Communal Issues and Media

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Abstract: India is a country of diversity and heterogeneity because of its vast variety of races, castes, customs, languages, communities and living styles. Though they live together in peace and harmony, the nation has witnessed a number of serious communal issues. Now these issues are perceived as a problems that impedes and warps the process of development of our country.

In this context media has an influential power in promoting communal harmony and national solidarity in India. Media, bearing both positive and negative sides has the power to shape attitudes and expressions of its target audience. Cut-throat competition results in media drifting away from ethics towards TRP ratings. But media should not forgo societal interests for its own vested interests.

Today, media is considered the fourth pillar of the state in safeguarding national solidarity and integrity. As the famous saying goes “With great power comes great responsibility”, so the Media too, should be fully aware of its power but further more towards its responsibility, concomitant and should use in the society’s best interests.

Key Words: - Communal factors, Mass media, Society, Government, Indian culture and Religion.

India is a country of diversity and heterogeneity because of its multi-ethnic, multi- religious, multi-lingual society harboring a vast variety of races, castes, tribes, traditions, customs, languages, communities and living styles. The primary reason for this is the advent of the Dravidians, Aryans, Christians Sikhs, Parsis and Muslims. The history of the land has always shown the adoptability of the people to new elements, with no loss of the vital Indian essence.

The ideas, believes and institutions thus imported, have neither been accepted nor rejected but they have been assimilated with an ambience, which makes its culture, composite in character. Despite the diversities mentioned Indians are closely bound and still maintaining unity in diversity. Though they are found living together in peace and harmony, there are many communal issues that are blooming fresh every day.

Ram Ahuja explains that the emergency of communalism is often attributed to the establishment of “Muslim” rule in India. It was when Qutubdin became the first Sultan of Delhi that Islam found a footing in India. Later it was the Mughals who consolidated their empire and Islam in the process. It followed a “discriminatory” policy towards the Hindus, reflected in the demolition of temples, and encouraged their followers to maintain their identity by rejecting Hindu influences on their social life.

When the British established their dominance in India, they initially adopted a policy of patronizing Hindus, but after First War of Independence in 1857, the Britishers adopted the policy of “divide and rule” which resulted in fostering communal clashes between Hindus and Muslims. This was further strained during the freedom struggle. Thus, antagonism between the Hindus and the Muslims started in the country and it gave way to communal imbalances. In the absence of appropriate adjustments between the Hindus (majority) and the Muslims (largest minority) conflicts have risen between the two resulting in violent outburst and communal riots. Communalism and Communal Violence seem to have become endemic in our society. It is now perceived as a problem that impedes and warps the process of development of our country.
To maintain and strengthen communal harmony, the society has to use different channels and mediums. Media is one of the most potent and effective medium given its wide each, effective delivery mechanism and ability to mobilize public opinion. Therefore media has a major role to play in promoting communal harmony in India.

Communal disharmony and clashes are fuelled by trepidation, suspicion and scorn. The different channels of media are the transmission channels through which fear, suspicion and hatred spread. Similarly, the confidence, trust and sense of security also get transmitted through the same channels. Whatever be the form, insecurity is perhaps the major cause of individual and social dissensions. Media, bearing both positive and negative sides has the power to shape attitudes and expressions of its target audience. It will bridge the gulf between the public and the government and the governed. If it plays its role honestly, it will be a great force in building the nation.

The Media in India has been very active even before Indian Independence. Historically, right from the days of the British rule media has been a vociferous supporter of communal peace and harmony and the importance of getting united to fight the common enemy, the British.

For example, newspapers and periodicals like the Amrit Bazar Patrika, Sandhya, Yugantar, and BandeMataram, Young India, Harijan etc was utilized by the leaders of the movement to urge the people to protest the partition, preserving communal harmony and protecting the interests of the Minority Communities.

Other than print media movies have also depicted communalism and suffering of the common man as a result of communal hatred. For instance the movie 'Sheen', has depicted the plight of Kashmiri Pandit’s. The film 'Maachis' highlights the issue of extremism in Punjab, Final Solution and Parzania were made based on the Gujarat riots. The film, Amu takes a look at the anti-Sikh riots of 1984.

The Indo-Pak and Sino-Indian wars too saw the Media taking an active lead in keeping the morale of the country high and stressing the need to eschew internal differences and conflicts and stand up united against external aggression. Even later on during the anti-Sikh riots of 1984 the Media took a lead and worked endlessly in trying to dissipate the communal tension and restore normalcy in the country.

The demolition of the Babri Masjid at Ayodhya in 1992 and the communal riots in Mumbai not only reported the actual demolition but also continuously condemned it to the utmost. It also tried to formulate some public opinion about the issue. Later on too during incidences like 2002 Gujarat violence that followed the Godhra train burning, terrorist activities such as the 2005 Ram Janmabhoomi attack in Ayodhya, the blasts in markets in Delhi (when Eid and Diwali both were falling only one day apart from 'each other), the 2006 Varanasi bombings, the 2006 Jama Masjid explosions, the 11 July 2006 Mumbai train bombings, and most recently after the Ahmadabad and New Delhi blasts in 2008, the various agencies of mass media all condemned the incidents and made the utmost efforts to maintain communal harmony by visiting the affected areas and bringing forth examples of people from different communities living together in peace, helping each other despite the prevalent communal tension.

However, despite all these positive steps taken by the various agencies of mass media towards preservation and promotion of communal harmony, an often heard criticism of these is that they are prone to giving into sensationalism and exaggeration of facts / events which sometimes can result into serious communal tension and clashes. During the Gujarat riots the Media came out with many sensitive pictures of the riots. These pictures have been used by communal elements to whip up communal passions and attract and recruit vulnerable sections of the population into the communal ideology. It is seen that the pictures of Gujarat and Babri Masjid have been used extensively to...
motivate youth to take up arms for carrying out terror attacks as revenge for the same. Even recently the incident of Muzaffar Nagar (UP) can also be considered.

A local Urdu newspaper Aftab of the Kashmir Valley, published a press release issued by Hizb-ul-Mujahideen in 1989 to wage Jihad for Jammu and Kashmir's secession from India and accession to Pakistan, asking all Hindus to pack up and leave. The same news has been repeated in another local paper Al Safa. Two local newspapers of Mangalore, Karavali Ale and VijayaKirana have been accused of instigating communal sentiments by publishing wrong reports and provocative images during the communal tensions in Mangalore.

Sometimes the movies continuously depict people of a particular community, as terrorists, drugs and arms dealers, anti-nationals etc., thereby building an image of that community which needs to be balanced by another positive one. Cut-throat competition results in the Media drifting away from ethics and towards TRP ratings. Media should not forgo societal interests for its own vested interests. The role of media in communal issues is to be that of peace makers and not abettors, to be trouble shooters and not trouble makers.

From the above discussion it is amply clear that media has contributed to both communal harmony as well as communal discord. The Media has to mould itself so that the reports suit the typicality of that particular audience. Media is a powerful medicine, if the medicine is used properly it can heal many ills, if it is misused it becomes poison. The greatest strength of India is its diversity whereby the focus is on unity and not uniformity, cohesion and not fusion, integration and not assimilation. Politically neutral, socially responsible, psychologically mature and culturally tolerant media is the best instrument to carry this message far and wide and promote communal harmony.

References