

## MEDIA AND ENVIRONMENTAL DISCOURSE

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### **Nepal Divested**

The series of earthquakes of around 7.8 magnitudes rumbled the entire city to wreckage with a distinct sense of *déjà vu*. An irreparable damage has been done. Countless death and injuries, millions of people rendered homeless. The beautiful valleys in the country obliterated. In the matter of the seconds, the “Land of Temples” lies quite in rubbles. The entire World is yet to come out of this stagger. With the speculations of more such strikes, a worldwide alert is declared. Not long back Japan faced almost the same story with the earthquake of magnitude 9.0 triggering tsunami, killing some 27, 500 people followed by a Nuclear-catastrophe in the northeast Japan. The most devastating happening of the times after the Second World War pushed Japan back to the times of their past wreckage. Japan took hundreds of years to come out of that rubble and found itself in the same soup. With radiations levels soaring in the seawater near Fukushima environmentalists felt the ripples of it across globe. Global Warming has become the most talked about issue. On the 45<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Earth Day, its imperative to open a serious discourse about the coverage of environment issues by the media.

In all that happens around us, media plays a pivotal role for any issue to enter into an arena of public discourse. The media furnishes our consciousness with the people, places and events that we call reality.<sup>1</sup>We, consciously or unconsciously, rely on media to comprehend issues. We depend on media sources to help us make sense of the cascade of information and news around us. As remarked by Hannigan this is more so in the case of information about environmental risks, technologies, and initiatives.<sup>2</sup> So, the news media plays an immensely critical role in society. It acts as a mobiliser of the information. The question here to ponder over is, does media takes interest in mulling over such issues pertaining to environment or consumer for that matter? How objective media is, in providing such issues of great concerns? What language is it using in, from news stories to advertisements to obituaries to wedding announcements, to mobilize people or providing them with objectivity in an issue?

The present paper discusses how media has been handling the fragile issue of common concern, which affects their lives to core in some or the other way. To this end, the paper is divided into three sections. The first section gives a backdrop of the lure of media in covering issues related to environment. The second section takes it ahead that what is actually the role that the media is playing in negative or positive senses. The last and the final note encapsulate the entire discussion.

### **A Conceptual Background**

A widespread recognition of the environment as an issue was first noticed by the Western media in 1970s, with the celebration of Earth Day. The interpretation of the Earth Day as ‘Day one’ of the new environmentalism was widely embraced by media. The environment moved from the being the fringe issue to an issue of paramount concern to the public. By the time of the UN Conference on Human Environment was held in 1972 at Stockholm, although there was a considerable coverage by the Western media, leading to public awareness; the Indian media coverage totally ignored environmental concerns are related it to Western fad irrelevant to Third World countries.<sup>3</sup> The developing countries, including India, seemed to be skeptical to the issues of environment. In the conference, to an utter surprise, in a stirring speech the then

Indian Prime Minister Smt. Indira Gandhi quipped that ‘if pollution was the price for progress, we want more of it’<sup>4</sup>. There seemed to be a widespread assumption amongst the developing nations that prosperity is more important than any green movement.

Although it is not the case as of now but the fact remains that environment has never been a political agenda in elections are otherwise till date. Rather it has always been viewed in the framework of environment Vs development, and development has always been at the priority list of not just the politicians but also the voters. Mass media also in the process has been least interested in covering environmental issues because it was fetching no business to them. So the due attention to environmental issues was absolutely ignored by media.

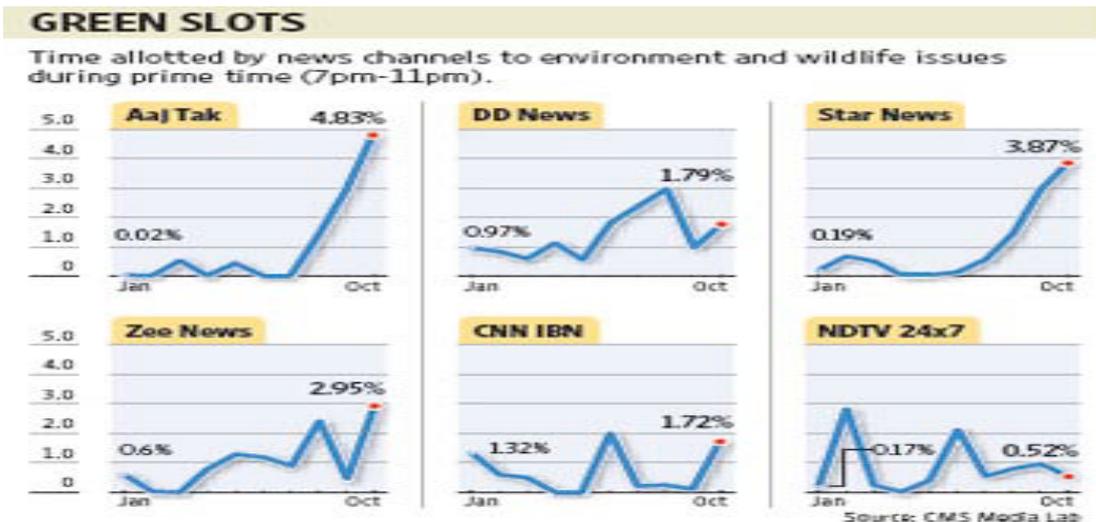
The Bhopal Disaster in December 1984 was a watershed as far as the Indian environmental reporting was concerned.<sup>5</sup>For the first time media began paying attention to the seriousness of the environmental pollution and other problems. The magnitude of the disaster shook many newspapers out of their indifference to environmental problems.<sup>6</sup>It can be thus rightly said Indian media took note of issues such as environmental and ecological degradation in different parts of India, and the human sufferings that followed in its wake since 1980s.

Anyhow, it was better late than never. 1990s brought Indian media the sense of importance of such issues, and this led to the massive coverage of Earth Summit held at Rio de Janeiro in 1992. The trend was on an upward direction in 2000s as well. One thing is important to note at this point of time is that although there has been a remarkable shift of media attitude towards ecological discourse, yet the media had failed massively in taking up cudgels in such issues of grave concern. Also, it has been observed by environmentalists and others that views and demands of environmental organizations have not been adequately and aptly presented in the media.

Trends over the last few years show that the environment has been reported consistently for less than 2% of the prime time in television news. And it is definitely not a front-page priority for our newspapers. Recently, however, there has been a visible increase in the number and scope of environment stories across media. An analysis of CMS Media Lab of prime time news of six national and popular news channels supports this conclusion, as we see sudden spikes in environment and climate change coverage.

The CMS reports that there are special initiatives and campaigns by news channels highlighting climate change, such as the NDTV green campaign. Also, special programmes and discussions on environmental issues are more visible in non-prime time TV slots throughout the day. Newspapers have had occasional environment stories on the front pages, but significant space and columns for these issues are now noticeable on the inside pages of most newspapers.

Source-CMS Media Lab, November 2009



### Media –An Informer, a Mobiliser or a Framer

As already stated that media coverage is most important for any issue to enter into public discourse or become a part of socio-political issue. It is also true that it purely depends on media to help make sense of the cascade to its target audience. The power of media lies not only (and not even primarily) in its power to declare things to be true, but in the power to provide the form in which the declaration appears. Kuhn rightly opines that changing the dominant paradigm changes the picture sketched by the empirical evidence, the transfer of information from media to individuals also changes the picture of reality.<sup>8</sup>

How justified Media has been to the public in providing a paradigm of understanding has been discussed in this paper. To ponder over this I have chosen three cases, to see how objective has media been? Has it been just an informer, or a mobiliser or a framer of the viewpoint for that matter?

#### I - Narmada Bachao Andolan

The Narmada Bachao Andolan, was incepted by an NGO fighting for the rights of the people displaced by the Narmada Valley Projects. The said project's reservoir was said to be submerging 40,000 hectare of agricultural land and some sites in around 326 villages. The NGO stood against the project and organized a rally in the valley from July 29 to August 4, 1999. More than four hundred odd people from all walks of life, and from nook and corners of the world came to participate in the rally. One of the most elite newspapers of the country The New Indian Express said, "For the first time some of us heard about the NBA, we thought of Michael Jordan. But the Narmada BachaoAndolan has nothing to do with claiming hoops. All they want is the justice for the dispossessed in the 'big dam' projects but what works against them is their militancy".<sup>9</sup>

As a matter of facts NBA was adopted the Gandhian philosophy and methods of protest. Although the movement itself has always been non-violent, its leaders have been jailed; but there was no trace in actions of NBA to be considered as militant. In another instance NBA activist said, "We will immerse ourselves in the water, we will use non-violent methods to achieve our objective". Surprisingly the correspondent's interpretation said, "Suicide by drowning seems pretty violent in any case".

Times of India, one of the most widely read national dailies argued that the big dams were the only means of irrigation, energy and drinking water needs and would largely outweigh the adverse effects. It hailed NBA as, 'militant', 'obstinate', and 'unreasonable'. The participants in the rally were described as 'merry makers, 'city dwellers' and 'romantic environmentalists'. The bias towards the environmental organizations as sources is evident in how their statements are framed. Officials and experts "say", "explain", "assert", "clarify", "reveal", and "reiterate" while environmentalist groups "claim", "argue", "allege", "charge", and "contend". These terms raises doubts in the minds of the readers.<sup>10</sup>

The point to be taken into cognizance here is that actually news is a version of reality shaped in significant part by the media or journalistic, to be more precise, norms and conventions. This is what creates an area of confusion. Now these norms include variety of topics from coverage, to importance, to placement of a news, to jargons used and to many more such considerations. And environment, unfortunately, falls prey of such, so called, "norms" and "conventions".

## II - Toxic Pesticide In Coke And Pepsi

The Centre for Science and Environment (CSE), a renowned research based NGO, based on the findings of an investigation conducted in its laboratory, released a report in August 2003 that revealed that major soft drinks marketed in India contained extremely toxic pesticide residues. This was for sure a matter of grave concern for common consumers, but to an utter surprise many newspaper reports did not see the laboratory results as facts and continued to describe the revelation as "allegations" and "charges". Deccan Herald, reported, "The arch rivals Coka and Pepsi together unanimously denied the CSE "allegations" and urged an independent scientific probe."<sup>11</sup> The Hindu's report said, "parliament was today quick to banish from its premises the soft drinks manufactured by Pepsi and Coca-Cola following allegations by a non-governmental organization on tuesday that they contained toxic pesticides."<sup>12</sup> Same such statements were found in The Tribune, The Times of India, and the New Indian Express. Of the 58 reports published between August 6, August 12, 2003, in eight newspapers as many as 37 of them described the CSE's findings as allegations. The official and industrial sources dominated the coverage. Some newspapers dumped reports of CSE's announcement to the inside pages and put the reports of the rejects of findings of the sift drink companies on the front pages. In the downpour of Public Relation tactics found in the news and advertisements in "public reactions" about the CSE findings selectively quoted consumers were frequently seen on media saying that they would continue to drink the soft drinks in question as they felt the controversy as a sheer politics.<sup>13</sup>

## III - Infestation Case Of Cadbury

On October 2003, just a month before Diwali, the Food and Drug Administration Commissioner received complaints about infestation in two bars of Cadbury Dairy Milk, Cadbury India's flagship brand with over 70% market share. He ordered an enquiry and reported this to media immediately. Over the following 3-week period, resultant adverse media coverage touched close to 1000 clips in print and 120 on TV news channels. To an utter surprise an observation reveals that the media had been constantly supporting Cadbury by emphasizing that it is directly related to the storage linked problem and has nothing to do what so ever with the production. In next six months, an Editorial Outreach program with 31 media editors across 5 most affected cities was orchestrated by the Cadbury PR agency to get senior Cadbury spokespeople to share their version of events in one-on-one meetings. The traders, and consumers, were reached nationally through a press ad 'Facts about Cadbury', released in 55 publications in 11 languages. There was a flurry of advertisements on TV showing Brand Ambassador, none other than Amitabh Bachan, visiting Cadbury factory and assuring people that it is safe.

## Conclusion

The preceding cases prove that environmental issues receive less credence in coverage by the media, whether it is print or electronic. At times it is able to fetch media attention and space due to the force of ways and means used by them, like demonstrations, strikes, celebrity endorsement for the issues; and all these provide a good spice to the news story. But the issues remain out of focus of coverage and hence fail to mobilise the masses.

Off late media is reflecting a lot of concern over environmental issues but the manipulation of the language makes a mark on its readers, which can not be simply ignored. It surely has the power to mobilise people not just in participating in the controversy but also in mobilising people to contact the authorities concerned on action taken, as done by new media in Anna Hazzare's case. But how much power does it usurp in mobilizing people is an issue of grave concern. And in a case of lack of mobilising information it leaves the audience to their non-concerning and least interested attitude towards the issue; and the whole effort of those fighting hard to wreck up the issue goes in vain. Rather it creates a dichotomy in the minds of the consumers of the news, in whatever form. This gives media, an informer a shift from being a mobiliser on the social and environmental issues of the society to a framer of the issue according to its whims and fancies. One can't deny the fact that any news does not have a homogenous effect on the reader.<sup>14</sup> It affects primarily on people with relevant issue attitudes, lower participation skills, and or lower efficacy; yet these people are the major constituents of the society, and are the consumers; rather if I rephrase it the people who are affected by it in actual senses.

## End Notes

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