

9 Human Development and the media

Ideally, human development is not only a matter of governmental action, but also one of larger public discussion and action. And in fostering public debates around both goals and processes of human development the media can, in principle, play a critical and constructive role. This recognition has led us to initiate a discussion in this report, although briefly, on the propitious conditions that the media may have created for human development achievements in Tripura. Limited as the scope of the discussion is, owing to scarcity of data, this attempt may throw some light on developing an understanding on the subject in the particular context of Tripura. This exercise gains particular importance in the light of the fact that the mainstream media while being very vocal about the ‘models’ of successful development in states like Gujarat remain quite silent about promising gains that have been made in human development terms in states like Himachal Pradesh and Tripura.

The prevalence of newspaper reading in Tripura seems to be strikingly low. While the exact proportion of households reading at least one newspaper may be different from 27 percent, the figure derived from the sample study, the difference would not be large enough to change the qualitative judgement. The question is, why is the prevalence of reading newspapers so low in a state where so many are literate and, particularly, neo-literate? With this question in mind, we take a look at the newspapers in order to see whether the nature of the content provides a clue to this mystery. The first thing that strikes us is the limited range of news reports and comments. With the usual focus on incidents in reporting, investigative journalism takes a backseat, and even in the sphere of reports based on investigation, the emphasis is on misuse of public money, whether because of incompetence or of corruption.

What is lacking is a sharp focus on social deprivation and its causes. For instance, there should be regular reports and analyses, along with substantive comments, on the problems in sectors like primary education and rural health. The media needs to focus more on the micro-issues and, at the same time, analyse them in the perspective of macro-policies. Using very concrete case studies, they can go into larger issues of policy and implementation. This is where there seems to

be considerable scope for improvement, for what we find are, in most cases, either reports of micro-incidents without much concern for the larger perspective or opinion pieces making very broad and general comments without rich micro-reports substantiating the point of view expressed in those comments.

One key to this challenge is participation or, in the current idiom of the media world, interactivity. Interactivity is seen to be the hallmark of the new age media. The rapid digitalisation of mainstream media on the one hand and the explosion of social media on the other have contributed enormously to various kinds of interactive communication, that is non-hierarchical in nature. This is where the traditional print and (relatively modern) television has to reorient or even reinvent itself. Print hasn't really changed at all. There is very little scope for even formal interaction. Television channels have been trying to address this issue in a number of ways like phone-in programmes and citizen reporting. But the predominant nature of the programmes is still in the 'I speak, you listen' format. The phone-ins are, in fact, mostly a variant of this, a 'You ask, I answer' model. True interactivity demands not only participation by media consumers; the participation has to be on an equal basis.

This raises a deeper question of attitude, not just of the media providers, but of the society as a whole. We still live in a society where the production of opinion and knowledge is embedded in a very tightly hierarchical system. There are 'informed' and 'knowledgeable' individuals and institutions who can 'educate' us. They are the 'opinion leaders'. They lead, the rest follow. This has to change, and change radically, if media has to become truly interactive. Seen in this perspective, an interactive media has to be fundamentally democratic in its belief and practice.

And this is where, we think, a state like Tripura can make quite novel and fruitful explorations. Let us take the Bengali print media for instance. With a lot of latent readership, measured by the number of people who can read newspapers (and magazines) but do not read any, one may think of creating print platforms where these people, along with those who are already reading the print products, can exchange information and opinion freely, without any 'expert guidance'. How to design these platforms is, of course, a million dollar question, but there is no reason to believe that ways cannot be found if one makes a sincere attempt. In fact, there may be a number of different ways in which it can be done, depending on the categories of readers as well as

information and opinion. Students, for instance, may like to interact only within the peer group, resisting the 'intrusion' of others in their space. On the other hand, the elderly may like others to share their space, precisely because they feel, and actually are, left alone in society.

What are the chances of such explorations? What are the obstacles? How can they be overcome? Basically, how can the rather constrained media space be opened up to accommodate and deal with a much wider set of concerns and issues in a democratic manner? This is evidently a very large and complex issue. The question is, what kind of role politics has played, and can play, in the evolution of the social mindset and societal practices, the two being closely related. The media space has to become much more non-hierarchical in order to attract the people, particularly the youth, both quantitatively and qualitatively. And it is clear that such a space can develop only in a democratic society, a society that practises democracy not only in the narrow political sense but in a much broader social one. To wit, it demands a truly democratic public sphere where there are open and free discussions and debates on any and every issue without any constraint imposed by a pre-determined hierarchy.

This is where, again, Tripura and its Left rulers have a great opportunity to create a different history, at least for two reasons. One, the oppressive dominance of the 'social elite' is significantly less in Tripura than in a state like West Bengal. The dominance of the upper caste, while substantial, is not as comprehensive. One indirect, and circumstantial, evidence is provided by the profile of newspaper readers. The proportion of people reading newspapers in the Scheduled Caste category in Tripura is practically the same as the overall ratio, reflecting a phenomenon strikingly different from what prevails in West Bengal. There is, we presume, substantial scope of using this reality to create the space for a relatively non-hierarchical discourse. The Left leadership can play a very effective role here. Add to this the possibility of a rich and meaningful two-way communication between the tribal and non-tribal sections of the society, and there is a great prospect of opening up and developing a space for public reasoning.

There is a second reason why the Left in Tripura has a good opportunity to try and democratize the social discourse. They have, after all, seen the pathetic implosion of their comrades in West Bengal. It is not unreasonable to assume that they have analysed the factors behind this debacle. Any sincere analysis would tell an intelligent observer that the Left lost its ground in West

Bengal essentially because it had largely failed to listen to the voice of the people. One hopes the party leaders in Tripura would not allow themselves to follow the same route but use their power intelligently to expand the space of democracy. One basic condition for that is to allow a thousand voices to speak, and speak in their own voice. This is where the media can play a very crucial role. And the ruling party can, in fact, provide leadership here by opening up their own organ(s) to voices of dissent.

In fact, this is something that the Left should try and do in its own interest, for this is a political issue of great importance to the cause of the Left. To realise this, we have to take note of the corporatisation of the media space. How this has affected the choice and presentation, indeed the very definition of 'News', has been a matter of much enlightened analysis. The technology of manufacturing consent has reached spine-chilling efficacy. The case in point is the mainstream view of development, which may really be called 'Development as Corporate Freedom'.

But there is another dimension of this corporatised media that gets much less attention than it warrants, that is the emergence and fast growing dominance of the idea of 'target audience' or 'relevant readers/viewers'. Since media is run predominantly on advertisement revenue, the focus is increasingly on consumers who can spend. How this distorts the content of the media products is evident. But it also has a strong impact on the pattern of growth of readership/viewership. In the specific context of print media, there are strong reasons to believe that many more people would have read newspapers and magazines if they found them relevant in their daily life. But what the majority of the citizens find relevant may not interest the upper echelon of consumers who comprise the most valued target audience, the relevant readership. The fact that the endemic problems of primary education and public health (as distinct from sudden 'incidents') get very little attention in mainstream media is a clear example of this fundamental problem. The simple reason behind this inattention is that the 'relevant audience' is just not interested in these issues. At least, that is the common perception among the leaders of the corporate media.

These two dimensions are clearly interrelated. There is a circularity between the nature of the coveted audience and the nature of the preferred content. Pious exhortations against this vicious reality will not be of any use. If one wants to tackle this problem, one has to think of a practical media strategy, one of creating an alternative media space. And that can be effectively done only

with an efficient 'business model'. Most attempts at developing alternative media fail because they do not have a good model of sustaining themselves financially. Depending on 'well-wishers', they run only as long as the wish remains, and that is usually not more than a couple of years at best. What is necessary is a model that runs on the strength of the readers who will pay for what they get. This can happen only if what they read or view is relevant for them. This is where a vibrant civil society, along with a sincere political leadership, can play a critical role. The potential of this should be strong in a state like Tripura, precisely because it is relatively distant from the corporate India in more than a geographical sense. Distance has its problems as well as its advantages.

Once again, the Left – and other democratic – political parties have a particular responsibility to try and realise this potential. Mobilising the working people is, or should be, their fundamental political project. They have as a rule defined this project in terms of some set ideas and programmes determined by the doctrinaire leadership, allowing specific and local issues to be accommodated only to the extent the leaders approve of.

There are very good reasons to believe that the ruling Left can, in this manner, expand and democratize the media space substantially. If people find their problems reflected and their opinions honoured through discussions and debates, they are very likely to feel interested in the media. With sufficient and sufficiently involved readership/viewership, one can have the solid base for developing media products without, or with only limited, dependence on the corporate sector for their sustenance.

Of course, this development cannot be a party affair. The Left is in a vantage position to open up and allow others to open up the media space. The rest will be a matter of a much broader and deeper social and cultural development. And it must be clearly said that this development, if truly broad and deep, is sure to challenge the dominance of the party in the socio-cultural sphere. That is the real test of a new and enlightened Left politics. Media is only one space where this can occur, and it is a very important space.