

The Media in India
Fifteenth Lecture - by Mark Tully
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I would first of all like to thank the Governors of the Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Trust for inviting me to give this annual lecture. Looking down the list of my predecessors I realize that I am in very distinguished company, I find myself in this company not so much because of my own achievements but because I have had the unique privilege of reporting for the BBC from India for more than twenty years, much to the annoyance of some of my colleagues who understandably wish I would move over and make way for one of them, as perhaps do some of those who manage the affairs of the Corporation. It is the BBC, and in particular its achievement in attracting and holding a very large audience in India, which has made me widely known.

Historians will I believe see the year that has elapsed since the last Nehru lecture as a turning point when they evaluate the legacy of the first Prime Minister of independent India. This year there was the tragedy of Rajiv Gandhi's assassination. He was the third member of the Nehru family to be Prime Minister of India. He left no obvious successor and so his death could well mean the end of what has come to be known as the Nehru dynasty, which has dominated Indian politics since Independence. At the same time the policies and principles of Jawaharlal Nehru, which have been generally accepted as the foundation underpinning the Indian state, have never come under such strain as they have this year. In the general election the right-winged Bharatiya Janata Party, which rejects Nehru's concept of secularism, became the largest opposition party in Parliament in Delhi and for the first time came to power in Nehru's home state, Uttar Pradesh, which is also India's most populous and politically important state. Nehru's socialism has been challenged by the economic reforms the new government has brought in, which could—and I emphasize the conditional—be the start of a freer, much reduced role. Abroad the collapse of the Soviet Union has challenged the relevance of the non-aligned movement which Nehru played a leading role in founding. It has also undermined India's own independent foreign policy by which Nehru set such store. That policy has been an attempt to maintain a balance between India's relations with America and the Soviet Union. One American diplomat said to me recently: 'India has been playing the Soviet Union off against us, but that will have to stop now. You need two powers to play off and now there is only one.'

Much of the debate about the future of the principles laid down by Nehru is conducted in the press. One recent article in the Calcutta Telegraph carried the headline:

Time to Discard Nehruvian Mindset.

Others have of course challenged that view. It would therefore be appropriate to start by looking at the role the press has played in the development of Indian democracy, and then to consider what effect it will have on the changing times which lie ahead.

Quality more than quantity

The press in India still has a small circulation. The magazine *India Today* has the largest circulation in the English language press and that is only 400,000. The major Hindi Daily the *Navbharat Times* has a total circulation of 250,000. But it would be a grave mistake to estimate the press's influence by its circulation. More than one person reads each newspaper, many more according to readership surveys.

The impact of the press is much wider than its readership. In the first place the elite rely far more on the press than they do in countries where the electronic media are regarded as reliable sources of news and opinion. India is a country where the elite play a role which far outweighs their size, their purchasing power, and indeed their visible political power. The attitude taken by the national press has in my view done more than anything else to preserve for so long an atmosphere in which it has not been quite polite to question Nehru's secularism. It has also, I believe, helped to distort secularism. The national

press has tended to give the impression that to worship in a temple or a mosque or a church is to be communal.

The press is also one of the most important sources of information for politicians. Almost every day I watch the noisy proceedings of zero hour in the Lok Sabha (Parliament). I see an opposition MP brandishing a newspaper as he vociferously demands an explanation from the government. Press reporting was the basis for the two opposition campaigns which have had the most profound influence on Indian politics in the last twenty years. It was press reporting of corruption in the state of Gujarat, of the behaviour of a Congress back-bencher, and of the car plant Indira Gandhi licensed her son Sanjay to set up, which lit the flames of the Jayaprakash Narayan or JP movement in the first half of the seventies. That movement led to the declaration of a state of internal emergency in 1975. The eighteen-month-long Emergency is often seen as the one black spot in the history of the Indian press. They were dark days, the Emergency, but it is not true to say that the whole press collapsed or that all journalists accepted censorship.

It was also the press reporting of the Bofors affair, the allegations that vast and illegal commissions had been paid by the Swedish arms company to clinch a multi-million-pound deal for artillery, which kept the controversy going right up to the election in 1989. The Bofors affair seriously undermined the authority of Rajiv Gandhi. Although nothing was ever proved against him, the Bofors affair was also in no small measure responsible for his failure to win a majority in the 1989 election.

Rumours which are the most pervasive medium of information or disinformation in India also inevitably feed on the press. During the 1989 election I was a little surprised when a group of villagers in Uttar Pradesh told me they would not vote for Rajiv Gandhi because he had threatened the lives of their young men. One explained to me:

he does not mind about buying a bad gun, because his son will never join the army so he won't lose his life because the gun is no good. It's people from villages like ours who join the army and who will die. When I asked the man where he had picked up that gloss on the Bofors affair, which I had never come across before, he replied, 'I heard it'. It was a rumour, possibly, in fact highly likely, spread by one of the opposition candidates, but it had sprung from the press reporting of the Bofors affair. I will return to the subject of rumours later.

Positive influence

What has been the impact on Indian society of the very considerable influence that the press wields? On the whole I would say very positive. It could be argued that the national press is in better health than all the other institutions in India which provide the framework for democracy to function. Although national newspapers are almost entirely owned by industrialists or businessmen, they provide a broad sweep of information. There are papers which favour the government and those which favour the opposition, but for the most part, as with the British press, that bias is kept to the comment pages and the news is presented in a straightforward, independent manner. That healthy tradition is fraying a little at the edges, as was shown by the coverage of the dispute over the job quota for the backward castes last year. The press is an institution which has developed during the last forty years, too, which is more than can be said for some of the other institutions of India. It always had a lively tradition of political reporting, but investigative journalism has expanded into all fields.

What is depressing is the response of the other institutions to the exposure made by the press. There have been countless reports on bonded labour, but governments have not been able to take effective action against this form of slavery. Another subject regularly covered by the press is the lengthy detention of people awaiting trial; they often spend more time in jail before their case is heard than the maximum sentence for the crime they are accused of.

The higher courts have passed several orders against this practice, but they have lacked the power to

make sure that the state governments comply with their orders. Within a few miles of parliament there are stone quarries in which men and women work in the most dangerous conditions. MPs have often debated press reports on this; the quarries were even nationalized to improve working conditions. But the same contractors still operate them and conditions have not improved.

I do have one criticism of the national press. I think that the tone of its comments and editorials is too negative. There is a tendency to leap from the particular to the general and to portray everything in the state of India as rotten. This has certainly contributed to the loss of confidence: the inferiority complex of the elite which I believe is one-of the most serious malaise India suffers from.

But that's just one criticism, Delhi is at present plastered with advertisements saying the BBC has chosen the Times of India as one of the world's six great newspapers, a reference to the recent World Service Radio series about six international papers which included the Times of India. This has not of course pleased the other national papers very much, but I am sure the BBC was right to choose one Indian paper.

Defects of local press

I am not quite so confident about the press at the level of state capitals, and in the smaller towns. It has long been the policy of the government to promote the press there. Governments have been in part prompted by worthy motives—combating the influence of the great metropolitan cities, creating and nurturing talent in the smaller towns, preserving local languages and customs, and many others. The government has also wanted to build up competition to the national press. Here I think the motive has been slightly less worthy. There is no doubt that politicians have felt that local papers will be less secure and so more amenable to government pressure. Nevertheless no one can quarrel with the aim of building up the local press, even though the results have not been entirely happy.

Corruption is a problem with the local press. Some of it is comparatively harmless. I remember the government information officer in Allahabad telling me once that he could never use his official car because the driver was always taking journalists' children to school, or their wives out shopping. If he didn't oblige the journalists they would write stories against him or against the government, which would get him into trouble. A more serious form of corruption is blackmail. Blackmail is difficult to prove, because those who are its victims don't report it. But it is well known that there are local papers which do blackmail politicians, officials, and businessmen.

The reverse is also true. Politicians put pressure on local papers. One editor in the town of Faizabad had to flee because some politicians were so angry about his paper's line on the building of the controversial temple in the neighbouring town of Ayodhya. Some Hindu organisations and the right wing Hindu Bharatiya Janata Party are demanding that a temple should be built on a site currently occupied by a mosque. They say the site is the birthplace of the God Ram. This is one of the major political controversies of the moment.

In Punjab the press has for years been under pressure from the Sikh separatists. Some papers, in particular the Punjab Kesari have however resisted this pressure with great courage.

The most dangerous trend in the local press is to become involved on one side or the other in Hindu-Muslim violence and tension. Twice recently the Hindi press in Uttar Pradesh fanned the flames of communal violence. One was the occasion when Hindus tried to storm that mosque in Ayodhya and the police prevented them from doing so. Hindu sentiments had already been inflamed by the arrest of Lal Krishan Advani, the leader of the Bharatiya Janata Party. Advani had been travelling across India in a pick-up decorated to look like Ram's chariot, drumming up support for the Ayodhya temple. He had intended to end his journey in Ayodhya where he planned to make a ceremonial start to the construction of the temple. He was arrested just before he entered the state of Uttar Pradesh. In spite of police attempts to prevent anyone else reaching Ayodhya, a large crowd did gather on the day work was due to start. The police opened fire on them when they broke through barriers and threatened the

mosque. National news agencies reported that fifteen people had been killed; my colleague Christopher Morris who was on the spot said it was impossible to tell exactly how many had been killed, but he estimated about thirty. The Lucknow based Hindi paper *Swatantra Bharat* published its story under headlines which read: 'Unarmed Hindu volunteers massacred. Up to one hundred killed, twenty five bodies found, thousands wounded'. Three other Uttar Pradesh Hindi papers published similar headlines, which were gross exaggerations and deliberate incitements to violence.

In December last year some Uttar Pradesh Hindi papers published deliberately fabricated reports during Hindu-Muslim riots in the town of Aligarh, the seat of the renowned Muslim University. The papers reported that Muslim doctors in the university hospital had massacred Hindu patients. An independent enquiry into that report found it was baseless. It is significant that the next day the national papers which contradicted the report were burnt when they arrived in Aligarh in order to prevent their circulation. The whole incident was a deliberate attempt to defame Muslim doctors.

It must be remembered that both these incidents occurred in the same state and at times of heightened communal tension. It also has to be borne in mind that on both occasions the national press behaved responsibly. Nevertheless it is clear that India needs to give serious thought to ways of disciplining those who misuse freedom of the press —delicate and difficult though that task may be.

Broadcasting atrophy

Although there is no doubt that the national press has made a major contribution to the preservation of democracy in India, the same cannot be said for the electronic media. When Jawaharlal Nehru gave his opinion on broadcasting during the deliberations of the Constituent Assembly he said: 'My own view of the set-up for broadcasting is that we should approximate as far as possible to the semi-autonomous corporation. Now I think that is not immediately feasible.' I don't think that those of my colleagues who are in this council chamber would regard semi-autonomy as an approximation to the BBC, but India hasn't even got anywhere near that so far. Forty years and three major enquiries after Nehru spoke in favour of semi-autonomy, the government retains its monopoly over radio and television. Both All India Radio and Doordarshan, the television service, are departments of the government totally controlled by the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting.

In times when in other democracies viewers are being offered an almost bewildering choice of networks, almost all Indians can only see one channel and that is government-controlled. No one, not even the senior staff of Doordarshan in their private moments, would say that channel is worthy of the achievements India has made in journalism and films. Why is it that a country which can produce journalists like Kuldip Nayar, Khushwant Singh and M. J. Akbar, and film directors like Satyajit Ray and Shyam Senegal, should have such poor standards of television production and journalism? One obvious reason is that the bureaucratic structure of a government department is just not suited to running a television or radio station. It is impossible to give producers the freedom which is the essential requirement of creative broadcasting when there are ministers, members of parliament, secretaries of the government of India, joint secretaries, and a whole army of auditors and accountants looking over the director-general's shoulder, and claiming the right of interference.

But that is not the whole answer. There have been outstanding radio and television performers in India. I think in particular of my old friend the late Melville de Mellow, who took great pride in his work and went to quite extraordinary lengths to prepare his magnificent commentaries on state occasions. There have been director-generals, too, who have managed to make some mark. Recently Bhaskar Ghose was sacked as director-general of Doordarshan because members of the Congress party thought he was making it too credible. But for the most part the staff of both radio and television suffer from very low morals. They have slipped into the attitude of mind which characterizes so much of the Indian bureaucracy and, I suppose, to be fair, bureaucracies everywhere, that no one is going to notice whether they do a good job or not, so why bother.

Those who are keen soon get disheartened. When Bhaskar Ghose was director-general he decided that

there must be a cadre of professionally trained television journalists. He recruited some very bright young people and set up a special training course for them at the film institute at Poona. One of those trainees was posted in Jaipur where he was sent out to cover a story on the Bharatpur bird sanctuary. None of his earlier stories had been transmitted so he suggested to the station director that he should catch a bus to Delhi, only about eighty miles away, and take the story to the television centre there so that he could see it did not get lost on its way to the screen. The station director was horrified at what such diligence might do to disturb his peaceful life and refused to sanction the meagre sum of money required to go to Delhi. He said to the reporter: 'Bring the cassette back to me and I'll make sure it gets aired in Delhi.'

Two weeks later the reporter was in the station director's office and saw the cassette still lying on his desk. Now that may be a particularly bad example but no one can deny that Bhaskar Ghose's bright young reporters have had virtually no impact on Indian television screens.

Implications for democracy

How has the politicians' refusal to surrender control over the electronic media affected democracy in India? Well in the first place there are those who argue, with considerable justification, that it is a denial of the right of freedom of speech guaranteed under the constitution. That is a legal interpretation of the position. I would urge a political interpretation. I believe that television in particular has been not just controlled but also misused by successive governments, and that this misuse has been a major contributor to the growing feeling among Indian voters that politicians do not respect them, a feeling which is a serious threat to Indian democracy.

When Bhaskar Ghose was sacked for making television too credible the service returned to saturation coverage of Rajiv Gandhi. A few months later came the 1989 election campaign which Rajiv Gandhi had deliberately timed to coincide with the centenary of the birth of his grandfather, Jawaharlal Nehru, and the fifth anniversary of his mother Indira Gandhi's assassination. Both events inevitably received saturation coverage on television, too. The opposition made misuse of television a major campaign issue and the electorate rejected Rajiv Gandhi. I don't know how much Rajiv Gandhi's defeat was due to the voters' anger at the television coverage, but one thing is certain—the aim of that coverage was not achieved.

The basic weakness of the government's radio and television strategy is that it assumes the electorate cannot see through the game, and Indians do not like being taken for fools. The government which followed Rajiv Gandhi did introduce a bill to bring in a broadcasting set-up which would be nearer to Nehru's semi-autonomy, but government and parliament would still have retained considerable powers of supervision and there was to be no competition. That government did not last long enough to see its bill through Parliament. Now, it has to be said, the new Congress government is talking about competition. It will have to be seen whether it has really learnt the lesson of Rajiv Gandhi's defeat.

Of course All India Radio already faces competition from foreign broadcasters, and so now does Doordarshan, but before I talk about that I would like to say a little about the overall impact of the foreign press on India. The Indian press and Indian politicians frequently complain about the coverage of their country in the foreign press, particularly the British press. That is not because our coverage is worse, but because it still seems to matter most to Indians. Television gets the most stick. There have been many rows between the BBC and the Government of India. One row over a series of films made by Louis Malle and shown on the BBC in 1970 resulted in the expulsion of the then Delhi correspondent Ronnie Robson. It was a grossly unfair decision, because he had nothing to do with the films or the decision to screen them. The complaint was that the films, regarded by many in Britain as very sensitive, showed India as a poverty-stricken, backward, superstitious country, prone to corruption and disaster. This is the main burden of all the complaints about Western coverage of India.

India and the BBC

Whilst I would not support most of the criticisms of the Indian press and politicians I do believe there is a very real problem about television, and to a lesser extent domestic radio. Because India is no longer central to our interests it does not often find a place in news bulletins or current affairs programmes. When it does it is usually reports of a disaster, or a major political event. The disasters inevitably reinforce the image of India as poverty-stricken and disaster-prone. On the other hand major political events, or at least elections, should concentrate listeners' and viewers' attention on the fact that India is (to use a cliché) the world's largest democracy. But of course many of the images on television inevitably also remind viewers of the country's poverty. In one sense this problem is getting worse because with the tendency for BBC news at least to spend more time explaining the main stories there is even less chance of anything except a very major Indian event getting on the news. But on the other hand if the BBC goes ahead with a rolling news service on domestic radio there will be more room for India. At the same time the new BBC TV current affairs slot, 'Assignment', has shown two full-length documentaries on India in its first year. I also always remind our critics in India that both the BBC and ITV have over the years made many documentaries on a wide variety of Indian subjects, in strands which are not news or current affairs. This year BBC Radio 4 produced a series of reports on Indian culture in the 'Kaleidoscope' programme. Whenever I have spoken in India about the attitude to the foreign press, I have also pointed out that news in the hard sense is rarely good, wherever it comes from, I have also said, and I would stand firmly by this, that the Indian reaction, particularly I am sad to say the reaction in Parliament to foreign coverage, is often hysterical and demeaning. I say demeaning because I think it shows a lack of faith in India. It gives the impression that members of parliament believe British coverage of their country could undermine Indian democracy.

Foreign newspaper coverage of India does not, in my experience, create the same problems. This is of course partly because its impact is less. But it is also to do with the fact that the many distinguished newspaper correspondents who have served in India have had more space at their disposal and found it easier to get stories which are off the beaten track into print. But having said all that I do think it is important for all of us, broadcasters and newspaper journalists, to reflect from time to time on our coverage, not just of India, but of the Third World as a whole: to consider whether we do set their problems in context. They are after all immeasurably greater than the problems we face in this part of the world.

Foreign broadcasts which can be seen or heard in India are quite a different matter. They can have a direct effect on events there. Ever since the transistor revolution All India Radio has faced competition from foreign broadcasters, who with the arrival of cheap battery-operated sets have been able to penetrate Indian villages. All India Radio has ignored the competition, making very few changes in its style or content to match or beat it, and continuing to give little beyond the government line. That means inevitably that Indians get a different version of events in their country from foreign broadcasters, who tell both sides of a story. Another advantage the BBC at least has is that they do not have to clear news with the government. By that I don't mean we ignore the Indian government's view or fail to check our stories. What I do mean is that once we are confident about a story we broadcast it immediately. The effect of that was illustrated by the photographs of Rajiv Gandhi listening to the BBC to hear my colleague Satish Jacob broadcasting the news of Indira Gandhi's assassination. Satish was about five hours ahead of All India Radio, because they could not get approval to broadcast the news. I have talked about the BBC because the audience research figures show that we are the most widely listened to of the foreign stations outside the region. There is considerable listening to Radio Pakistan but that is to get another government's version of the news. I have also talked about the BBC because there is so much evidence to suggest that it is regarded as a major source of unbiased news by a very large number of Indians. There are the audience research figures which suggest that thirty-three million Indians regularly listen to World Service programmes in English and in Indian languages. But the evidence also suggests that the BBC's influence, like that of the press, cannot be measured just by figures. One example of this is of all things rumours. BBC appears to be so synonymous with reliability that when Indian politicians or others want to spread rumours they credit them to the BBC. The attempt to

storm the temple at Ayodhya was a good example of that. The Hindu fundamentalists who wanted to enrage their community spread rumours claiming that the BBC said the police had shot hundreds of people dead, but that Hindu volunteers had still managed to get inside the mosque compound and damage the structure. We had not, but the rumours were so pervasive that the chief ministers of Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal issued statements attacking the BBC for broadcasting them. The matter was also brought up at cabinet level, when, I have to say, one minister, George Fernandes, did ring me to check what the BBC had reported and told his colleagues. I wrote to the two chief ministers suggesting, politely I believe, that they should have been aware of the dangerous role rumours play during crises in India, and suggesting they could have helped to squash the rumours if they had found out what the BBC had actually said. They did not reply. But that's by the way. The point I am making is that if All India Radio enjoyed credibility the name of the BBC would not count for so much, and while that might be sad for us, Indians might be justified in thinking it would be good for them.

Challenge from cable

Now Indian television is facing a foreign challenge too. It comes from CNN and the BBC World Service TV. At present that challenge is limited to the comparatively prosperous urban middle classes who can subscribe to the mushrooming cable service which have dishes to pull down the satellite signals. The middle classes only need to be comparatively prosperous because the cable operators charge about £ 3 a month for their service. If satellite receiving dishes develop on the same lines as other electronic technology they will get smaller and smaller and cheaper and cheaper. That means the challenge to Indian television will intensify. It will, however, remain limited to the 3 per cent of Indians who have an adequate command of English, until the satellite broadcasters start transmitting news in Indian languages as of course World Service radio does. Nevertheless that 3 per cent is a very important segment of the population. They are the opinion forming elite.

How is India responding to this challenge? When I asked the secretary of the Information Ministry to reply to that question he said: 'Oh we don't have to respond to every little thing that happens, do we?' In the first session of the new Parliament MP's showed that their minds were still set on the old pattern of broadcasting. There was a major row in Parliament about a quiz on television. The answer to one question was that Mohammed Ali Jinnah had once described the Congress Muslim leader, Maulana Azad, as 'The showboy of Indian politics'.

Reminding viewers of this, was considered so derogatory to the memory of the programme that the minister had to apologize to the nation and the quiz programme was taken off the air. That indicates that MP's continue to believe they should have the right to control everything which goes out on radio and television. It also seems to me to indicate that they lack confidence in the good sense of their own people. Neither Parliament nor the bureaucracy of the information ministry would seem to have prepared themselves to face the new challenges from foreign television.

Having been the BBC correspondent in India for more than twenty years I know that the responsibility of having so many listeners in India is taken extremely seriously. Whenever questions are raised either by the government or anyone else, they are looked into by us in Delhi and by my colleagues in Bush House. Difficult issues like whether we should lay ourselves open to accusations about siding with the opposition by broadcasting their announcements about their plans to demonstrate, or how we should describe those who use violence to oppose the government, the terrorist problem, are mulled over endlessly. It goes without saying that BBC World Service television, whose twenty-four hour service to Asia starts tomorrow, take their responsibility equally seriously. But I think they will have a more difficult task. BBC World Service radio is primarily regarded in India as a broadcaster of news and this means it does not often face the difficult problems of the portrayal of violence and sex, the use of bad language, and even blasphemy, that BBC World Service television will. Apart from the news, almost all its programmes are going to be the same as British viewers see on BBC 1 and 2. They are, of course, made for a British not an Indian audience. India does not have the same views on such subjects as sex and blasphemy as we do.

Foreign television is undoubtedly an intrusion into other people's lives. It also has to be said it is an intrusion they often welcome. I personally hope, however, it is not going to lead to the undermining of cultures very different from those who make the television programmes. But it is going to be no good for countries like India crying themselves hoarse about cultural imperialism and the need for a new world media order. Attempts by the non-aligned movement to achieve a different media order have shown the futility of going down that track. Talk of banning satellite dishes will get India nowhere, too. Such a ban will become increasingly difficult to enforce as the satellite viewing habit spreads and the dishes to go with it. The answer lies in India using the undoubted talents of its own people to provide an Indian television service that they will want to watch; a television service that is based on their own culture. That, I believe, is the greatest challenge facing the media in India today.