Has Indian news media come of age?

For once it seemed like Indian news media fulfilled its role as it called attention to the safety for women. With access to social media platforms, the so-called ‘middle class’ and ‘civil society’ have more opportunity and responsibility than ever before to keep the media honest, says USHA M RODRIGUES.

I am sad, very sorry, quite ashamed and angry about the 23-year-old paramedical student’s brutal gang rape and murder. Like others, I want to see justice done, and I want India to change. No more rapes, no more torture of a girl child, and no more murder of the helpless.

But, I am grateful too. As a person born in India but now living overseas, I am grateful for the presence of the media and journalists who covered the aftermath of the gang-rape, allowing citizens space and air-time to express their emotions, showing pictures of the outpouring, persisting with their questioning of those in authority to take action, for television debates and for print editorials to look at this complex issue of safety for women and girls in India.

It is because of the presence of a large number of news media, some of them broadcasting their stories via the internet, that I could be part of this shared moment of grief and resolve. For once it seemed like Indian news media fulfilled its role as it called attention to the safety for women and by-and-large commencing the process of building a consensus about what are the priorities of this issue. And, I optimistically hope that the media will continue to build this consensus where a society in transition starts to dissect the reasons behind the continuous murder and disrespect for women in the land where goddesses are worshipped.

As mass communication researcher Harold Lasswell (1948) a long time ago noted media is also a transmitter of the cultural heritage of a society, and in case of India with its age-old traditions, superstitions, and historical myths, the media would also need to shed light on some of these aspects of the cultural heritage that India needs to discard (here I am referring to the joint family system which makes parents value boys more than girls, the dowry tradition, a woman’s social status linked to her marital or maternal status, and a feudal power system where rights are reserved for those who carry the cane, and so on).

One of the common criticisms of Indian news media has been that it lacks depth. Almost all of the news channels tell the same stories with very little variety. But, in this case, the television channels not only
showed restrain in their coverage of the girl’s background (admittedly the relevant law may have forced their hand), but provided space for more views and debates on the issue of safety for women. If television used its visual strength to highlight the protests, the print media used its words to put forward detailed arguments and emotions.

The point I am trying to make here is that often commentators fault the Indian media for being sensational and being TRP ratings driven – but it needs to be acknowledged that the size and reach of the Indian media is the envy of the world, particularly the developed nations. If Indian media covers an issue with a level of maturity and sincerity, the Indian society would be served better than any other community in the world, because no other society has the privilege of having 700+ television channels, thousands of print newspapers and magazines, and a thriving film industry. It should be a fact that is celebrated not lamented because of the diversity and plurality of expression it provides to its citizens.

I heard and read insensitive and primitive statements of the politicians (who by the way represent and reflect views of many in the Indian society), I heard ministers go on a number of news channels pretty much saying the same rehearsed words of assurance and resolve, and I also read and heard others including politicians cry for the dying girl and noting the deepening of democracy in India with the rise of middle class and youth in India which protested against the gruesome act.

Indian news media as a collective provided a platform for people to express themselves – whether on paper, on camera or on their web sites. Now, the hope is that the administration will fill the loopholes which have let the violent act of rape go answered all over India; and the media will continue to cover the issue to keep the administration honest to its words. But, it is the people, the civil society, which needs to do its part – that is to let media know when they are asking the right questions.

Media does to a large extent reflect the society – so it is the civil society which can force the media to reflect what matters to them. If they want to watch / know how badly Amitabh Bachchan’s toe nail hurts (even if he does not want that to be broadcast), then media will show that. But, if people want the media to beam those camera lights on the plight of the poor and vulnerable in society, on maladministration, and on solutions to these problems, then the media will do that.

And as argument goes, if the media is after the eyeballs of the middle class because that is what advertisers want, then the middle class bears the burden of that attention. It needs to use its privileged status to uplift the lives of those more unfortunate then them in this transitioning society.
At least, in India, unlike some of the more advanced / developed nations, Indian civil society cannot say that they do not have a choice in media. The curse of concentration of media ownership has not yet sucked the life out of the plurality of media in India. And, now with access to new technologies and social media platforms, the so called ‘middle class’ and ‘civil society’ has more opportunity and responsibility than ever before to keep the media honest.

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