

Kamala Saikia memorial lecture by Usha Rai



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Nava Thakuria 10 August 2010 11846 views

Here is the full text of 9th Kamala Saikia Memorial lecture delivered by eminent development journalist of India, Usha Rai today (August 9, 2010) in Guwahati. The program was organized by Journalist Kamala Saikia Memorial Trust in association with Guwahati Press Club at Vivekananda Kendra in the city.

Dear fellow journalists and friends

I am not a public speaker and hesitate when I am asked to come for such orations or lectures. But I could not refuse Dilip Chandan when he called me for I get extremely disturbed when I hear of physical attacks on journalists by people trying to brow-beat or silence them. I believe 18 journalists have been killed in Assam by Ulfa and others and there has not been a single arrest. It is shocking. As violence rocks our world, more and more journalists are dying in the conduct of their duties—such as the recent death of the Indian Express journalist Vijay Pratap Singh in Allahabad recently. I can understand and even condone the death of journalists killed covering wars, riots and such events, but to be bumped off by hoodlums or criminals who want to silence a journalist and send a message of fear to other journalists needs to be condemned in the strongest terms.

There is another reason I could not refuse Dilip. My nephew Sanjoy Ghose, a highly committed social activist, was killed by ULFA in 1997. I was then working with Hindustan Times and when he told me about how ULFA had threatened him if he did not back off from his work in Majuli Island and leave Assam, I decided to come for the meeting where the people of Majuli and the local leaders were to come out in a show of support for him. It was a tense meeting and despite efforts to break the meeting there was a solid show of support from the community he was working for. I wrote about this meeting and the threat to NGOs working in the North East in the hope that ULFA would be aware that the media was watching it. The story was front page anchor in Hindustan Times, Delhi. Buoyed by the support he received, Sanjoy decided to stay on and that was a mistake. The very next month he was abducted and killed.

I came back with Sanjoy's father on hearing the news of his disappearance and stayed here in Assam for about a fortnight till the police confirmed he had been killed.

I have been a development journalist all my life and when I was invited here I did some soul searching. All these attacks by Maoists and other extremists in Chattisgarh, Jharkhand, West Bengal, Bihar and Andhra Pradesh --- police personnel being killed, trains being blown up and poor villagers and tribals being exploited and caught in the crossfire makes me realize that we as the fourth estate have failed in our responsibility as journalists. We failed to report the lopsided development that has been taking place in our country.... the neglect of the rural people—villages and tribal pockets being caught in the bullock cart age while the affluent and the metros surged ahead. It is not as though no journalist has reported or campaigned on this growing divide between the haves and havenots in India. But it has not been strong and sustained enough to compel the government to focus on removing the disparities. In fact there should have been a national upsurge against the growing disparities and inequities in our society. At one end of the spectrum there was communism and at the other end capitalism. Feeble efforts at socialism got lost somewhere down our road to progress. In fact what we need is not these various 'isms' but a more just society—with an assurance of food, shelter, clothing, education and health facilities for all.

Business houses and corporate houses too failed Village India. They did not try to check this inequitable development by ploughing their resources, backed with management skills into rural India.... setting up industries and improving infrastructure to boost employment at the grassroots level. There were and still are exceptions—Azim Premji, Narayan Murthy and Anu Aga to name a few. We, the media, failed to report this lack of corporate social responsibility. Sustained writing, almost in the form of a campaign, was missing on exploitation of the tribals and their forest wealth, the large scale displacement of people, the pauperization of rural India, the lack of attention to the problems of farmers and the agriculture sector. Our inability to report all this accurately has led to the present malaise. Activists, who broke away from development as the government and the corporate sector perceived it, were derogatorily described as jholawalas, looney bins etc. Most journalists failed to correct this image of grassroots social activism.

If every newspaper and committed journalist had taken up cudgels for more equitable development in the country, would we have come to this sorry pass? If we can campaign on the murders of Jessica Lal, Priyadarshini Muttoo and Nitish Kataria, or the sexual abuse of a young sportswoman (Ruchika Girotra) that led to her suicide and get their cases reopened, surely we can campaign equally vigorously on the stagnation of development in our villages—on lack of good education, health care and employment opportunities... on inequities and poverty literally driving the marginalized into the folds of hardliners... picking up the gun to become militants or terrorists.

Both at the national and state level journalists cover various ministries but here too newspapers and journalists created a hierarchy. Finance, petroleum, commerce, external affairs and information and broadcasting were coveted ministries. A lower status was given to the Ministries of rural development, health, education, environment, irrigation and water supply and women. What they were doing... or not doing was seldom given adequate space in the media. Journalists too did not wish to cover these ministries because of their low profile. I have met journalists in national newspapers who have a tunnel vision and have never been to a village.

The few journalists who did break away from the stereotyped role of the media whether it was P Sainath, Darryl D'Monte or Kalpana Sharma or a Harivansh of Prabhat Khabbar, Ranchi, did get recognition. When I was in the Times of India, Sainath won an award that compelled the newspaper to publish a series of his articles. His stories were from the poorest districts of the country and were published on the last page of the newspaper. They were all wonderful stories and were read with great interest. But Samir Jain, the young owner of the newspaper, was not that happy. TOI was projecting itself as a paper of the elite and the affluent so the angry young proprietor asked the editor of the paper as to why these “down market stories of the poor were being published in an up market paper like TOI!” Fortunately, the writ of the editors still prevailed in those days and the stories were not taken off. Subsequently the stories were published in the form of a book titled, ‘Why everyone loves a good drought.’ The book and the stories won Sainath laurels and awards galore and catapulted him to the position of the top ‘development journalist of the country.’ Today he is the editor for rural news in the Hindu. Though Sainath taught journalism and groomed and encouraged several young journalists in the national and regional press to follow in his footsteps, they were not as successful as him. Even so, it was Sainath and the team of young journalists that he mentored that brought public attention to the large number of farmers committing suicides-- beginning in Andhra and spreading across the country. Very often Sainath built on the stories that these young journalists broke in some regional papers but his style of writing and the placement of his articles in the newspaper shook the government. Sainath’s regret, eloquently put across, was that the Lakme beauty contest was getting more space and time in newspapers and TV channels than the farmers’ suicides.

Twenty four hours television news channels have mushroomed across the country and one would have hoped that they would have time and space to devote to issues such as equitable growth of all sections of society, rural India and why it remains an outcast in development, the state of our tribals and their marginalization, However, though some efforts were made in that direction by a few channels—NDTV being one of them, their interest soon fizzled out. There was no advertising support for such programmes so rural reporting was not seen as good business. I remember in the seventies and eighties the Statesman award for rural reporting was a much sought after recognition. You don't even hear about it now.

However, with the return of Naxalism and Maoism, the growth of the Red Corridors has been documented. But it has been more sensational and political in nature than promoting development in the region.

In fact in their efforts to get TRP ratings, the media's focus has been on celebrities ... on film stars, fashion, food and frolic. Gossip has become an intrinsic part of today's journalism. Former cricket captain Azaruddin's alleged friendship with a badminton champion becomes front page news despite Azaruddin and the young, married woman denying the gossip. There have even been instances where film stars were called to anchor news on TV channels and to edit the day's newspapers. Several minutes on prime time goes to reporting fashion shows, Sania Mirza's wedding wardrobe and the escapades of our cricket heroes. These are all marketing gimmicks to increase TRP ratings. Newspapers are following in the footsteps of television with increasing focus on colour and glamour. In fact revenue earning supplements of newspapers called metro editions are largely gossip supplements—all about parties, fashion shows and VIP outings. Like coloured comics, these supplements attract young, upwardly mobile youngsters and college kids.

There was a time when newspapers were viewed as the conscience of a nation. They were called the fourth estate or the fourth pillar of democracy. Erstwhile editors, who watched over every sentence published in a newspaper, would not tolerate partisan or inaccurate reporting. Sources had to be quoted. You spent years in the reporting room groomed by the seniors. There were few schools of journalism. Most of us learnt on the job. But now newspaper owners consider themselves as businessmen. Newspapers are used to promote the many businesses of the proprietors and to jockey with those in power. Editors have been devalued and sidelined. Proprietors call the shots even on editorial issues. The proprietor/editorial director of one of the Capital's leading daily newspapers calls the editor to find out what is going on the front page and what line should be taken for the day's editorial. Another national daily has no 'one editor' at the top. The job is split between several editors—each having a say in a section of the edit page or the news pages. Today, there is a surfeit of editors, but no single powerful editor who has a total control of this newspaper.

The contract system that has come into newspapers has further denuded the powers of the journalists. Journalists are hired and fired if they don't fall in line. If the newspapers are not raking in money or, if journalists fall foul of a boss, they are sacked. During the recent recession there has been large scale retrenchment. This is happening in some of the top newspapers of the country and the smaller papers and regional press follow in the footsteps of their peers. Trade unions have ceased to matter even if they are there for public show.

Newspapers have not invested in journalists for reporting from small towns and rural hinterlands. Instead they had stringers who were paid per column inch published. The money they received was so little that many began to bully and even blackmail people to earn a decent living. Now the stringer journalist has become the newspaper's multi-purpose representative in small towns. He collects ads and doubles up as a journalist cum circulation rep. So you can imagine what kind of news stories they would feed the newspaper. Newspapering is passing more and more into the hands of marketing and business managers. The status of the business manager in some newspapers is higher than that of the journalist and even the editor.

The boom in the media industry is also seeing increased corruption as TV channels and newspapers vie with one another for greater clout and to garner more money. I remember the shock and dismay among journalists when we found the masthead of our newspapers being compromised. Little ads began appearing near the masthead in the ears of a newspaper or its top corners. Soon after, the anchor slot, which journalists jockeyed for, was grabbed by advertisements. Slowly ads began grabbing other front page spaces in newspapers. Now we often see ads or one ad on the whole first page. Sometimes there is a quarter cover on the front page which is an ad.

But worse was in store. Paid news has begun making inroads into editorial spaces. The line between the editorial and the advertorial is getting fuzzy. It is a dangerous trend and goes against the core beliefs and mission of practicing journalists. What is worse it is being done with the support of leading newspaper managements in the profession. Journalists have become pawns in this game. They are asked to write four or five articles on an issue or a politician with a particular slant and the money, which could be a couple of lakh rupees, goes straight to the management of the paper. Payments are also being made for not publishing certain types of news. So instead of being guardians of democracy, the media's principal business seems to be to make money. While it is true that good journalism needs money so that journalists can travel and report accurately, money is also needed to market newspapers and TV channels--- surely there have to be some parameters, some boundaries between commercial interests of the media houses and the ethical practice of journalism --to report fairly and accurately and to expose corruption in public life. Ministers in the present central government have said they were approached for payment of upto Rs 50 lakhs to get favourable coverage during elections.

I know that the media hates any kind of regulation or censorship. But there should be a regulatory body that is powerful and ethically run. We have the Press Council of India—but in its present form it is like a toothless tiger. The media barons just do not listen to it.

While self regulation is undoubtedly the best answer, it is just not happening. “Disclosure of interest at the bottom of the published story or at the end of a broadcast,” has been suggested by some people. I think every newspaper should have an ombudsman who would act as the guardian of fair and ethical reporting. One such attempt was made some years ago but was not sustained.

Another trend that is disturbing is the setting up of units within newspaper houses to promote social issues in journalism. As we all know social issues or development issues do not get adequate space or time in newspapers and TV channels. These units approach

big NGOs and even UN organizations to do advocacy for them. They take a lump sum and collect largely journalists from their own outfit for advocacy. This is definitely not as bad as paid news but the commitment to social issues unfortunately is confined to the one big event that is organized and is not reflected in sustained news on social issues. But because these advocacy efforts are backed by newspaper managements, willy nilly journalists are getting knowledge and training on how to report on social issues whether it is population issues or trends in sex selection.

I would however, like to end on a positive note and will quote from an interview of Anu Aga, who is the chairman of the Thermax Social Initiative Foundation in Pune and is on the National Advisory Council headed by Sonia Gandhi. Anu Aga symbolizes the best in corporate India and she managed and steered Thermax India after her husband's untimely death. The interview was carried by one of the finest publications on development issues called Civil Society. It comes out of Gurgaon and is edited and published by Umesh Anand, a former resident editor of the Times of India.

Anu Aga rightly points out that “we wake up only when people get violent.” She is worried because the recent spurt in the country's economic growth does not reach a vast number of people. “While a few are getting richer and making it to the Forbes' list, the reality is that the gap between the rich and the poor is widening. It is shameful that 49 per cent of Indians are malnourished and our neighbours, Pakistan, Nepal and Sri Lanka have done better than us,” she says.

“We often boast of our demographic dividend but if do not pay attention to malnourishment, which affects the brains of our child, the dividend may turn into a demographic disaster.” In fact, she says, we need to look beyond malnourishment to education, skill development and providing jobs to our people. The wealth generated by opening of the economy has been denied to the poor and the marginalized. But like ostriches we have buried our heads in the sand and do not want to understand the consequences of neglecting our large majority. We wake up only when people get violent as in the case of the Naxal movement.

While corporate social responsibility, keeping aside a percentage of the profits of the company for social causes, is important, it is equally important that the funds earmarked for social development by the government, reaches the people. Rajiv Gandhi had pointed out that there is gross mismanagement of 85 paise of every rupee allocated for social causes. Companies, Aga says, could offer their services to the government and through management skills help in planning and implementation. But at the end of the day accountability is needed. An average citizen finds it difficult to demand accountability but collectively business houses—through bodies such as FICCI, CII, Assocham—can demand accountability for government spending. If we in the media can collectively raises our voices and join the chorus of business houses for accountability, hopefully money earmarked for our rural areas and the poor will reach them. Instead of writing on the frolics and foibles of the rich and famous, the media should act as vigilantes.

Nava Thakuria

Senior journalist based in Guwahati.

BY NAVA THAKURIA

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