

Media Challenges Amidst Cultural and Religious Pluralism
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In a Multi-cultural and pluralistic religions situation of India the greatest challenges of the mass media recently was the pogrom in Gujarat. The mass media in English reported that there was a planned genocide of the Muslims in Gujarat following the gruesome burning of a compartment of the Sabarmati Express Train at Godhra on Feb 27, 2002, which resulted in the death of 57 the devotees of God Ram.

Day after the incident the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (The World Hindu Council) announced a national strike. But strike or no strike, many groups of people went around on the day of the strike and on the following days, weeks and months attacking Muslims all over Gujarat. Some people in the government machinery either supported the communal attack or sat at the fence.

The minority community of Muslims was no match for the systematically organized attacks of the fanatical and fundamentalist groups. The results were more than 2000 Muslims killed and about a lakh Muslims were made refugees in camps in their own country!

The main targets the communal attacks was small and big business establishments as well as the residence of the Muslims all over Gujarat. Consequently the Muslims suffered also loss of properties worth crores of rupees and got crippled economically. In Ahmedabad alone more than 500 small and big restaurants and hotels owned by Muslims were raised to the ground.

These attacks on Muslims all over Gujarat were carried out as if spontaneous outburst of anger of ordinary people as a reaction to burning to death of devotees of God Ram in railway compartment of Sabarmati Express. But to any discerning observer the Gujarat carnage was a well planned and executed in minute details by the politicized Hindu fanatics and fundamentalists with the approval and sometimes open support of the ruling Bharatiya Janta Party (BJP) and the followers of the Sangh Parivar.

The Gujarat carnage threw up great changes to the media in the state. The reaction to the carnage varied from paper to paper and from one television broadcaster to another. Radio and Government controlled Doordarshan gave the ruling parties' views. But the English press and the International Press and other media gave a totally different picture. A well known Gujarati columnist Mr Gunvant Shah was so exasperated with the English Media that he wrote in his Sunday column in "Sandesh" Gujarati daily.

"Tell a lie, but do it in English
Write a lie, but do it in English
Print a lie, but do it in English
This way you will make threefold profits:
You will be considered secular,
You will be considered intellectual,
You will be considered large-hearted."

Sad to say that, like fishing in the troubled waters, some Gujarati language newspapers were concerned not with fair reporting of the daily happenings but only on the money they can make and the circulation they can build up by supporting and fanning the communal tension.

The cultural and religious pluralism of India is very much in evidence in the north western state of Gujarat. This multi-cultural and religious pluralism made the communal situation worse and the challengers of the media even greater.

In the past the media especially the print media were mainly responsible for building up a society deeply rooted in tolerance and harmony in India. So during independence struggle the followers of different culture and religions came together. Hindus and Muslims, Jains and Buddhists, Christians and Parsis, stood shoulder to shoulder and they all unitedly opposed the British rulers for an independent India. The newspapers irrespective of their communal or political affiliation promoted communal harmony and a secular society in the face of cultural and religious diversities.

In a South Asian Seminar at Cochin in Kerala in February 2003 a speaker Dr Daniel Acharuparambil speaking on the theme "Media for Peace in South Asia" quoted Pope John Paul II: "The men and women of the media are bound to contribute to peace by breaking down barriers of mistrust, fostering considerations of other points of view, and striving to bring people together in understanding and respect."

Here lies the great challenges of the print and broadcasting media. How can we break down the barriers of mistrust? How can we foster consideration of others' points of view? and how can we bring people together in understanding and respect? The task for the mass media is indeed enormous. Herculean efforts are required.

But the people in the media need not get afraid of the enormous task if one is prepared for a step by step approach. The first step is shed ignorance and prejudice against the people of other religions cultures.

In India people are deeply religious of different religions irrespective of their But, Religions unit them. The perceived or imagined danger to one's religion make him or her to fight to protect his or her religion. Writers and journalists need to be fully aware of this situation where there is much ignorance and prejudices.

One way to fight against the ignorance and prejudice is to establish contact and good relationship between people of different religions. In my Christian and Hindu environment and culture I see a lot of enmity against the Muslims. Seeing that this enmity is created mainly by the ignorance and prejudice, I have been trying to establish contact with a few Muslim brothers and learn more about their religion, Islam as well as to portray the Muslims in my writing as human being not different from the people of any other religion.

In a concrete instance, I wrote an article in my weekly newspaper column that a Muslim man came to my rescue when my jeep had breakdown in a deserted road late at night, I got very good response to my article through a few letters and other personal compliments. In my article I praised the Muslim Samaritan for two things. First, he help me as a person in need without knowing my

identity, my religion or my organization. Second, he help me in a situation when Gujarat was totally unsafe for anybody especially the Muslims after the Godhra holocaust on February 27, 2002 and subsequent anti-Muslim pogrom in Gujarat.

Another concrete step to break down the barriers of mistrust is my recruiting for the first time a Muslim youth for my In-Service Training in Professional Journalism programme. The trainee Mr Imran Asmat Shekhani is a good boy that he easily mixes with other two trainees: one tribal girl and a Catholic Dalit boy and my staff personnel too feel at home with Imran. This is also the first personal contact with a Muslim at this deep level for all my staff and trainee personnel and I am sure that this interaction with a Muslim will leave lasting good impression on my staff and me.

Fostering the consideration of others' points of view is something I took seriously in my profession as a journalist. The prevailing context of anti-Muslim feeling and enmity in Gujarat certainly calls for the consideration others' point of view. In this context two books have helped me : Dr Sebastian Vempany's bulky volume of 504 pages - book "MINORITIES IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA." The book's portrayal of Muslims by the Islamologist has been so impressive and enlightening for me that I studied the book deeply and wrote a long review. A shortened review is being published by the "Third Millennium" quarterly from Rajkot.

The second book is entitled "THE SHADES OF SWORDS" by an acclaimed journalist and author, Mr M J Akbar. The subtitle of the book "Jihad and the conflict between Islam and Christianity" gives a fair idea of the content of the book. In it Akbar "explains how jihad thrives on complex and shifting notions of persecution, victory and sacrifice."

I found M J Akbar's book a great help in considering the Muslim's point of view about a host of things especially about current developments and trends in the world. In "The shades of Swords" Akbar as a Muslim reveals the Muslim's point of view of history in contrast to Western and Christian points of view and I found it Akbar's point of view very refreshing.

But in the multi-cultural and multi-religious context of Gujarat and for that matter, the whole of India, the biggest challenge to the journalists and writers is to bring people together in understanding and respect. While differences of any sort contribute to division and separation, understanding and respect bring people together.

Truth and genuine knowledge about various religions and different cultures contribute to understanding and appreciation of people different from one own religion and culture. Similarly journalists' attitude of love and respect also contribute to bringing together the people of different religions and cultures. Here lies the challenges for writers and journalists.

A media person 'has to tell the truth, nothing but the whole truth in love and charity. Communications of truth in love without religio-cultural bias foster understanding and commands respect. Such understanding and respect will certainly help people of different religions and cultures to came together in mutual love and appreciation because knowing the truth helps people to break down the barriers of ignorance and prejudices.

A media person has to make positive efforts in his or her works to cover and highlight the positive

sides and genuine qualities and achievements of people of different religions and cultures. Such efforts will certainly help to bring together people of different religions and cultures.

In short, personnel in mass media can give leadership to face and overcome the challenges posed by cultural and religious pluralism for peace and amity in the world. Here I suggest a few concrete steps.

First, study and understand sympathetically different religions and cultures.

Second, speak, write, broadcast positively about different religions and cultures.

Third, mingle and get involved with inter-cultural and inter-religious organizations and groups.

Fourth, have an open mind to accept and appreciate whatever is noble and up-lighting in different cultures and religions.

And fifth, cultivate and foster friendship with people of different cultures and religions.

This way a media person can not only become enriched but can also contribute substantially towards bringing people to face the challenges squarely amidst religious and cultural pluralism.