians have become media barons and media barons have become politicians, establishing a continuum between media, politics and government, there is a parallel continuum between media, business and editorial leadership, with publishers and CEOs becoming editors and editors becoming publishers and CEOs.

Time was when many professional journalists worried that the post of editor was being devalued with print and TV companies not naming editors and dividing up the editor’s work among several persons, both journalists and managers. As a consequence, today several print and TV

Written by Sanjay Baru
Monday, 18 April 2011 20:24

media have no single editor and, therefore, weak editorial control and leadership.

As some of the conversations recorded in the famous Nira Radia Tapes reveal, senior journalists not only worry about the fate of politicians in power, but they also worry about their company's bottom and top line. Given the unabashed blurring of roles, an increasing number of business persons and politicians are now quite blasé about using carrots and sticks to influence and brow beat the media.

But a far more insidious development has been under way – namely the integration of the positions of publisher/ CEO with that of Chief Editor/ Editor. The job of Editor has been under threat in Indian media for a long time, but today professional editors – who have no ownership stake in the media company – are becoming an endangered species.

Owners or CEOs are editors and editors have become shareholders or CEOs. Those who worry about content also worry about revenue. It is not difficult to see what this means for editorial freedom. It is also not difficult to see that the famed separation of powers between “Church and State” in the media no longer exists.

Owner/ CEO/ Manager/ shareholder- editors either impose corporate objectives or their personal whims. Editors who speak eloquently about the freedom of the press and autonomy of media are often the first to impose their dictatorial and arbitrary style on their own colleagues.

Editors, who demand accountability from elected representatives of the people, are often quite happy to censor dissent and straitjacket diverse opinion within their own organizations. When such tyrannical editors are also owners or CEOs of their media establishments there is no internal court of appeal for a journalist.

The burden of my song has been to draw attention to the fact that the impressive growth of Indian media in recent years has not been matched by a similar rise in professional standards, both on the editorial side and in business ethics and practices of media firms, and media

Written by Sanjay Baru
Monday, 18 April 2011 20:24

accountability.

As a consequence, despite the phenomenal growth of the media and the high visibility of media personalities, the public regard for journalists has not in fact risen. A recent poll in the US and UK rated 'nursing' as the most ethical profession and 'journalism' as among the least ethical ones!

I have not been able to find a similar poll in India, but the result is unlikely to be very different. Concerns about corruption in the media are just beginning to surface. When a couple of cases get exposed their impact on the credibility of our profession would be hugely destructive.

Because of all these trends, Indian journalism is presently facing a crisis of both credibility and competence. In the past few years we have witnessed increased public scrutiny of the executive, the legislature and even the judiciary. More recently we have witnessed some early signs of a similar scrutiny of the media.

The cynicism and anger that have come to characterize public criticism of the other three 'estates' will sooner rather than later be seen in the criticism of the media. Each of the 'four estates' have from time to time drawn public attention to the short-comings of others. Sometimes three of the four have combined to bring the fourth to heel.

So far we have not seen in India a coming together of the executive, legislature and the judiciary in a joint bid to discipline or rein in the media. During the emergency, when media was under attack, the judiciary was in fact an ally of the media. When the Rajiv Gandhi government proposed an anti-defamation law, the entire media stood as one and with support from other political parties resisted the move.

Today, the media will find it more difficult to defend itself against such scrutiny and regulation. The day may not be far when public opinion will demand more accountability and transparency on the part of media organizations. With public opinion on its side, the executive and/ or the judiciary may well begin to demand such accountability from the business and editorial heads of media organizations, and from prominent TV anchors and columnists, not to mention the regular reporters.

Written by Sanjay Baru
Monday, 18 April 2011 20:24

What is worrying, however, is that in response to such public anger and cynicism the media may be turning populist – a standard response of a politician – in an attempt to ingratiate itself to its critics. This too is a dangerous trend. Media populism is in part a response to public anger and, paradoxically, a response to public disdain and indifference.

To an extent this is the logical culmination of the phenomenon of qualitative development not keeping pace with quantitative growth. The ‘dumbing down’ of the media brings in its train disregard for it, disrespect for it, disenchantment with it. This makes the media ripe for greater regulation.

If Indian media wish to avert this threat, then it must look within, introspect and rediscover professional values. This is easier said than done. It is not because of a lack of will that this has not happened. There is often no incentive for such introspection and no reward for mending ways.

The good thing, however, is that we live in a society and a nation in which we have the freedom to debate these issues. In paying tribute to the memory of Sharada Prasad, my generation must pay tribute to his for the freedom they secured for us and for posterity.

Shouri was a freedom fighter, like Kamalamma [Sharada Prasad's wife], like my father and my grandfather and grandmother. Their generation was the architect of a unique experiment in human history – building a vibrant and liberal democracy in a diverse and stratified society, a backward and poor economy. Shouri epitomized by the best instincts of that generation, symbolizing the liberalism and pluralism of a generation that was inspired by Gandhiji to value High Thinking and Simple Living.

These values are under threat and the media is not doing enough to protect them. By encouraging those with contending view points to argue with each other, we are not doing enough to create greater consensus between conflicting views.

The greatness of the Indian people is not that we are argumentative, as Amartya Sen has celebrated with an eye to a global audience. The real greatness of the Indian people is that we

Written by Sanjay Baru
Monday, 18 April 2011 20:24

are in fact consensual. Merely because we invented the 'Zero' and made possible the binary 1:0 system, the foundation of the current information era, does not mean that the Indian mind sees the world in black and white. Thinkers like Sharada Prasad have always reminded us of the range of gray possibilities in comprehending the reality around us.

The day the Indian media moves away from its binary world view, its argumentative 'me and you' divides, and moves closer to the consensual frameworks of reference of a people who have always valued the idea of Sarva Dharma Sambhava – of Unity in Diversity – it will have created a new paradigm, a very Indian paradigm, in the world of communication.

That would be the best tribute we can pay to a great Indian, a truly renaissance man, a liberal scholar, a non-argumentative Indian like Sharada Prasad!