

Media can play a Preventive Role in All Disasters

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The following is the speech the President of India delivered while inaugurating the seminar "Role of Media: Preparing People to Cope with Disasters" in New Delhi on the National Press Day (November 16, 2000).

The revolution in communications and the omnipresence of the media have made the world today more disaster-conscious than ever before. It has been estimated that during the last ten years the highest number of disasters that struck the world was in the year 1999. India is particularly vulnerable to disasters given its immense population, geographical extent, vast coastal belt and the spread of rivers and mountains. In fact almost 30 to 40 per cent of the days in a year witness, apart from man-made disasters, natural calamities like floods, droughts, heat and cold waves, and tropical cyclones. Referring to this phenomenon Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru in his letter to the Chief Ministers of India on September 1, 1950 wrote:

I imagine that India has set up some kind of a new record, not a record to be proud of. It is a record of disaster and calamity, one following another in quick succession, bringing sorrow and misery to vast numbers of human beings.... we do not yet know the full extent of this disaster in which millions of people are involved.

A few months later he wrote again:

Indeed, every calamity is a challenge to our nationhood... and a nation is ultimately judged by the way this challenge is accepted.

Nehru's admission that he did not know the full extent of the disaster testifies to the dearth of information on the subject. This lack of information itself can be described as a disaster. We can avoid this disaster only if the media plays its role in disseminating information. That role is not to advertise anti-earthquake pills and then ask the sceptical consumer "what is the alternative?" as it is said to have happened in the great earthquake of Portugal, but inform and educate, and prepare the public on the question. It is said that prevention begins with information. To a large extent the functioning of modern society depends on the fast spread of information through the media.

I am glad that this seminar has been organised by the Press Council of India. The Interim Report of the High Powered Committee for Preparation of the Disaster Management Plans had indicated that the Press Council would be requested to conduct a

workshop on the role of the media and disaster management. The Committee during its deliberations repeatedly focussed on the crucial role played by the media in disaster situations and highlighted the importance of disseminating reliable and correct information on disasters to the people so that they remain prepared to face such situations. Realising that the electronic media assumes greater significance for faster dissemination of information, it proposed that their role should be thoroughly examined and would request the Director General of Prasar Bharati to contribute a chapter on the theme "Role of Electronic Media in Disaster Management Efforts".

In our history there are lessons available about the use of mass media for awakening consciousness of the people to fight against outbreak of plague, cyclone, flood, earthquake, famines etc. For instance, Mahatma Gandhi wrote extensively in the *Indian Opinion*, the *Harijan*, the *Amrit Bazar Patrika* and several other newspapers about the methods to prevent plague. It is instructive to learn that Mahatma Gandhi in his articles, essays and letters blamed our unclean habits and unhygienic conditions for the emergence of plague and exhorted through his writings to make sanitation, what he called, the "alpha and omega of civic life". He even appealed to the educated Indians to become missionaries in hygiene and sanitation. Once when plague broke out in Johannesburg in 1905, he asked: "What is the duty of the press on such occasions?" The answer he gave to that question constitutes the theme of this seminar today. He wrote that the duty of the press was to notify the incidence of plague as soon as it occurred for information of the public so that they remain prepared to meet the hazard. After that he suggested that the press would highlight the people's faults which caused the disease. It is a fine example of strategic use of media for alerting the public to avert the problem and at the same time critically examine the actions of the people for its management.

I recall that when India was hit by plague in the 1990s many newspapers reproduced the writings of

Mahatma Gandhi on the issue and widely circulated them for the benefit of the public. It is because of the focus of the media on cleanliness and hygiene that many citizens of our country were motivated and cleared garbage from places close to their residences and put there a picture of a God or a Goddess to prevent others to throw garbage in the same places. This is how the media acted as a vehicle of preventive health care during that calamity.

In 1976 I was a witness to the great earthquake in China, the Tangshan earthquake, and I have vivid recollections of the manner in which the Chinese faced the calamity, by giving information to the nation and by organisation and collective action by the people.



In India soon after independence we faced a great human earthquake in the influx of refugees following the partition of the country. On one occasion when Mahatma Gandhi was asked to address the refugees at Kurukshetra, he agreed to do so personally by physically going there. When that could not be made possible he was requested to address the refugees through radio. That was the first and the last live broadcast by Mahatma Gandhi over radio which took place on November 12, 1947. It is interesting to know his feelings after he used the medium of radio to reach out to the distressed people. Referring to the radio he said:

This is a miraculous power. I see Shakti, the miraculous power of God in it.

In the twentyfirst century in a well-wired and connected world, Gandhiji would have expected us to render better service to the people by using the miraculous powers of space technology, information technology, electronic media and many other channels for faster communications. I am glad that the Minister for Information and Broadcasting Hon'ble Smt Sushma Swaraj has declared November 12, the day on which Mahatma Gandhi addressed the refugees over radio, as the National Public Service Broadcasting Day.

The UN World Disaster Reduction Campaign, which was launched in 1998, underlined the necessity of enlisting the media as working partners in promoting natural disaster prevention measures worldwide.

The super-cyclone that hit Orissa's coastal belt rendered all the communications ineffective. Even the capital of the State remained inaccessible. At that particular time the HAM technology could have served the purpose of establishing the links. It is indeed a pity that the technology, which is available in our country, is not widely used by the agencies

concerned. I have come across literature which say that the magnitude of impact of the super-cyclone in Orissa could have been minimised if people had access to appropriate information. We, apart from the well-established print media, have space technology, information technology and a widespread network of TV and radio. These can be combined together to generate mass action at the time of disasters.

I was going through the Interim Report of the High Powered Committee for Preparation of the Disaster Management Plans. They have listed and identified several disasters, both natural and man-made. They have also outlined various steps to be taken to prevent disasters. May I suggest that in their final report a separate chapter on 'women and children' would go a long way in specifically addressing their problems. Because it is well known that they face the worst consequences of any disaster or calamity. Some studies show that women are pro-active respondents in relation to disaster management. The International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction has specially identified women and children as keys to prevention of disasters. Our plans for disaster management may have got an unintended male perspective. For instance, while constructing life-saving public shelters in disaster prone areas it has been found that women and children do not find easy and safe access to them. Therefore in any plan for disaster management, women should be mobilised and integrally associated with those plans. The media has a greater role to play in harnessing public opinion to this effect.

It is said that a free press and electronic media is the best guarantee against occurrence of famines. I am sure that the media can play a great preventive role against all disasters by informing and preparing the people to face such disasters.

In regard to man-made disasters like plague, AIDS and war and violence and social ills and injustices the media can do a tremendous lot in the way of prevention as well as alleviation of their human consequences. Incidentally, awareness and preparedness by the general public in respect of natural and man-made disasters, will be a sort of preparation of the people for dealing with any kind of emergencies that may befall the nation in a disciplined and organised manner. The media today has at their disposal all the methods and instruments that can educate and enable the people in performing their duty to the nation effectively, intelligently and speedily in times of crisis.

I congratulate the Press Council of India for holding this seminar.

Jai Hind.