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Journalism of M. K. Gandhi: Its Relevance in Twenty First Century India

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Abstract:

The Fourth Estate is a powerful force in the twenty-first century to be reckoned with. The challenges and responsibilities are galore in a country like India. Journalism in India is not new, rather it has marched through the previous century when it was started, practiced and used to achieve the avowed objective to inform and educate the society at large. The ethical standard professed by those who were in the profession continuously maintained and improves the prestige and magnanimity of the profession in a manner which should be emulated even today. Journalism is both an art and a profession. The trend in modern journalism in India is to emphasize the professional aspect more. Whether it is an art or a profession or both, the fact is that it requires a good foundation and grooming ground for achieving excellence to educate inform and entertain the people. Here the Gandhi an concept of journalism has been discussed with a view to situate the journalism of today's India in an era of globalization because the fact of the matter is that his ideas and thoughts have still relevance which can be pursued by maintaining equilibrium between ethical professionalism and commercialism.

Keywords: *Communication, Indian journalism, Freedom of Press, Ethical Journalism, Journalistic Entrepreneurship, Content Coverage, Public Opinion, Communication Education, Communication Policy, Age of Information.*

Communication, as has been said, is a process by which information is conveyed to the recipient with a view to stimulate their idea, opinion and thinking process. Journalism since its origin has been performing this task almost single handedly. From invention of printing press in fifteenth century to the modern era, journalism marched a long way. It has developed over the years through various challenges. Its history is the story of humanity's long struggle to communicate freely with each other and part of the story has as its theme continuing efforts to break down barriers which have prevented the flow of information and ideas upon which public opinion is largely dependent.

Journalism is both an art and a profession. The trend in modern journalism in India is to emphasize the professional aspect more. Whether it is an art or a profession or both, the fact is that it requires a good foundation and grooming ground for achieving excellence to educate inform and entertain the people, which is its *raison d'etre*.

From a retrospective study of the growth of journalism it can be gleaned that journalism in India made a decent beginning through different periods. It got a new meaning and its use became more prominent in the pre-independent period. During this period of enslavement of India, it was used as an instrument basically to inform and educate the mass to prepare a ground for them to get rid of the foreign yoke. And the baton was in the hands of eminent personalities of the time who were known for their erudition, sagacity and fearlessness. Their honest journalistic endeavour were very often discouraged and put to restriction by various draconian press acts of the foreign regime. It was nothing but an outright affront to the profession, which was at its infancy. But, those deprecatory acts of the foreign regime strengthened the resolve of our great leaders and torchbearers and the commendable efforts of the stalwarts like Raja Rammohan Roy, Dadabhai Narouji, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, M.K. Gandhi and host of others have kept the prestige, sanctity and social importance of the profession intact.

Indian journalism is two hundred years old. It came as a long way from the two-page scandal sheet of James Augustus Hicky which passed for a newspaper in 1780 and which introduced as essentially western media into India. It passed through many stages in its evolution and there were many occasions and periods in its long, chequered career when it was very nearly crushed out of existence. The history and growth of Indian press coincided with early reformation and liberation struggle of modern times. From the very beginning the alien rulers hated newspaper and journalists but their hatred and contempt for Indian newspaper was more and the fact that Indian journalism survived their concentrated and sadistic onslaught on the press, especially during the freedom struggle beginning from the 1920s must be considered a miracle and a tribute to the spirit of sacrifice and patriotism of those pioneers who

stood shoulder to shoulder with the freedom fighters. With hardly any resources or equipment and in the face of government suppression, brave men and women came out to spread the message of freedom and to educate their countrymen on what was happening in the country in the impoverished and badly printed newspaper and pamphlets and journals.

Journalism made a roller-coaster journey in India and witnessed many transitions and transformations to establish itself on a firm basis. It faced draconian laws, censorship, prohibition, gagging, etc. at the hand of foreign regime but, resurged every time with the efforts of stalwarts who despite the repugnancies of the government established the freedom of speech and through their wholehearted efforts made it available to the people in general throughout the length and breadth of the country. One such personality was M.K. Gandhi who like others utilized the media to spread the message of freedom, and several of his ideas about socio-political, economic and cultural ethos which the country needed at that time for a transformation. His ideas have relevance even today and therefore, there is a need to discuss some of his concepts about the free press, its roles and responsibility.

M.K. Gandhi, a rationalist, a redactor, a communicator par excellence, a protagonist of value based journalism, a diehard moralist, who always tried to maintain a dignity and sublimity of the profession in which he had delved in to. The most important of the fact is that he never considered it as a profession but a noble work to inform and educate the people as a whole.

Journalism to him is a means to serve the people which he expressed in his Autobiography as “The sole aim of journalism should be service. The newspaper is a great power, but just as an unchallenged torrent of water submerges whole countryside and devastates crops, even so an uncontrolled pen serves but to destroy. If the control is from without (outside), it proves more poisonous than want of control. It can be profitable only when exercised from within. If this line of reasoning is correct, how many journals of the world would stand the test? But who should stop those that are useless? And who should be the judge? The useful and the useless must, like good and evil, go on together, and man must make his choice.”¹ He said that “I have taken up journalism not for its sake but merely as an aid to what I have considered to be my mission in life.”²

Gandhiji defined the objects of journalism in his autobiography as follows:

- Understand popular opinion and give expression to it.
- Arouse desirable sentiments among the people and
- Fearlessly expose popular defects.

After his return from South Africa around 1915 the prevalent volatile political situation in India provided a platform and conducive atmosphere to him to explore the possibilities in the use of mass media for the political, socio-economic emancipation of India. Gandhiji first tried to move around the country to assess the ground realities and the problems of the people. His first major effort to test the utility of his experience and method to deal with the problems of the masses was his interference in the issue of the farmers of Champaran and solve their problems through his technique of Satyagraha. This was his attempt to create a mass support for his ideas and at the same time spread the message of the movement. Indian press by that time had reached a recognizable stage which had earned reputation both within and without the country. The deportation of B.G. Horniman, the then editor of Bombay Chronicle who was a supporter of his Satyagraha provided an opportunity to Gandhiji to foray in to the field of journalism and who had taken up the editorship of Young India which was then published by the management of Bombay Chronicle.³

Then, Gandhiji utilized this platform to put forward his ideas and also visualized that equal importance should also be given to the vernacular languages which could serve his purpose of dissemination of ideas to politically educate the mass and for that matter he also took over the editorship of *Navjivan*, a Gujarati monthly that he converted into a weekly, *Harijan* (English), *Harijansevak* (Hindi) and *Harijanbandhu* (Gujarati). With this he took over the cause of untouchability, poverty and political injustice.

His conception as to how newspaper could be utilized to establish vigilant society can be gauged by his views which he expressed in Indian Opinion as such, “I believe that a struggle which relies chiefly upon internal strength cannot be wholly carried on without a newspaper. It is also my experience that we could not perhaps have educated the local Indian community, not kept Indians all over the world in touch with the course of events in South Africa in any other way, with the same ease and success as through the Indian Opinion, which therefore was certainly a most useful and potent weapon in our struggle.”⁴

Gandhiji was very much a lover of freedom of opinion which is evident from the fact that in 1921, Young India published the manifesto on Freedom of Opinion under his own signature: “It is the inherent right of everyone to express his opinion without restraint about the propriety of citizens offering their service to or remaining in the employ of the government.”

¹M.K. Gandhi, *An Autobiography: My Experiments with Truth*, Navajivan Publications, Ahmadabad, 1958, p.142

² Young India, July 2, 1925

³ B.P. Sanjay, *Mahatma Gandhi and Journalism*, The Hoot, 2005

⁴ M.K. Gandhi, *Satyagraha in South Africa*, , Navajivan Publishing House, Ahmadabad, 1950, p.142

He was a fearless crusader and never ever hesitated to express the wrongs, prejudicial and prohibitory laws of the government to proscribe free press and freedom of expression of the media. In Young India of August 7, 1924 under the caption "Below the Belt," he wrote-

"The press law is gone only to be replaced by new activities under the laws of sedition and libel. The editor of a daily newspaper when he begins writing his leading article does not weigh his words in golden scales. He may be betrayed into a hasty word. Must he pay for it even though he did it obviously in good faith without malice and in the public interest? The libel actions are calculated to demoralize Indian journalism and make public criticism overcautious and timid. I am no lover of irresponsible or unjustifiably strong criticism. But the caution to be beneficial must come from within and not super-imposed from without."

When the office and residence of the editor of Modern Review, a Calcutta periodical were searched by government, Gandhiji wrote in Young India of January 12, 1928: "I long for freedom from the English yoke. I would accept chaos in exchange for it. For the English peace is the peace of the grave. Anything would be better than this living death of a whole people. This satanic rule has well-nigh ruined this fair land materially, morally and spiritually. My ambition is much higher than independence. Through the deliverance of India, I seek to deliver the so-called weaker races of the earth from the crushing heels of Western exploitation in which England is the greatest partner."⁵

Along with the freedom of press he also advocated the much required responsibilities of the press too which is evident from his statement- "The superficiality, one-sidedness, inaccuracy, and often dishonesty that have crept into modern journalism, continuously mislead honest men who want to see nothing but justice done."⁶

Gandhiji had been frequently writing on various aspects of journalism. To him editorial independence, adherence to truth and self-restraints were the three overriding considerations for journalism. In his message for the editor of the newspaper, 'The Independence', on 30 January 1919, he wrote: In wishing you success in your new enterprise, I would like to say how I hope your writings would be worthy of the title you have chosen for your journal; and may I further hope that to a robust of independence you will add an equal measure of self-restraint and the strictest adherence to truth? Too often in our journals as in others do we get fiction instead of fact and declamation in place of sober reasoning? You would make 'The Independence' a power in the land and a means of education for the people by avoiding the errors I have drawn attention to.⁷

Gandhiji expressed his opinion about the role of newspapers as such: "In my humble opinion, it is wrong to use a newspaper as a means of earning a living. There are certain spheres of work which are of such consequence and have such bearing on public welfare that to undertake them for earning one's livelihood will defeat the primary aim behind them. When, further a newspaper is treated as a means of making profits, the result is likely to be serious malpractices. It is not necessary to prove to those who have some experience of journalism that such malpractices do prevail on a large scale. He was of the opinion, 'Newspapers are meant primarily to educate the people. They make the latter familiar with contemporary history. This is a work of no mean responsibility. It is a fact, however, that readers cannot always trust newspapers. Often facts are found to be quite the opposite of what has been reported. If newspapers realized that it was their duty to educate the people, they could not but wait to check a report before publishing it. It is true that often they have to work under difficult conditions. They have to shift the true from the false in a short time and can only guess at the truth. Even then, I am of the opinion that it is better not to publish a report at all if it has not been found possible to verify it."⁸

As he outlined the objectives of journalism i.e., to understand the popular feeling and give expression to it, to arouse among the people certain sentiments and fearlessly expose popular defects and to achieve this in his own journal he explained in Young India of July 2, 1925: "Reference to abuses in the States is undoubtedly a necessary part of journalism and it is a means of creating public opinion. Only my scope is strictly limited; I have taken up journalism not for its sake but merely as an aid to what I have conceived to be my mission in life. My mission is to teach by example and present under severe restraint the use of the matchless weapon of *satyagraha* which is a direct corollary of non-violence. It is a solvent strong enough to melt the stoniest heart. To be true to my faith, therefore, I may not write in anger or malice. I may not write idly. I may not write merely to excite passion. The reader can have no idea of the restraint I have to exercise from week to week in the choice of topics and my vocabulary. It is training for me. It enables me to peep into myself and to make discoveries of my weaknesses. Often my vanity dictates a smart expression or my anger a harsh objective. It is a terrible ordeal but a fine exercise to remove these weeds. The reader sees the pages of the Young India fairly well dressed-up and sometimes with Romain Rolland, he is inclined to say 'what a fine old man this must be' Well, let the world understand that the fineness is carefully and prayerfully cultivated. And if it has proved acceptable to some whose opinion I cherish, let the reader understand that when that fineness had been nothing harsh or haughty occupies, be it momentarily, my thought-world, then and till then, my non-violence will move all the hearts of the entire world. I have placed before me and reader no impossible idea or ordeal."

⁵ S.N. Bhattacharya (1965), *Mahatma Gandhi, the Journalist*, Asia Publishing House, Bombay, p.43

⁶ *Harijan*, October 24, 1942

⁷ V.S. Gupta, *Mahatma Gandhi and Mass Media*, Employment News, Vol. XXVI, 29 September-5 October 2001

⁸ V.S. Gupta, *Op. Cit.*

His libertarian proclivity is known from the fact when his view about the freedom of press was expressed by him in his own words as: "I cannot function freely if I had to send to the Press Advisor at Delhi every line I write about. The three weeklies have been conducted in the interest of truth and therefore of all parties concerned. But I cannot serve that interest if the editing has to be done under the threat of prosecution. Liberty of the press is a dear privilege."⁹

Gandhiji's advice to people who wanted to guard against sensationalism and obscenity in journalism was to depend on healthy public opinion that will refuse to patronize poisonous journals. He proclaimed that freedom of the press has to be protected but if necessary in the interest of ethics, morals and the public good, some internal check against undesirable trends was to be welcomed."¹⁰

To him "the true function of journalism is to educate the public mind, not to stock the public mind with wanted and unwanted impressions. A journalist has, therefore, to use his discretion as to what to report and when. As it is, journalists are not content to stick to facts alone. Journalism has become the art of 'intelligent anticipation of events'."¹¹

He opined that "the Press is called the Fourth Estate. It is definitely a power; but to misuse that power is criminal. I am a journalist myself and shall appeal to fellow journalists to realize their responsibility and to carry on their work with no idea other than that of upholding the truth. Newspapers are a powerful influence. It is the duty of the editors to see that no false report or report likely to excite the public is published in their newspapers... The editors and their assistants have to be extra careful about the news they give and the manner in which they dress it. In a state of independence, it is practically impossible for the governments to control the Press. It is the duty of the public to keep a strict watch on the newspapers and to keep them on the right path. An enlightened public will refuse to patronize inflammatory or indecent newspapers. For them, (the people) the printed sheet is Gospel truth. The fact throws a great responsibility on the editors and news writers. I myself never swear by newspaper reports and will warn readers of newspapers not to be easily affected by stories reported therein. Not even the best of them are free from exaggeration and embellishment."¹²

These are some of the ideas of Gandhiji which speaks of his sublime thoughts on morality and ethics in journalism. The relevance of his thoughts and ideas cannot be undermined in today's modern and globalized world where media has progressed leaps and bounds. Technology has made this profession much more competitive than before and profit motive has undermined morality and ethics and even sensationalism has been unhesitatingly given frequent spaces in media today.

Now if we put Gandhiji's journalism *vis-à-vis* journalism of today we can easily surmise in which direction the media has marched and how much progress it has achieved. Journalism in India made much headway in the post-independent period. As India was under the foreign yoke there was a need to inform and educate the people about the fallacies of the alien rule, malpractices, and corruptions in the society. Journalism was therefore primarily started and considered as a tirade against the tyranny and duplicity of the foreign regime. Then gradually it was utilized as an instrument of social welfare. The personalities who edited the newspapers, periodicals, journals were stalwarts who have their reputation on the national scene as crusaders who fought on various socio-economic and political fronts for the upliftment of the masses. They gave prime importance to honesty, integrity, objectivity, truthfulness and maintaining of a proper ethical standard.

Thus, when India got independence it inherited the prized legacy of a well-established journalism which needs to be adopted with certain modifications and additions to meet the challenges of the new environment. With the reconstruction of the newly independent India the need was felt to build an effective link between the people and administration, inform them about socio-economic political issues, to convey the essence of the new Constitution, to make them aware about their right and duties. And there was no iota of doubt that in performing this uphill task journalism could play a viable role.

Post-independent India witnessed many upheavals on the national and international front. And these bound to have positive and negative impact on the society. Then the question arises how the media reacted to the various developments in the socio-economic political arena? What was the impact of media on the society and was the media rose up to the occasion from time to time and performed its destined role?

Answering this question needs a retrospective analysis of the journey of journalism during the fifty years or so. During this period various media houses came to the fore who ventured in to the field in a big way. This journalistic entrepreneurship affected the journalism, tradition, standard and ethics. Journalism started revolving around these media houses and their policies. The cardinal objectives of newspapers as envisaged by Gandhiji and others such as understanding the popular feelings and giving expression, to arouse among the people certain desirable nationalistic sentiments, to fearlessly expose defects in public life without any prejudice, reservation and witch-hunting are pushed to a corner.

⁹ M.K. Gandhi, *An Autobiography, Op Cit*, p.28

¹⁰ Young India, May 20, 1921

¹¹ Sarvashri R.K. Prabhu, et al (1966), *The Mind of Mahatma Gandhi*, Navajivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad,

¹² Sarvashri R.K. Prabhu, *Op.Cit*.

The press in India like many other developing countries in addition to all its problems of finance, equipment, paper, staff, training and the like faces peculiar policy dilemma. On the other hand, it is expected to serve as a watchdog on government and on the other it is expected to carry, interpret, even propagandize the government's development plans to the people because the future of the nation hinges on the success of the plan. The response to the dilemma varies from country to country, newspaper to newspaper and journalist to journalist but upon this response depends to a substantial degree the nature and contents of coverage in newspaper.

In addition, commercial interests tend to dominate the press. The anxiety to increase circulation and increase commercial revenues at times leads to some compromises in terms of quality and nature of contents in newspapers. To some extent social and educational functions of the press have been relegated to the background, if not totally ignoring them.

In the context of revolutionary changes in communication technologies which are making the concept of global village a reality, the question of objectives, values and role of press acquires even greater significance as the potentials for both doing good as well as harm are now enormous. With increasing interdependence of nations, the question of development, place and role of journalists need careful examination. With this comes the question of training and cooperation required to cope up with such new challenges.

Thus, media may undoubtedly be considered one of the most effective weapons in arousing popular conscience and in creating public opinion. The press because of the influence it wields is termed as the fourth estate. The media has the capability to make or mar a society, a government, a nation. Therefore, a fresh conceptual approach whereby goals are set for the media for bringing about a social change and for establishing peace is eminently desirable. Without limitations of the freedom to discuss or present anything within the bounds of reasons and law, the media have to be judged on how well it systematically and methodically attempts to cover adequately subjects related to poverty, children, health, education, religion, environment, social and racial prejudice and exploitation of every kind, socio-political and economic. Equally important is the consideration how efficiently the media resist the temptations to glorify the actions which may be considered undesirable and threatening to personal freedom, national unity and security, social welfare, peace and prosperity.

As Kautilya had said that if a drop of honey is put on the tip of the tongue the taste of the honey would not remain confined to that part only but it will spread to the whole mouth. Similarly, a society without corruption, prejudice cannot be conceived. The journalists are people who like others bear the mark of men's frailties, their selfishness, and their prejudices. Therefore, it can only be hoped to replace little selfishness with some of the trifle wisdom, replace a little prejudice with knowledge acquired through proper education.

Thus, utmost importance should be given to proper, well defined education which is vocational and practical oriented. Emphasis should be given on idea formation, capacity to perceive an event from different angle and proper presentation while imparting mass communication.

The communication education should evolve and incorporate national objectives which should be non-political, non-controversial and on which there is general consensus. The objective should be to further the interests and well-being of the people as a whole and to promote many sided development of the country. The objective should be long term one and need not necessarily change with political changes.

In a country to India's size and population, diversity of religions, languages, regional imbalances and several other factors though it is difficult to evolve a national communication policy or generally acceptable information strategy, nevertheless it is essential to give some direction to mass media efforts. The country should have the necessary infrastructures to implement the basic policy in the shortest possible time.

To discharge his functions in an efficient and purposeful manner, the mass communicator in India should have a clear conception of the basic ideal of values which he has to promote. He should also know something about the mass media infrastructure, the gaps that exist at present in communication facilities as compared to international standards and what is required to bridge or minimize this gap.

The first and foremost objective of India's communication policy should be to preserve and strengthen the democratic way of life. Mass communication efforts should be directed at including an abiding faith among the people in democratic institutions such as free and fair elections, rule of law, independence of the judiciary, freedom of press, secular character of the state etc. The media can play an effective role in the development process by promoting understanding and involvement of people in the socio-economic changes and developmental activities taking place in the country.

Unlike other advanced countries of Europe and America, India did not witness comparable economic and technological changes in the 19th and most part of 20th centuries which was the cause of development of mass media in those countries as India was under the colonial rule. However, the fact of the matter is that the rich countries of the world did not reach the present stage of development

because of higher media usage. Rather the technological, economic and social changes will bring about higher media use among people and this historical truth has to be taken in to account by the development planners and media experts in India.¹³

Further, many content analytical studies of the media conducted in different parts of the world have clearly established that in both rich and poor countries, very little time and space are devoted to development related matters or socio-economic problems. The media generally spend a great deal of time and space for entertainment, gossip, trivia, political controversies, leaders' statements, inter-party and intra-party squabbles, political lampooning and trivialization of serious issues of importance to the large majority of the people. The media's next area priority is sports and games, and then come all the write-ups about film and cultural spectacles and idiosyncrasies of film and other media personalities. This gives the impression that India has solved all her vexing problems of existence.¹⁴

It is true that we are living in the Age of Information or the Age of Media Revolution but, can it be said that a country where half of the people are illiterate, three-fourths are uneducated and almost half have never used the telephone is in the Information Age? Therefore, there are certain pertinent questions which every concerned citizen should ponder about-

- Can the present direction of media/information revolution benefit society as a whole?
- Will it usher in a systemic change in our society by mobilizing the public concern toward poverty, unemployment, ill-health, and other socio-economic and cultural problems?
- Can we blindly imitate societies where there is a plethora of media and consequently an information overload?
- Are the new media giving an opportunity for people to get an adequate and true picture of the world, its structure and its economic organization?
- Will it create information haves and have-nots and divide the people further in a country like India where socio-economic disparities are already high?¹⁵

The answer to the questions can be addressed by following Gandhiji's concept and ideas of journalism which always tried to reflect the truth of Indian society and the myriad problems faced by it. He tried to mold the current of journalism in Indian perspective and Indianise it as far as possible so that the issues and challenges that confronts the nation can get the due and desirable attention.

Some of the ideas of Gandhiji which are essential and should be considered as an ethical code which should be emulated by media in order to establish a healthy journalistic atmosphere may be mentioned here. His entire ideas on media and journalism in a nutshell are:

- The sole aim of journalism should be service.
- Journalism has become the art of "intelligent anticipation of events."
- Journalism should never be prostituted for selfish ends or for the sake of merely earning livelihood or, worse still, for amassing money.
- Journalism has a distinct place in familiarizing and expressing public opinion.
- A Journalist's peculiar function is to read the mind of the country and to give definite and fearless expression to that mind.
- The newspaperman has become a walking plague. He spreads the contagion of lies and calumnies.
- The press was called the Fourth Estate. It was definitely a power but to misuse that power was criminal.
- Newspaper today had almost replaced the Bible, the Koran, the Gita and other religious scriptures.
- The newspapers should be read for the study of facts. They should not be allowed to kill the habit of independent thinking.
- Freedom of the press is a precious privilege that no country can forego.
- An itch for new is a variety of dissipation, debilitating to the mind and spirit, unless it is properly curbed.
- The liberty of the press is a dear privilege, apart from the advisability or otherwise of civil disobedience.
- The newspapers had become more important to the average man than the scriptures.¹⁶

To conclude it is worth to quote Martin Luther King(Jr) who wrote about Gandhiji in these terms: "Gandhi was inevitable. If humanity is to progress, Gandhi is inescapable. He lived, thought and acted, inspired by the vision of humanity evolving towards world of peace and harmony. We may ignore Gandhi at our own risk."¹⁷ The three important prerequisites of a journalist should be courage, conviction and conscience on the basis of which the edifice of a fearless and favourless fourth estate stands. Ethics is nothing but "life worth living or life that is simply satisfactory" which is more important than moral conduct.¹⁸

¹³ J.V. Vilanilam (2006), *Growth and Development of Mass Communication in India*, National Book Trust, New Delhi, pp.192-193

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ J.V. Vilanilam, *Op.Cit.*, pp.198-199

¹⁶ www.gandhi-manibhavan.org

¹⁷ Bidyut Bhattacharya, *Mahatma Gandhi and Journalism* (Feature), 30.09.2002, PIB Press Release

¹⁸ P. Siger (1993), *Practical Ethics*(2nd Edition), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, p.10

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