

14th Annual National Conference on Electoral and Political Reforms

Date and Venue: 10th-11th March, 2018 at Indian Institute of Management (IIM), Bangalore

Background Note

Session: Political Reforms & the Fourth Estate

The Press is often referred to as the “Fourth Pillar” or “Fourth Estate” of Democracy because of the notion of the media as a watchdog, as a guardian of the public interest, and as a conduit between government and the governed. Media plays a crucial role in shaping a healthy democracy. It makes us aware of various social, political and economic activities happening around the world. It is like a mirror, which reflects the bare truth and harsh realities of life.

Political reforms and Media

The Press is an important player on the political stage. Journalists are often feared by politicians because they have succeeded in uncovering corruption, the abuse of power and assorted malfeasance. Policies have been changed, reforms initiated and corrupt politicians and officials ousted partly because of media exposes.

Media reminds the politicians of their unfulfilled promises at the time of elections. The exhaustive coverage by TV news channels during elections helps people, especially illiterates, in electing the right persons. This also compels politicians to abide by their promises in order to remain in power. The media also exposes the loopholes in the democratic system, which ultimately helps the government fill the vacuums of these loopholes and to make the system more accountable, responsive and citizen-friendly.

In Democracy, there are three indispensable functions of media: First, it must provide a rigorous accounting of people in power and people who want to be in power. Second, the media must provide reliable information and a wide range of informed opinions on the important social and political issues of the day. Third, it must state only unbiased and neutral facts.

Changing role of Media

Unfortunately, increasing commercialization has created stiff competition in media and in order to outdo each other, media houses are not focusing on responsible and serious journalism but openly resorting to “sensational and cheap journalism,” besides promoting the “Paid News” culture. What is even more disturbing is that now most of the media houses in India are under the control of a few vested business and political interests. Hence, the democratic interests of the many are being undermined by the private selfish interests of the powerful few. In some instances, the media is even being used as proxies in the battle between rival political groups, in the process sowing divisiveness rather than consensus, volatile speech instead of sober debate, and suspicion rather than social trust.

The impact of media is really noteworthy as it plays an important role in building mass opinion. Selective or excessive coverage can create or kill an issue. Constant repetition of the news, especially sensational news, breeds apathy and insensitivity. It leads to loss of public confidence in the media and in democratic institutions in general.

The Prognosis

The need of the hour is that media plays a more proactive role in the improvement of Democracy because of the enormous power and reach it has. It should never forget its Watchdog status and scrutinise all the Government/ Political Parties related activities, including the proposed and passed Bills, the schemes announced

and implemented, the scams and corruption charges reported, and last but not the least the statements made by both the Ruling Party as well as the Opposition Parties. It is imperative that the analysis of all the above mentioned activities should be reported to the masses without any bias or political influence. Media is an important tool to push for Political reforms in the country despite the constraints on editorial freedom and various other challenges. Notwithstanding the pressure from the Government through various agencies/tools under its command, the media will have to focus on internal functioning and funding of the Political Parties besides keeping an eye on the decisions taken by the Government.

By Aparna Lal
Senior Program Associate (Communications)