

REVOLUTION AND COUNTER REVOLUTION IN MEDIA

The arrival of the electronic media and the resultant retreat of print media have fundamentally altered life and society in the late 20th century. Though the vast expanses of Asia, Africa, Latin America which constitute more than 2/3rds of the global space are yet to be well-acquainted with this new phenomenon, they cannot be said to be free from its impact for good or worse. Infact, these large areas are yet to well acquainted when with the print media, which is more than four centuries old. The reason is the economic backwardness caused by the imperial occupation both direct and indirect and lack of literacy. All literate people or literate communities are neither necessarily backward not uncivilized. Much before the society acquires formal literacy, it has its won conventions and traditions to store, sustain and spread knowledge and wisdom. The concept of the modern intelligentsia that literacy is to be all and end all of knowledge and wisdom is a particular type of myopia. Some of the greatest thinkers and reformers of humanity like Mohammed Nabi and Emperor Akbar were less than “literate”. Same is the case of a number of historic communities and cultures. But the new world of industry and technology has lost the ancient modes of gaining and propagating knowledge while they are not yet in full possession of the compensatory advantage of literacy. Thus they have lost the old world but gained no new world.

Unlike the printed word, the electronic media has the comparative advantage of being able to be of service to illiterate masses as well. However, in the case illiteracy has to be seen not simply as the ignorance of the alphabet. Even large sections of the educated are averse to reading habits. Reading involves effort much greater than viewing a cinema or watching a television programme. Therefore the new media is accessible not just to the vast majority of formally illiterate but to the formally literate sections too who are not particularly taken to reading habits. Because of this the electronic media may be said to be a more universal and popular form of communication which reaches vastly larger audience than that of print communication.

This characteristic of greater democratization and popularization of communication was evident in the period of transition from handwriting and calligraphy to print technology of movable types. There were many cultivated and educated scholars who considered the arrival of the printing technology in 1453 with alarm. The rear and apprehension of such people in the late middle age Christian Europe were equaled only by the feelings roused by the occupation of Constantinople by the Turks and fall of historic Byzantium. They though that the fall of Christendom before the “Islamic hordes” presage a terrible Apocalypse for

the entire human race. By an interesting coincidence, the historic fall of Constantinople and Gutenberg's invention of printing took place almost in the same year. The saintly scholars, who were disturbed by the "diabolic" invention of movable types, to be handled by the semi-literate, stinking proletarians, feared that the great art of calligraphy and copying practiced by god fearing, priestly clan and their acolytes in the sacred precincts of monasteries, would come to an end for ever.

Ofcourse the late middle age priests and monks were in the distinguished company of the great Plato who too considered the alphabet and writings as uncultured inventions. He detested the idea of transforming great ideas, which were the products of soul, into material objects and signs like stone, brick and papyrus, palm leaves and peculiar drawings called Hieroglyphics. The Soul was the gift of God and it is not given to human to defile it by transforming its products into material and mundane objects. We all know that ancient Indians also looked at the art of writings with suspicion and the best of their traditions like the Vedas were kept alive and transferred from generation to generation by oral transmission. Ancient Indian traditions are divided into Shruthi and Smriti. Shruti means what we hear and to that category they assigned the sacred Vedas. Ofcourse shruti was also later written down and subject4d to alphabetic technology by the great middle age scholar-statesman of Vijayanagara empire, sayana.

This short review of the progress of technology in communication makes it quire clear that the human kind always kept pace with an made use of the technological progress, for better or worse, but always with suspicion and trepidation. Such suspicions are heard even now when we are crossing the threshold of the 21" century with promise of *more tremendous* transformations in technology. We often hear from those who were largely bent and brought up in an age without such of cinema and television expressing their fears about its consequences. Though everybody watches television and *avidly* swallow its multifarious ware in plenty no one is satisfied with the value or moral of this new media, which is fast coming under the jack boots of commercial interests. Older men are even more worried about the harmful effect of television on the younger generation and even more on infants and adolescents. But the fact remains that the calls for the boycott of television fell on deaf ears including those of the ones who make such calls. Recently I came across a very perceptive and persuasive book called *Four arguments for Elimination of Television* by Jerry Mander (Goa, 1998). Mander's arguments were very convincing. There may be others who share his views. But one of the unchallenging factors of history is that we do not have an escape route from the progress of technology. There is no way in which humanity can reverse the march of technology. Great humanitarian 'drinkers and reformers

like Rousseau, Ruskin, Tolstoy and Gandhi advised humanity to take their steps backward from March of the *monstrous* machines. But all of them failed miserably. Therefore we have to *conclude* that attempts to shun machines and technology are futile. All what remains for us is to make use of all the technological progress to the best advantage of humanity and try to try to make it less harmful.

Now let us consider the mutually contradictory impact of all technologies whether in communication or other areas of human endeavor like production or other means of livelihood. On tile one hand technology promises to make our life 'and toil *easier* and save us much of the hard physical labour to provide us with more time al hand to be spent for art, philosophy, culture - and for those who are religiously inclined - worship and meditation. On the other hand these same *technologies* tend to *strengthen* the hands of those who oppress and exploit the majority of humans and sharpen the division between the haves and have-nets. Such sharpening of the class differences has taken place not only within each country but also oil a global scale. The modern *technology* and the industrial revolution have created islands of prosperity and luxury surrounded by large areas of slums and poverty where humans eke out an existence of penury, deprivation, dirt and squalor. It is such sights around our prestigious *metropolitan* cities like Mumbai, Calcutta and Chennai, which horrified Mahatma Gandhi and led him to. yearn for the sylvan Life of ancient self- contained villages. Ofcourse historically these ancient villages were also festering grounds of casteist discrimination and exploitation. But that is another matter. Mahatmaji's concept and dreams were different.

It is this technological process and *industrial* grandeur of the West that enabled them to conquer and lord over vast areas of the globe, now identified as the Third *World*. This general law of the twin aspects of technology is valid in the case of communication also. When humans, five thousand years *ago* invented alphabet it was a quantum jump for the progress of human kind. Knowledge *then*: onwards did not die with the *creator* of the knowledge. Knowledge can be stored vertically for coming generations *and* horizontally for *people* of other lands and dimes. That helped to add up knowledge of generations and the knowledge of the entire human kind and make them available far all people who cared. But at the same time alphabet also restricted the scope of the spread of knowledge and enabled the deviant minority to monopolize the wealth to the exclusion of the rest of the humanity. Humanity was divided into those who monopolized knowledge *and* science and others who were deprived of it. This majority who were deprived of knowledge and alphabet became the underdogs aid those who monopolized became the overlords. In many ancient societies there were not only traditions but

even stringent laws which prohibited humans of lower status taking to alphabet and learning. Our own Manusmriti's dictum that Shudras with alphabet knowledge must be shunned and even punished. Similar restrictive injunctions were there in other ancient societies also. In the 20th century nobody has the powers to put a ban on anyone learning the *alphabet* or practicing knowledge. But without a formal ban, there is the unwritten ban, which is implemented by the devious working of class, and caste societies, which in effect keep *millions* illiterate and ignorant. India has the dubious distinction of having: the largest collection of illiterates in the world.

The arrival of Gutenberg and printing promised an end to such discrimination by making the printed word available to all and sundry at a minimal cost. It certainly was another quantum jump in humanity's onward *match*, but printing requires machines and machines entails capital investment. Gutenberg's small equipment and its immediate successors might have necessitated only small investment. But as the printing progressed from *treadles* to machines run by oil, electricity and such energies increased the potential of machines and also the capital required for that and printing became such gigantic endeavors that smaller machines and smaller practitioners were driven out by the printing giants and monopolies. Here also the power of those who hold larger capital and larger machines in printing gave power to a few at the expense of the majority. So printing with high potential for democratic spread of knowledge and information finally ended as an instrument of power in the hands of a few at the *expense* of many.

Then came the electronic media. We have already compared the *Beater* reach of the electronic media than that of the print media. On the face of it, like all other technological advances in the history of human kind television too promised *Beater* democratization and universalisation of science and culture. But 'liere a so the inexorable law of sums in a class-divided society began to operate and this *Beat* technology became the handmaiden of fortune hunters and profiteers, the cultural leaders and artistic geniuses and philosophers who communicate with tire human kind have become pawns in the hands of hidden persuaders and mind Manipulators, whose only aim is to make a fast buck. The prototype of this new tribe of world conquerors, who subdue us not with guns and bombs or swords but the control they exercise over the airwaves, is Rupert Murdoch. Murdoch now excels the performance of the great conquerors like Alexander, Chenghis Khan and Napoleon. This quiet operator sitting in his luxurious and well-appointed office room in the top echelon of sky scrapers in New York, London and Hong Kong control the minds of millions and drive them along the lines, his cronies chart with small personal computers on their lap.

The word communication gives the impression of a community operating somewhere in this process. But electronic communication and the image communication are always a one-way traffic where. There are only givers and receivers of communication. The receiver is the victim of communication than participant in the *process*. Unlike in the comprehension in the print media our powers of reasoning are *suspended* in the course of the reception of the electronic message. Comprehending the printed message, you can always slow down the pace, ponder over what *you* have read, return to the older passage with which you want here to compare the present one. So your reasoning is alive. You are not a victim of *communication* but a participant in the dialogue with the text you are trying to comprehend. But in comprehension the message of the small screen or big screen you do not have such opportunities. Messages after messages are heaped *upon* you in a torrential rain so that by the time you *try* to think over what you have viewed or heard, another torrent is coming fast to devour you. No television is now free from the *trammels* of an overload of commercial advertisements, so much so, that all *the* information and cultural exchanges seem as only fringes and margins of the commercial advertisers' *domineering* message. So the most advanced form of communication has degenerated into an instrument of commercialism and consumer society and not the highway to knowledge and culture. *Knowledge*, information and Culture take a backseat in the festival of light and shadow *provided* by the electronic *media*.

The criticism of electronic media and its harmful impact on human kind which I have dealt with in *detail* may lead the reader to the conclusion that I too have become a victim of technology phobia, which characterize every stage of technological advance. It is true that I too *may* be a victim but what is the way out?. Thinkers and *philosophers* of *modern* communication have gone deep into this problem of media domination over human minds. They have devised methods of participatory *communication*, democratic control over the communication system and decentralization, of communication power. The case in point is the proposal made by the E.K.Nayanar Government to the Government of India on future television set-up in the country. The Kerala Government has suggested a 3-tier system of television communication in India. The first tier consists of *central* telecasting facilities, which will be operative on the national scale. The second tier will be confined to the present-day States or if possible, cultural and linguistic areas. Unlike the present practice, such television set-ups will not be in *any* Way subservient to the national system. They will be fully autonomous. The third tier consists of local television systems which can be established by municipalities, panchayats, townships, districts. and institutions like universities and factory complexes.

I do not say that this proposal is the panacea for all the ills of concentrated communication power that we discussed a while ago. But since there is no escape route from technology all what we can do is to serve it to the *best* interests of humanity. Therefore the built-in ills inherent in the electronic and global communication has to be met with equally ingenious social engineering. Among various challenges thrown up by the 21st century, universalisation and democratization of communication media must receive the utmost attention if we are *to* sustain our values of Freedom. It is heartening to note that along with the machines of concentrated power and hierarchical bureaucratic growth, ideas of freedom and empowerment of the people at large have received new fillips in the closing years of the 20th century. This message must be taken ahead and instruments of concentrated power should be demobilized to serve the empowerment of the dispossessed and dis-inherited majority of humanity. That decentralization also demands decentralization of economic and *political* power, which in the long run cannot be anything other than socialism.
