

Development Challenges in Odisha: Role of Media in Public Policy

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What are the Development challenges in Odisha?

Odisha is among the poorest of India's major states, despite its rich endowment of natural resources, and coastline. There have been positive developments in recent years, and poverty rates in Odisha have declined from 47% to 39.9% between 1999-00 and 2004-05.¹ Despite this improvement, poverty rates in Odisha remain almost twice as high as rates in the rest of India. Non-monetary indicators of poverty too confirm the low welfare status of Odia households. For instance, infant mortality rates are 65 per 1,000 live births relative to 57 per 1,000 live births for India.² Maternal mortality rate, malnourishment is exceptionally high. Despite having 11 per cent of country's water resources, millions of people in Odisha face severe water shortage both for drinking and irrigation. Sanitation scenario is appalling. Only 8% of the rural households in Odisha use toilets as compared to over 80% of rural populace in Kerala.

Eighty seven per cent of Odisha's 37 million population is rural, and a vast majority of the poor live in rural areas.³ There are substantial regional variations in the extent of rural poverty in Odisha. Across the three regions of the state, poverty rates vary from 87% in the Southern interior region to 50% in the Northern interior region to 32% in the Coastal region. On account

of the very high population density in the Coastal region, however, the absolute number of rural poor is roughly equally distributed across all three regions of the state. Odisha lags behind the national average in almost all development indicators.

This high rate of poverty in India, particularly in Odisha can be attributed to :

- High level of dependence on primitive methods of agriculture. About 75 per cent of Indian population depends on agriculture whereas the contribution of agriculture to the GDP is 22 per cent. While services and industry have grown at double digit figures, agriculture growth rate has been less than 4 per cent.
- Unequal distribution of resources
- High difference in literacy rate. Although the overall literacy rate at 73.45 is close to the national average, there is high difference between districts. While the literacy rate in Khurda is 87.51 that of Nabarangpur is 48.2.
- Unemployment and under-employment. 60% of our labour force generates 18% of our GDP. Agriculture (as we know it today) condemns many Indian farmers to poverty because of low productivity. One lac of India's 6 lac villages have less than 200 people. Job creation clusters and soft and

hard infrastructure need size. New cities need to be engines of poverty reduction.⁴

- Environmental degradation.
- High population growth rate in many states, mostly North Indian states.
- High level of inequality arising from rural-urban divide

Fall out of continuation of poverty and hunger

Besides the human tragedy, one of the ramifications of poverty is a nation with weak and underproductive manpower leading to further poverty and thus continuation of a vicious circle. Poverty coupled with inequality in a society gives rise to social tension leading to class conflicts, which might tear apart the social fabric and bring about anarchy. The Maoist upsurge in Odisha, Madhya Pradesh, Chhatisgarh, Andhra Pradesh and several other states in India is the glaring example. “The extremist political resistance has gained ground at least in one fourth of the landmass at the very heart of the country.”⁵

Can Public Policy effect some change?

The answer is both yes and no.

Yes, if the policies are pro-people with a long term vision; and if the policies are properly implemented. Mal-implemented policies can be counterproductive.

No, if the policies are wrong. There is a cause for worry as public policy-making in India has frequently been characterized by a failure to anticipate needs, impacts, or reactions which could have reasonably been foreseen, thus impeding economic development. Policies have been reversed or changed more frequently than warranted by exogenous changes or new information. O.P. Agarwal and T.V. Somanathan have written a brilliant paper ‘Public Policy Making In India: Issues and Remedies’ in which discusses why India’s policymaking structures

have so much difficulty in formulating the “right” policy and then sticking to it. It goes on to ask, and make a modest beginning in answering, the question of what can be done to improve the structures and systems involved in the making of public policy in India. One of the suggestions that they have suggested is more engagement with the media and civil society at the policy formulation level. That brings us to the following question:

Why should media be concerned about Development Issues?

Before answering that one question: can media do something about it? We must note here that there are at least 3 major media traditions in modern India:

- Diverse, pluralistic and relatively independent press
- State-controlled media like AIR, Doordarshan.
- Media outfits of various subaltern groups and their organizations

Despite the wide diversity, in the present Indian context, media does play an important role in the exertion of power and distribution of values. Media affects the overall quality of public life and also shapes people’s engagement in the specific policy decisions in the Indian democracy. Now onto the question: why should media be concerned about poverty, or hunger, or displacement, unemployment, health, sanitation and issues like that ? There are basically three reasons:

- Media owes its status and power to its altruistic, do-gooder role
- As a product of the society media has a responsibility towards it
- As a business venture it has a stake in making people capable enough to contribute to the media business

Media enjoys credibility, built over years of faith and trust as it is perceived to be truthful, unbiased, knowledgeable, having basic humane values, having a moral universe and having social responsibility. In fact these perceptions are the fountainhead of the power of media. Media has to be altruistic in order to retain its power. People want to escape poverty. So poverty is a call to action - a call to change so that many more may have enough to eat, adequate shelter, access to education and health, protection from violence, and a voice in what happens in their communities. Media as the fourth estate must share the responsibility to help eradicate poverty.

Media has a responsibility towards the society as a product of the society. We don't help someone or something because we were the reasons why they got in trouble in the first place. We act because we can. For example, if we see someone who is drowning, we don't just let them suffer or die because we're not the ones who pushed them in the water. We act because we can, and because someone may die if we don't. Reducing poverty helps build stronger communities, more stable governments and improves the region's economics. For example, if developing countries gained even just 1% more of the value of world trade, it would lift 128 million people out of poverty. It would also provide economic growth for developed countries as new markets opened up to our own producers.

Media is also a business. Therefore like all honest businesses it has a stake in removing poverty. Improvements in the living standards and income of people would have significant economic benefits for everyone, including media business.

Status of development reporting

Now that we know why media should be concerned, the question remains: is media concerned. It will be pertinent to quote what one of our most respected journalist B.G.Verghe

wrote, "In the competition for circulation/ratings and a larger share in the consumer rupee through advertising there has been a dumbing down of serious reportage and analysis, a trivialisation of news and events, sensationalism and prurient coverage, invasion of privacy, trial by press, resort to rumour, gossip and innuendo without verification, and disregard for fair and balanced reporting or prompt correction when in error and the right of reply".⁶

A recent content analysis of three mainstream Odia newspapers shows that development news finds just about 2 to 3 per cent of the total editorial space. Does development news get prominence in mainstream Odia newspapers? The content analysis shows that just 0.4 to 1.57 per cent space in front pages of three largest circulated newspapers were occupied by development news. Were the development issues discussed in the editorial pages? Yes, but the space occupied just 0.47 to 1.45 per cent of the space.⁷

The trend is similar in newspapers of other languages, and other media like television. Increasingly more space and time is devoted to trivia, to non-issues. For example, the Lakme India Fashion Week 2008 edition produced, in one count, some 4,00,000 words in print. Over 1,000 minutes in television coverage. Some 800 hours of TV and video footage were shot. Close to 10,000 rolls of film exposed. Consider that this was the main media event in a country where less than 0.2 per cent of people sport designer clothes, where per capita consumption of textiles in 2002 at 19 meters, was way below the world average.

In its eagerness to cover non-issues, media is not focusing on real pressing issues. When hundreds of journalists and photographers were covering Lakme India Fashion Show or similar 'show's, scores of farmers were committing suicide in various places in the countryside. It did

not get the kind of coverage, it deserved. Growing hunger amongst the poorer sections in India should have been a matter of urgent concern anywhere in the world. With well over 300 million hungry people, India alone has more undernourished human beings than all of sub-Saharan Africa combined. But this does not seem a matter of grave concern within the media. There are a number of pressing issues that concern millions of people, like non availability of basic services- health, education, roads, which are not addressed by media. Non availability of drinking water in many parts of the country is a major issue. So is displacement. So is labour migration. The list is endless. Inequality between the rich and poor is growing. In fact it has grown more in the last 5-10 years than it had in the last 50 years after independence. Social tension is on the rise. So is violence. But mainstream media seems not to be bothered. There seems to be a disconnect with the ground reality. P. Sainath writes in anguish, "But how do we address problems whose existence we barely acknowledged in the first place? So forget about the agrarian crisis, and the 1,82,000 farm suicides associated with it over the past decade. And when was hunger and joblessness an issue (in the media), any way? Most publications have given zero space to India's dismal show in the global Hunger Index."⁸

Causes of the disconnect

Now onto the causes. There are two sets of causes really, one from the media angle, one from the media-users angle. First from the media angle:

- (i) After 60 plus years of independence, the missionary zeal of pre-independence media has lost its steam. Media is a business now, infotainment business with a bit of social responsibility thrown in. Since it is business it has to cater to the want and need of its consumers; more to want than to need.

Hence it gradually aims at lowest common denominator. Entire approach changes. Serious issues are gradually pushed out. The 'dumbing down' process is in place.

- (ii) Advertisement is becoming more important. With media becoming more capital intensive, and the product selling at less than the production cost, advertisement revenue is becoming more crucial for survival. The stake is becoming higher. Gradually what media needs is not readers or viewers; they need consumers for the products advertised. This role reversal determines the content. Media no longer needs people who would think, they require zombies, who would only consume.
- (iii) The media have, as P. Sainath puts it, "lost their compass, and with it, their compassion. What Prabhat Pattnaik, one of our foremost economists, calls, 'the moral universe' of the media has changed a lot for the worse. All their technical advances can not hide this. Indian journals of the freedom struggle had differing perspectives, angry debates. There was richness and variety. Today you have Mcmedia. It tastes the same everywhere."⁹ There has been, as P. Sainath puts it, 'a recession of the intellect' in the media.¹⁰

From the media-users angle:

- (i) The most cogent explanation for why journalism in the public interest has lost leverage was offered by Polk Laffoon IV, the corporate spokesman of Knight Ridder. "I wish there were an identifiable and strong correlation between quality journalism ... and newspaper sales," he said. "It isn't ...that simple."¹¹ Why does it happen? We, the media users seek entertainment in all forms, shapes and sizes and information that we can use for our personal gain.

- (ii) Serious issues bore us. We do not want to delve deep into the issue. It is easy not to be involved. We want light reading material, pretty picture to ogle at. And then get on with our mundane life.
- (iii) We need idols. And we now want them well dressed and well heeled. We need idols like instant coffee. Page3 personalities with their shallow but colourful persona fulfil this need.

But, what is the problem?

Many ask: what is the problem if media is bypassing serious, basic issues? That is what people want. And what is the problem *yaar*? Apparently there is none. But look closely. The process is changing the way we look at core issues. Serious issues. There is less space for serious issues and even lesser for its analysis. Media is supposed to set agenda, and in this way a totally skewed agenda is being set. As B.G. Verghese says, “Serious journalism must remain part of the democratic dharma. A true democracy is inseparable from an informed people exposed to diverse views and ideas.” Gradual trivialisation denies people this exposure. It is a threat to healthy democracy.

There is something more serious than this. This trivialisation process is eating into the vitals of healthy socialization process. Further it is stunting the humanizing process and triggering a sinister dehumanising process. It is promoting ‘I ...me’ culture. It is promoting a shallow, ‘all body - no soul’ kind of existence. It is a negation of what human civilization stands for. And we don’t seem to understand. There lies the big problem. As Prasannarajan writes in India Today, “The legitimisation of trivia as a cause only magnifies the pornography of protest, not the debatable bad taste of the act itself. It is a pretence born out of paranoia.”¹²

Consider what P. Sainath says. “If we were to look back at Indian journalism of the last 15 years—how relevant would it be? There were huge technological advances. Major gains in reach and technique. But how did the media connect with, say, the giant processes gripping the Indian countryside? Did it achieve greatness? Even goodness? Perhaps its mediocrity was too pronounced for it to gain even notoriety. (Though a few did manage that.)”

Is there a solution?

Yes there is. It lies in two levels: at the media consumers’ and at the media content producers’. Both media consumers and content producers can and ought to play their role to help mitigate poverty. However, I shall concentrate only on the role media can and should play.

What roles media can play?

Media can play five roles. There can be considerable overlapping in the roles.

- Media as a Watchdog: It is said that sunshine is the best disinfectant. That somebody is watching me- is the best deterrent to lot of social maladies like corruption.
- Media as an Enabler: Media increases people’s access to information. Information brings them power and to some extent prosperity. If we take a look at the media consumption and development matrix of Kerala and Bihar or Odisha, we shall find that there is a clear relation between access and use of media and development.
- Media as a Public sphere: People can air and share their ideas through mass media. Issues can be discussed. Suggestions for solutions of problems can be aired and discussed. For example media can help discuss the suggestions M S Swaminathan offered to mitigate hunger and ensuring food security in the ‘Food Security Atlas’.¹³ Socially

responsible journalism is a struggle to gain public space within the private sphere.

- Media as an Informer: Media can inform people about various problems of society, and what causes them, and what is being done or not done about them. This helps fix accountability.
- Media as a Platform: Media can provide a platform, where people can air their grievances, put forth their views, and participate in governance.

Conclusion

“At the end of the day, the media remains a public trust, which alone justifies its characterisation as the Fourth Estate. Its prime asset is credibility. The maintenance of professional standards of fairness, balance and public interest is critical to its place in society.” Forget this, and media will lose its credibility, and for media, especially news media credibility is the fountainhead of its power. One word for the content creators in media: development is not a ‘dry’ and ‘boring’ area. It can be made interesting reading/viewing. It is possible to present the stories in a way to shake people out of their stupor, to stir their collective conscience. All it takes is skill and application.

It is possible to meet the development challenges. We can, collectively and individually, participate in making that change happen.

Footnotes :

1. <http://planningcommission.nic.in/news/prmar07.pdf> Poverty estimates based on a uniform recall period suggest that poverty rates have fallen from 36% in 1993-94 to 27.5 in 2004.
2. National Family Health Surveys (2005-06) Fact Sheet – Odisha.
3. Odisha has one of the lowest population densities among Indian states.
4. India Labour Report, 2008

5. Medha Patkar and Amit Bhaduri, The State and its Stepchildren, Tehelka, April 11, 2009, p-44
6. Verghese, B.G. in an article titled, “Newspapers as a Public Trust”, published in The Hindu, 29th January, 2006. B.G.Verghese is a columnist and a Ramon Magsaysay Award winner. He is currently Visiting Professor at the Centre for Political Research, NewDelhi.
7. The content analysis was done by the students of Indian Institute of Mass Communication, Dhenkanal between August and October, 2008. The newspapers taken for analysis were Sambad, Dharitri and Samaj.
8. P. Sainath in an edit page article : ‘A recession of Intellect’ published in the Hindu, April 20, 2009.
9. Excerpted from P. Sainath’s book, The Indian Media: Illusion, Delusion and Reality’, a collection of essays in honour of Prem Bhatia, Rupa and Co, New Delhi, January 2006.
10. P. Sainath in an edit page article : ‘A recession of Intellect’ published in the Hindu, April20, 2009.
11. State of the News Media 2006 report presented by the Project for Excellence in Journalism, a research institute affiliated with the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism and funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts. Details at www.newswatch.com.
12. S. Prasannarajan, India Today/The Kiss of Death/ May 14, 2007. Vol. XXXII Number 19. Page 32.
13. The Atlas concludes with a “Sustainable Food Security Compact,” a nine-point action plan for every State and Union Territory. The action points refer to stabilizing population, conserving and enhancing land resources, ensuring water security, conserving and restoring forests with community participation, strengthening biodiversity, improving the atmosphere, managing common property resources, intensifying crop and animal production in a sustainable way, and forming a Coalition for Sustainable Food Security in every State. Details in : <http://www.mssrf.org/fs/atlas/atlas.htm>

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