

## A DISCUSSION

## MUST WE IGNORE DEVELOPMENT?

Nikhil Chakravartty, Usha Rai, Mrinal Pande and Sanjay Ghosh talks about the issue at the Press Institute. Ashoke Chatterjee moderates.

**ASHOKE CHATTERJEE:** Development communication is a term often associated these days with the reporting of socio-economic activity in rural India, and more particularly with activities in the NGO voluntary sector. Several recent gatherings here in New Delhi have charged that mainstream media ignores development. Perhaps we might start by asking Usha Rai to clarify what exactly constitutes development? What is it that needs attention through better reporting?

**USHA RAI:** Here in Delhi, this process in newspapers begins with coverage of activities in particular ministries—Health, Environment and Education might be covered as 'development ministries. Yet few newspapers regard these as sources of priority news. Another reason why such ministries seldom get serious coverage is because the ministries themselves do not know how to project interesting information as news. The concerned organisations do not know how newspapers work or how to get maximum coverage. As they are considered low priority by newspapers, the beat is relegated to junior reporters. Thus neither the bureaucracy nor the newspapers are inclined to give development much importance. Then there are other challenges, such as rural coverage. It is often not possible to pursue stories in distant rural areas. It is not easy to travel and reach those areas, to pick up significant stories and new ideas. Often one may get an idea, but be too tied up with other work to have the time to follow-up.

**AC:** Sanjay Ghosh, you have been working in rural areas and writing from the field. What has been your experience with access to media, over the problems of distance and concern?

**SANJAY GHOSH:** I would like to start with the impact of recent policy changes on the thinking of media institutions. These have increasingly come to reflect corporate interests. Who is now left to play the conscience-keeper role of media—that for me is the main question. For example, when grain prices rose in the public distribution system and some 20% of the people in rural Rajasthan had to migrate in search of work, that did not get reported. It was not considered as news. The media now has no time for those who are not part of the market, and I am talking about people who are outside organised market systems. Development should be about social justice, not markets.

**UR:** But this kind of migration is news. How is it that none of us got to know about it earlier?

**SG:** Partly because rural problems are very complex. It is not possible to say that people migrated only because of the PDS crisis. There happened to be a drought and there was unemployment. People sold their ration cards to the shopkeepers to meet immediate survival needs. Because we live in that area and we have the experience, we can make such a statement that grain prices increased and so there was migration. And that should be news.

**AC:** Is it really a matter of distance that such information is not transformed into news? If developments like this could be transmitted on the telephone from Rajasthan to Delhi, what would it take to encourage the media to investigate?

**MRINAL PANDE:** Maybe if a daily like HT were approached they would do something. But it is a fact

that in most dailies, and I can speak with greater experience of Hindi papers, the professional approach is lacking. In addition, there is this obsession with political bigwigs. The real problem is that power and decision-making structures within newspapers have changed. The professional editor is discounted now. In the past, in most papers there was an editor in charge of news and another editor for views. News and views were segmented. News was not to be coloured by views, and news was to be kept above views. Because of that you were encouraged toward some kind of in depth sounding. Reporters went out to probe situations of injustice. Now what most papers want is either a very positive story—of almost a miracle occurring—or a totally negative story of the kind we got on the reservations issues. Secondly, most papers today are concentrating on and investing in technology. They are neglecting the professional aspect. Cost-cutting in news gathering leads to the employment of stringers, instead of building networks of regular staff. In many newspapers, stringers without professional training are given full jurisdiction over an area. They can quickly degenerate into influence-peddlers and local dadas, definitely not interested in stories about injustice or aggression. The angle of such stringers could be to support repressive power structures against the people, because they are being fed by the powerful, and they are also often subsidised in many ways by the State. So at the first information they would rush to report, say, the burning of a police station rather than the cause of an agitation. To my mind, this is due to the lack of professionalism. There are newspapers today which may sell less than 2,000 copies, but who flourish on this type of reporting through multiple editions. This is particularly alarming because more and more papers are indulging in this type of journalism. Viable stories get corrupted.

**SG:** The experience of activists in the field must be respected, and the field experience of journalists built up. This cannot happen overnight. We have been talking about attaching journalists to NGOs as a training opportunity. Many journalists have no concept of how even administrative matters are managed in the districts—of the difference between panchayats and patwaris, for example. You can imagine how this could affect reporting of Panchayati Raj developments.

**NIKHIL CHAKRAVARTY:** Panchayati Raj offers an enormous opportunity for sustained, in-depth reporting on what is happening to peoples' lives. The panchayats will be concerned with every aspect of development—environment, the status of women, health, education.

**AC:** The development page in the Indian Express was one effort to sustain important news from the field on such issues. What channels did you use for news-gathering Usha?

**UR:** We had people willing to write on development issues, mostly young staffers and people from outside who would contact us or whom we would commission. We had to build our reporting networks and our systems for ensuring reliable reporting. I might give them some ideas on what we were looking for. Or if I wanted to check some copy, I might send them to an NGO. We would get responses to reports from field locations from all over the country, people writing to say that they wanted to know more. It was amazing how many felt part of a larger issue through the sharing of news on our page.

**AC:** Nikhilda, the disappearance of a widely read and respected service like Usha's page in the Express suggests that development issues still remain peripheral within our developing society. Why is this?

**NC:** Well, newspapers usually treat development news more as feature material than as hard news. The real crisis is the subversion of news by poor editing. In an era of non-professional editors, advertising revenues and not news quality is the preoccupation of those who run newspapers. Where news is concerned, basically they are preoccupied with the citadel—the power centre is what counts; so 'news' and party politics are seen as synonymous. And although all parties demonstrate a concern for development issues in their manifestos—this can be traced back to Rajen Babu and the All India Congress Committee—but later, after Independence, this was never really a priority issue. Parties, like newspapers, all followed the line of the power centre. Winning elections and not social issues has become the preoccupation. 'Development' is okay for Sunday supplements, carrying these articles as features, not as news. The fate of Usha's page bears this out.

**MP:** It is not just editors but political cadres too which have been reconstructed. Once there was a sort of 'depth sounding' between journalists and politicians. Now that kind of relationship has disappeared. That quality of dialogue between political parties and journalists is almost nil. If I take in a young correspondent, his first desire is to be put on the political beat, or onto an important ministry where the minister has clout, and where contact with the powerful can serve career

advancement. Matters vital to people are not seen as attractive or useful to careers. Because of this, even interviews with ministers are often done in a way that would not put them on the spot. If you read the interviews with VIPs in most of the broadsheets today, these are in a way 'user-friendly.' Politicians and journalists use each other. In these ways a very unhealthy nexus is built up, so that development issues cease to mean anything. They are picked up only when they can be used as a handle or as a stick. This is what happened with the Rs. 2 kilo rice issue in Andhra.

**NC:** That's a good example. Most papers sat down and computed what it would cost the exchequer, and then whether this made N.T. Rama Rao a good or foolish leader. The issue of whether such rations could be demanded by people as their democratic right was lost sight of. When other parties and leaders picked up the Rama Rao strategy, it was still the political and populist projections with which newspapers were preoccupied.

**AC:** So in this situation, what can be made to change?

**NC:** For one thing, newspapers will need to break up the 'caste system' that separates development as one sector of activity rather than accepted as a cross-cutting concern. Panchayati Raj, the Narmada and Farakka situations are all examples— they embrace so many social, environmental, political and even diplomatic aspects. My submission is that development is not one-sided and media has a responsibility to commutate that. Not just whether dams should be big or small, but how they affect people today and tomorrow.

**AC:** In this context of attempting or encouraging a change, what contribution can come from the other side— from NGOs?

**SG:** NGO's and activists are part of the development process, often only a small part. The meat of the issue should be a concern with what affects people. It is not just a matter of reporting about NGOs. However, I am also concerned about the changes taking place in the voluntary sector. The team 'NGO' is taking on new implications. Many are having to restructure themselves, particularly in the changing circumstances of a state that is withering away. So in this whole reconstruction of the non-government sector, what I find difficult is that you will have activists now who may write against state atrocities. But how many would be prepared to do so tomorrow if it affects their funding? With

donors often regarding NGOs more effective than government institutions, national and international funding patterns are changing, bringing with them both opportunities and threats. There is a need to build and sustain true independence.

**NC:** Sanjay, these changes are taking place at many levels, not just in the NGO sector. The media has a responsibility to unravel these intricacies and to analyse them, and to spread the message that what is happening in the field is a part of global movements. Look at the manner in which good ideals and ideas— human rights, child rights, environmental protection— are being used to undermine the efforts of poor countries on the one hand, while also being used to highlight Third World concerns among the rich. The Morse Report on the Narmada is one example. The concern with people is what must be made to count— and there is hope because things are changing, even in the centres of power. It is this change that media must recognise and respond to.

**MP:** Very often when I go to the hq of an NGO I find they are not bothered about the actual work which is being done, but are only conscious of the impression they must make on the writer. In this I often find them no different to bureaucrats! Unlike journalists who may have been trained to be objective, NGO workers come from various backgrounds and classes, so their objectivity may be a coloured. Yet what I feel is that they are basically advocating the issues that confront us. No NGO worth its salt is set on self-aggrandisement. When NGOs indulge in tokenism, that is painful not only to the media but also to NGOs. We should be able to distinguish sincere work, and to give it space.

**UR:** I agree. Despite all the gloom, look at the situation Copenhagen has brought about. The spotlight will be on NGOs more than ever now. This is for sure!

**MP:** What we must help build is reporting skills within media that can respond to this opportunity. We need reporters who can shrewdly go beyond slick handouts from governments or NGOs and not be taken in by exaggerated emphasis on so-called success stories. All this implies that media set-ups need to be sensitised, modified so that professionalism can be restored.

**UR:** We need the success stories too. But I agree that preoccupation with success or failure is not the issue— it is understanding the development process and learning from it, and extending that learning to as

## VIDURA

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many as media can reach. For this, development must be acknowledged as mainstream, and journalists encouraged to recognise development as career-friendly. We need development editors, and development bureaux!

**MP:** There are good people in the Press who recognise this. It is they who help get out what we have and recognise as good development stories.

**NC:** I am hopeful. All this will take time, and it will take hard work on all sides. The interest in change is

there. The Charkha workshop Sanjay just organised is evidence of it. Such a gathering would have been impossible even five years ago. What we need is practical tools—things like a directory of development reporters and development media institutions, directories of NGOs in every region, training facilities for media persons, workshops of the kind we have had in Delhi but held all over the country to bring media and field activists together. All this must be used by us to sensitise and activate the reader and the viewer. The focus of all reporting must be on the human being. To attract and stir the citizen—that is the true job of the reporter.