

“India's booming paid media: it's factor and impact”**Dr. Mohammed Javed****Guest Lecturer****Rani Durgawati University. Jabalpur [M.P.]****Introduction-**

Indian citizens have the freedom of speech. But freedom of speech in itself means little without freedom of information. If you are free to decide for yourself and speak up, but you are deliberately fed information that makes something look really good and something look really bad, your condemning what was informed to you as bad, or your praising what was informed to you as good holds little meaning. Yet, your voice raised as an opinion lends its power to decisions the country takes. Indian media has been recognised as sensitive, patriotic and a very influential tool in the socio-political sphere since the days of the freedom movement. The father of the Indian nation Mahatma Gandhi initiated his movement with the moral power of active journalism. Paid news in colloquial use can refer to the practice of placing favorable news reports in mainstream news organizations. Practically, it extends to false or exaggerated criticism or deliberate double standards in evaluating. India has finally woken up to the menace of 'paid news' culture in mainstream media. The practice that involves money in unethically acquiring media space for the beneficiaries remained an important issue in India for many years. But lately a number of influential media persons' organisations have shown their concern with this kind of journalism in the country. The practice of offering envelopes to reporters remained visible across Asian media and especially India and China for decades. But lately the practice appears to be becoming institutionalised, not by poverty-stricken reporters but by the publishers themselves.

It is alleged that many media houses in India, irrespective of their volume of business have started selling news space after some 'understandings' with politicians and corporate people without disguising those items as advertisements. Today, India with its over a billion population supports nearly 70,000 registered newspapers and over 450 Television channels (including some 24x7 news channels). The Indian media, as a whole, often plays the role of constructive opposition in the Parliament as well as in various Legislative Assemblies of the states. Journalists are, by and large, honoured and accepted as the moral guide in the Indian society. While the newspapers in Europe and America are losing their readership annually, the Indian print media is still getting stronger with huge circulation figures and market avenues. For democratic India, the media continues to be acclaimed as the fourth important pillar after the judiciary, parliament and bureaucratic set-up.

The definition of paid news-

Paid news in colloquial use can refer to the practice of placing favorable news reports in mainstream news organizations. Practically, it extends to false or exaggerated criticism or deliberate double standards in evaluating. It can be used to influence decisions, as seen in the superb expose by Sainath of the favorable reporting of Monsanto by Times of India, which was aimed at preventing a ban because of farmer complaints. As it stands, the Parliamentary Committee report vindicated the facts from the expose in

their interactions with villagers. The Analytical Monthly Review has published a robustly argued article linking the phenomenon of paid media with the neo-liberalization of India's economy and media. Paid News has been defined by PCI as - Any news or analysis appearing in any media (Print & Electronic) for a price in cash or kind as consideration. Press Council of India guidelines say- news should be clearly demarcated from advertisements by printing disclaimers, should be strictly enforced by all publications. As far as news is concerned, it must always carry a credit line and should be set in a typeface that would distinguish it from advertisements.

The factors most likely to Influans -

India's Election Commission has detected hundreds of cases where candidates gave money to the media. In return, the newspaper or TV channel carried glowing reports on their campaigns and hyped their chances of winning. In a campaign in Punjab, rival candidates both gave money to the same paper. The next day, the paper predicted that both men were heading for victory. Then came the annual general meeting of the Editors' Guild of India during the fourth week of December, where most of the members expressed concern at the growing tendency of a section of media groups (both print and visual) to receive money for some 'non-advertorial' items in their media space. The Editors' Guild sent a letter to each of its member-editors throughout the country asking for pledges that his/her publication/TV channel will not carry any paid news as the practice 'violates and undermines the principles of free and fair journalism'.

According to PCI that Paid News misleads the public and hampers the ability of people to form correct opinions. It causes undue influence on voters and also affects their Right to Information. It seeks to circumvent election expenditure laws/ ceiling. Paid News adversely affects level playing field. An a video that went viral, the reporter is seen on the shoulders of the man, who is standing in the water and wobbling under the strain of keeping the reporter above water. It may have been just an isolated antic by an insensitive reporter, but it comes just weeks after a parliamentary report delivered a harsh rebuke to a much deadlier and more widespread practice - the oxymoronic phenomenon of "paid news". The report outlines what is now a well-known evil: how newspapers and television news channels take money in return for positive coverage. The money comes from business houses, individuals and politicians, particularly at election time.

The impact on Indian politics-

The Press Council of India, a statutory body that regulates India's media, said in the 2010 report that its guidelines stated that news should be clearly demarcated from advertisements. The report, though, lamented the council's lack of power to punish media companies that ignored those guidelines. It recommended legislative changes to make the council's decisions binding. Paid news, it added, should be punishable by law. The latest committee report reiterated the need for a more powerful regulator and hit out at the government for ignoring the council's recommendations. It found the current policy of "warning/admonishing/censuring" newspapers was insufficient and said the government should consider legal changes to allow fines, revocation of licenses and even criminal charges.

- The election-time paid news phenomenon has three dimensions. One, the reader or the viewer does not get a correct picture of the personality or performance of the candidate in whose favour or against he

decides to cast his vote. This destroys the very essence of the democracy. Two, contesting candidates perhaps do not show it in their election expense account thereby violating the Conduct of Election Rules, 1961 framed by the Election Commission of India under the Representation of the People Act, 1951. Third, those newspapers and television channels which received money in cash but did not disclose it in their official statements of accounts, have violated the Companies Act 1956 as well as the Income Tax Act 1961 besides other laws.

- The report also raised concerns about India's lack of restrictions on how large a media company can grow. The government should look at rules to avoid the development of monopolistic practices, it said. A spokesman for the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting declined to comment. An official at the ministry said the government was hoping to formulate a response by August. "This is the first time the ministry is handling such a report," the official said. "These issues are sensitive." Reaching a solution will not be easy, as the U.K.'s experience has shown. There, efforts to set up a powerful media regulator have gotten bogged down in a debate over free speech. The parliamentary committee acknowledged obstacles. For one, it's hard to prove paid news when the financial transactions that underlie them are often "clandestine," the report found. The issue, though, doesn't appear to be going away.

- The council found that 61 candidates admitted to paying for news coverage during Gujarat state elections in December. With national polls due in 2014, the issue is sure to come into the spotlight again, however dimmed. Paid news in colloquial use can refer to the practice of placing favorable news reports in mainstream news organizations. Practically, it extends to false or exaggerated criticism or deliberate double standards in evaluating. It can be used to influence decisions, as seen in the superb expose by Sainath of the favorable reporting of Monsanto by Times of India, which was aimed at preventing a ban because of farmer complaints. As it stands, the Parliamentary Committee report vindicated the facts from the expose in their interactions with villagers. The Analytical Monthly Review has published a robustly argued article linking the phenomenon of paid media with the neo-liberalization of India's economy and media.

The measures taken by the PCI about paid news-

The guidelines of the Press Council of India that news should be clearly demarcated from advertisements by printing disclaimers, should be strictly enforced by all publications. As far as news is concerned, it must always carry a credit line and should be set in a typeface that would distinguish it from advertisements. The guidelines of the Council, as decided in 1996, are reproduced hereunder and efforts should be made to ensure that these are followed by all media organizations.

- i) General Election is a very important feature of our democracy and it is imperative that the media transmits to the electorate fair and objective reports of the election campaign by the contesting parties. Freedom of the Press depends to a large measure on the Press itself behaving with a sense of responsibility. It is, therefore, necessary to ensure that the media adheres to this principle of fair and objective reporting of the election campaign.

The Press Council has, therefore, formulated the following guidelines to the media for observance during elections:

1. It will be the duty of the Press to give objective reports about elections and the candidates. The newspapers are not expected to indulge in unhealthy election campaigns, exaggerated reports about any candidate/party or incident during the elections. In practice, two or three closely contesting candidates attract all the media attention. While reporting on the actual campaign, a newspaper may not leave out any important point raised by a candidate and make an attack on his or her opponent.
2. Election campaign along communal or caste lines is banned under the election rules. Hence, the Press should eschew reports which tend to promote feelings of enmity or hatred between people on the ground of religion, race, caste, community or language.
3. The Press should refrain from publishing false or critical statements in regard to the personal character and conduct of any candidate or in relation to the candidature or withdrawal of any candidate or his candidature, to prejudice the prospects of that candidate in the elections. The Press shall not publish unverified allegations against any candidate/party.
4. The Press shall not accept any kind of inducement, financial or otherwise, to project a candidate/party. It shall not accept hospitality or other facilities offered to them by or on behalf of any candidate/party.
5. The Press is not expected to indulge in canvassing of a particular candidate/party. If it does, it shall allow the right of reply to the other candidate/party.
6. The Press shall not accept/publish any advertisement at the cost of public exchequer regarding achievements of a party/government in power.
7. The Press shall observe all the directions/orders/instructions of the Election Commission/Returning Officers or Chief Electoral Officer issued from time to time.

ii) Guidelines on 'Pre-poll' and 'Exit-polls' Survey-1996 The Press Council of India having considered the question of desirability or otherwise of publication of findings of pre-poll surveys and the purpose served by them, is of the view that the newspapers should not allow their forum to be used for distortions and manipulations of the elections and should not allow themselves to be exploited by the interested parties.

1. The Press Council, therefore, advises that in view of the crucial position occupied by the electoral process in a representative democracy like ours, the media should be on guard against their precious forum being used for distortions and manipulations of the elections. This has become necessary to emphasize today since the print media is sought to be increasingly exploited by the interested individuals and groups to misguide and mislead the unwary voters by subtle and not so subtle propaganda on casteist, religious and ethnic basis as well as by the use of sophisticated means like the alleged pre-poll surveys. While the communal and seditious propaganda is not difficult to detect in many cases, the interested use of the pre-poll survey, sometimes deliberately planted is not so easy to uncover. The Press Council therefore, suggests that whenever the newspapers publish pre-poll surveys, they should take care

to preface them conspicuously by indicating the institutions which have carried such surveys, the individuals and organisations which have commissioned the surveys, the size and nature of sample selected, the method of selection of the sample for the findings and the possible margin of error in the findings.

2. Further in the event of staggered poll dates, the media is seen to carry exit-poll surveys of the polls already held. This is likely to influence the voters where the polling is yet to commence. With a view to ensure that the electoral process is kept pure and the voters' minds are not influenced by any external factors, it is necessary that the media does not publish the exit-poll surveys till the last poll is held.

3. The Press Council, therefore, requests the Press to abide by the following guideline in respect of the exit polls: No newspaper shall publish exit-poll surveys, however, genuine they may be, till the last of the polls is over.

Conclusion -

A major new report on the phenomenon of paid news in India's media is, well, hardly making big news. The report, submitted to Parliament last month by the Standing Committee on Information Technology, is pretty racy stuff. It details how newspapers, television channels and radio stations allegedly take money for positive news coverage. It relies on previous reports by regulatory bodies and fresh testimony from a wide range of media representatives, regulators and government officials. The report, which points out that self-regulation by India's media has failed to stop the practice of paid news, has some eye-catching recommendations.

- It suggests a more-powerful regulator and stiffer penalties, including criminal charges possibly leading to imprisonment, for those who accept payment for news. And it lambasts the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting for "dithering" by failing to tackle the issue. "The rise of 'Paid News'," the report says, "has undermined the essence of a democratic process." Paid news in colloquial use can refer to the practice of placing favorable news reports in mainstream news organizations.

-Self-regulation is the best option to check the "paid news" phenomenon. However, self-regulation only offers partial solutions to the problem since there would always be offenders who would refuse to abide by voluntary codes of conduct and ethical norms that are not legally mandated. There should be a debate among all concerned stakeholders on whether a directive of the Supreme Court of India that enjoins television channels to stop broadcasting campaign-related information on candidates and political parties 48 hours before elections take place can and should be extended to the print medium since such a restriction does not apply to this section of the media at present.

- Practically, it extends to false or exaggerated criticism or deliberate double standards in evaluating. It can be used to influence decisions, as seen in the superb expose by Sainath of the favorable reporting of Monsanto by Times of India, which was aimed at preventing a ban because of farmer complaints. As it stands, the Parliamentary Committee report vindicated the facts from the expose in their interactions with villagers. The Analytical Monthly Review has published a robustly argued article linking the phenomenon of paid media with the neo-liberalization of India's economy and media.

References-

1. Press Council of India, Report on Paid News Dated: 30/07/2010
2. Communications Division Election Commission of India about Paid News-3rd February, 2011
3. Media collusion with politicians, business weakens Indian democracy
4. "Why paid news is a threat to Indian democracy". 5 December 2013. Retrieved 14 December 2013.
5. Paid News, The bane of ethical journalism : Sanjay Gaur - By Yking Books