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THE IMAGE OF WOMAN IN COMMUNICATION MEDIA

1. Introduction

Communication Media acts as a mirror, in imaging the concerns, conceptions, capacities and aspirations as well as the problems, catastrophes and evils of a society. It also moulds, focuses and accelerates public opinion about issues and events. It is a well known dictum that the media creates and destructs images of societies, peoples and persons. Hence it is worth studying how the contemporary Communication Media projects the woman of India and how it represents her problems, aspirations and concerns.

Communication Media as generally interpreted consists of various channels of communication, namely the printed media, Films, Television, and Radio. If the meaning is stretched a little farther, novels, short stories, pamphlets and posters can also be accommodated in the printed media. Communication Media is also termed as Mass Media because their reach extends to vast heterogeneous masses of the population living in a wide and extensive area of a country. An outstanding feature of the Mass Media is that they are founded on the idea of mass production and mass distribution and mass audience. Copies of newspapers and magazines for instance, are printed in large number and circulated over a vast area. These media have a tremendous influence on the minds of those people who are constantly exposed to them. It is therefore not altogether wrong to presume that the above channels of mass communication are so powerful in motivating people's actions, behaviour and attitude. Could we then presume also that these media if used positively could propagate and inculcate healthier values in our society. We should at the same time admit the fact that in spite of the high achievements the media has acquired on the business front, has failed miserably in the social as well as in the human concerns. In a developing country like India the Communication Media has a spectacular role to play in the development of social, cultural and human values.

A cursory purview of Indian Literature (Vernacular as well as English, novels, short stories, poems etc.) will show that they project women as great mothers like Kunti and Ghandhari; sacrificing wives like Sita, Sati, and Parvati; passionate lovers like Nagakanyas and Apsarass; the beauty to be adored; helpless being to be protected; feeble minded sibling; pride property of the owner; domestic servant who needs no wages and have no rights; symbol of sex and synonym for sex etc. Quite often these themes become the basis for films. These concepts are hammered into the minds of millions of readers and viewers and thus a permanent attitude is moulded in the society. Since the power of media-field is so enormous, women themselves are drawn to frame such a mental set up. These distorted images reverberates passions in imbalanced minds and molesting, rape, bride burning and such inhuman actions follows. The press, reports these as crimes, with juicy captions and sexy narrations often throwing the victim to the mercy and compassion of the society who in return views the incident with an eye glass that the victim might have provoked the culprit. The police meanwhile leaks false reports and makes a twist in the investigation and the culprits are saved by maligning the already shattered victim. Moreover an event occurred in a remote corner is publicised stethoscopically which give license to make more and dirtier crimes. Thus the already tarnished image of woman is hardened in the consciousness of the society. The portrait of modern woman as voiceless and weaker is once again reinforced by the Communication Media. This vicious circle is analysed here in detail and an alternative is suggested as conclusion.

2. The Revelation of International Womens' Year

The year 1975, known throughout the world as the International women's Year, has confirmed the pitiable and derogatory condition of women which modern society is providing them. From the results and data that came out from various international and national conferences, workshops, round-table talks and seminars, Director General of UNESCO has observed that "we live in a society that is still patriarchal as its root a system which perpetuates male dominations and female inferiority. The social structures is continually reinforced through control of the institutions which shape society including the family, the education system, the religious places, the courts and of course, the media."¹ The

1. Niroj Sinha (ed.), *Women and Violence*, Delhi: Vikas Publishing House Pvt. Ltd., 1989, p. 108.

conference condemned the degrading exploitation of women as sex symbols and instruments of economic interest by certain media of social communications.

There has been an unanimous agreement that the image of women projected by the media constitute a main obstacle to eliminating discrimination against women and a main factor in preserving traditional sexist attitudes towards them. In all seminars and workshops during the Women's Year, the appeal was made to mobilize all forces in order to change and replace this image by truthful, honest representation of women who constitute more than half of the world's population. For instance, one of the recommendations of the Conference states:

Likewise these request those in charge of the mass communication media to ease projecting and gradually eliminate commercialized, tasteless and stereotyped images of women, particularly in pornographic publications, the use of such images in depicting sexual crimes and crimes of violence and dissemination of any material tending to create prejudice and negative attitudes with regard to the changes necessary for the revaluation of the role of women.²

3. Press Coverage of Women and Women's Concerns

Even in the present century, which is essentially an age of science and rational thinking, we still find the Law of Manu³ governing the thinking of our society. So Indian women are "under the disposal of father in childhood, of husband in her youth and of son in old age." Let us see now how the press, a very powerful medium of communication, treats women and her concerns.

First of all let us look at the newspapers. We find many of the leading papers giving catchy titles and flashy headlines making out very genuine news reports, into sensational events. Women are attacked in the street, parks and fields, nurses are raped by their doctors, students by their teachers and they are not spared even by patrol policemen. They are bought and sold and exported to red-light areas. These are the main

2. *Ibid.*, p. 109.

3. It was Manu's Code that has had the most negative effects, forging unbreakable shackles on Indian women for countless generations. Even today, it is his law that keep millions of women helpless in the prison of Hindu Society.

events relating to women that get published. Instead of highlighting the sad plight of the victims or the nature of the gruesome crime, such reports are made out to be just sensational descriptions of unwanted and unnecessary details. Here I would like to draw your attention to the recent incident that took place in Bombay – the brutal murder of two nuns on November 17, 1990. These two nuns had done outstanding humanitarian work and had devoted themselves to the care of poor orphan children. Their murder had caused shock waves not only in Bombay city, but in the entire country. Instead of getting to the bottom of the incident and apprehending the culprits, the police and medical authorities thought it fit to disclose details about the alleged sex lives of the victims. On November 18, leading newspapers of the city carried reports defaming these nuns which added to the shock of November 17. The news reports are as follows:

The Times of India: The post-mortem examination today revealed that the women were used to sexual intercourse and that one of them even had a sexually transmitted disease. *The Indian Express:* The sensational killing of two nuns on Thursday night in Jogeshwari, took a shocking turn today, with the post-mortem reports revealing that they were used to frequent sexual intercourse. Moreover, one of them was suspected to have been infected with a venereal disease. *The Sunday Free Press Journal:* Police sources confirmed the findings of the post-mortem report which stated that both the sisters had regular sexual intercourse. One of the nuns was also suspected to be suffering from venereal disease.⁴

This is how most often the reports are given in the newspapers. But what was the actual truth of the above incident? The post-mortem examination revealed no evidence of sexually transmitted disease nor that they ever had sexual intercourse. In reports of this sort an element of exaggeration creeps in and the poignancy of an emotionally torn victim is often forgotten. Most often reports do not probe deep enough into these matters, with the result that instead of curtailing crime, they promote it and the message is lost in the process of reporting.

Most of the news in the paper are concentrated on rapes, dowry harassment and deaths and other atrocities committed on women. The women are shown merely as the passive victims of such crimes perpetuated on them. Such reporting only immortalizes the situation and the

4. Cf. "Status Report on Nuns' Murder," *The Examiner*, Feb. 9, 1991, p. 149.

feeling of women's powerlessness and feebleness. There is no attempt to dig deeper into the facts of the cases and do any follow-up on the development on the police and court proceedings, and the situation of the woman concerned. Often the accused man goes scot-free or pays only an insignificant fine this fact goes unnoticed and unreported by the press. This sensationalisation in the reporting of those occurrences, the piling up of the reports and statistics of gruesome dowry deaths, rapes etc. often leads to a growing desensitisation of the reader population on these issues. There is little analysis of the underlying causes, the root situation of which these extreme manifestations are but the tip of the iceberg.

Any news other than such atrocities is often given a lighthearted or negative slant—whether it be the statement in the headline or in the choice of words used. For example, when the Times of India reported that woman pickpocket was caught red-handed by a woman, they chose to headline the news item: "Woman is woman's worst enemy." Many news papers often use such euphemisms and archaic phraseology as 'eves', 'weaker sex' etc. to refer to women, thereby indirectly emphasizing women's inequality to men.⁵

One finds little understanding and writing on the discrimination against women based on gender irrespective of caste or class—discrimination in the important fields of education, employment and participation in the political processes. Even the government, the upholder of the Constitution which promises equality to all citizens of India, sees woman as a second rate in their employment schemes. The Khadi and Village Industries Board considers women as "supplementary earners" and pays them wages lower than the men for the same work.

In India we are used to the traditional women's magazines like *Eve's Weekly*, *Femina* and *Woman's Era*, which mainly concentrate on fashion, cookery, tailoring, trips for holidays and homemaking arts. The articles, stories and even the style are framed according to the taste of the elite city dwelling women for whom reading is a passing time. These magazines take care to include some spicy items so that the circulation among the men folk is also promising. They further reinforce the perception of woman's role in society as that of ornamental wife and hardworking

5. Cf. Sucharita S. Eashwar, "Press Coverage of Women and Women's Concerns," in *Indian Women In Media*, Delhi: Lithouse Publications, 1984, p. 6.

housewife and mother through the advice columns, articles, interviews and stories. A woman's primary role seems, to get married and look after the needs of her husband and children. Her own needs as a person are secondary and could be sacrificed if they came in the way of her primary function.⁶

Most degrading and objectionable use of women is observed in pornographic literature of films which are on sale in huge numbers in the world market. These literatures of films have projected women as a mere sex object giving her status of non-person in political and economic roles.⁷

However, in the recent past we see a big growth in both the space given to news about women and the quality of the coverage on women. Even the traditional women's magazines have come a long way. They occasionally carry features discussing aspects of feminism and projecting images of women other than in "mother and homemaker first" stereotype. Many daily newspapers too have started a page or column which indicates their interest in women and this includes significant articles and features relevant to women in becoming aware of their exploitations and understanding their rightful role in society. These steps taken by the print media is definitely encouraging. Something is done, much is still undone.

What then should be the role of the press with regard to women? I feel it is time that the press take up women's issues more seriously and without any inhibitions set new trends in reporting and feature-writing. The press should be free and without prejudice to any caste, community or religion. It should specially highlight women's issues with the aim of both educating and enlightening them on their own problems, capabilities etc. Articles, features, letters to the editor, novels and short stories written on issues concerning women should find an important place in the print media, since this could mould people's attitudes and be a means of social change in the society. The press should have a censorship of their own so that women are not projected as mere sex objects for promoting business and sale of goods. Such advertisements cause much damage to the whole concept of womanhood and moreover,

6. Sutapa Sarkar, "A Fallen Image - Women in Media," in *Indian Women in Media*, Delhi: Lithouse Publications, 1984, p. 43.

7. Sinha, p. 42.

lower her status in the society. The momentum of women's struggles in the urban and rural areas can be strengthened by a wider coverage and proper attention from the press. It will not only help unite women in their efforts to free themselves, but also perform another equally important task - that of awakening and persuading the society to help stop gross gender injustice towards women who are always considered as second class citizens.⁸

We may not need to wait long for this self awakening because more women are attracted to the profession of journalism. I myself have met many women reporters of established newspapers who are moving in their Kinetic Hondas and compete with the men counterparts efficiently. So I do hope that, in the near future these professional women journalists can change the present day inhuman coverage of women.

4. The Exploitation of Women in Advertisements

Ours is a consumer society. Because of the power of advertisements we buy things which may not be necessary for a standard living. But for pompous and status we amass things and become possessive human beings.

To sell a tractor, splash a woman's picture with it and it is sold. Similarly to sell a two-in-one transistor, advertise a bikini-clad woman displaying the ware over head, it gets the required market. In the cinematic world, woman are displayed scantily clad on highway hoardings, that is what helps the producer get box-office. Fiction books with obscene woman's pictures on the cover makes the best sellers.⁹

The purpose of advertisements is to persuade to sell products. Advertising is a very big business and at times under the archaic illusion that what is good for advertising is good for the country. For some ad-agencies, this may seem selling regardless of the human consequences.¹⁰

8. Cf. Sarkar, pp. 42-43.

9. Asha Ramesh, "Movement Against the Portrayal of Woman in Media," in *Indian Women in Media*, Delhi: Lithouse Publications, 1984, p. 1.

10. Wilson Bryan Key, *Media Sexploitation*, New York: New American Library, 1976, p. xvi.

Advertising today is an inextricable part of the social milieu. As such it is not surprising to find that the medium seeks always to define women in relation to men, whereas men are defined in relation to their work or their creativity. Advertising mirrors women's life in our male dominated world, but in doing so strengthens and supports the partial world-view of and about women. Media images have circumscribed women's body, mind and soul to serve male goals.

It is a known fact to almost all, that advertisement uses women as sex objects. Keval Kumar defines advertisements thus:

An advertisement is the picture of a pretty girl eating, wearing, holding, showing or driving something that somebody wants to sell. Advertisement may be a pretty girl business and it must be acknowledged that a pretty girl is an immediate attention-getter. Cigarette ads have been the most guilty in this regard. For instance, Regent's advertising campaign to inform readers that prices were being slashed, depicted the zip on a girl's dress slipping down day by day. A public outcry forced the withdrawal of the campaign. Regent's special Filter's Current ad depicting 'an exclusive affair' is an equally poor taste.¹¹

Women have always become targets of exploitation. Take for example, the ads of everyday commodities like blades, shirtings, towels etc., the ad invariably carries a woman, worse still, a semi-clad or scantily clad woman advertising the product in a suggestive posture. Even if truck or tractor tyres are to be sold, it is found that the use of a woman is very crucial in its sale. Why should a woman be found perched atop a tough tyre? Why should a woman very scantily clad be found clinging sensuously to a brand new dunlop tyre?

Another look at the ads and we find banks begging parents to save money for their daughters weddings. In other words, promoting the dowry menace, and encouraging prospective bridegrooms to look for a father-in-law with a huge bank balance. Here too, are we not inculcating the wrong values of life in a subtle way?¹²

11. Cf. Keval J. Kumar, *Mass Communication in India*, Bombay: Jaico Publishing House, 1987, pp. 142-143.

12. Sarkar, p. 41.

Referring to the denial of dignity and beingness of women, Prabha Krishnan states:

The hospitality industry (hotels, tourist agencies, airlines) and the photographic goods industry are examples of industries where the image of women as sex slave is assiduously promoted. In these ads women are shown in service that is servile, often in varying stages of nudity. Such images are used in all promotional matter generated by them; even airlines timetables are graced by simpering lasses.¹³

In going through the ads one can easily find that "the function of almost all campaigns in any country is to use woman's body or part of the body in an erotic attraction appealing to male viewers. And it does not really matter what you are advertising—Cola drinks, motor cars, shaving creams or sleeping pills, the additional feminine nudity is a must to add."¹⁴

5. The Image of Women in Television and Films

Television and VCR today have become a significant part of the lives of several million people and it is likely to grow in importance in the years to come. This powerful medium can be used to bring about positive changes in social attitudes and behaviour patterns, in keeping with the national policy goals and objectives of social and economic development. However, if improperly used, it can have a strong negative and destructive impact on our social fabric. The television viewers constitute a captive audience. Unlike the choice or censorship that can be exercised say in seeing a film or a play in the theatre, no such option exists in the case of TV. One is compelled to either to watch what is being telecast or to switch off the set. The TV reaches into our homes and is watched by all age groups. It is already exerting a strong influence on young children who are its most addicted viewers. Values and behaviour patterns propagated through this medium are likely to influence strongly the norms of social and family interaction and relationship. If such is the influence of this medium, it is necessary that we examine the content and quality of TV programmes—the images, the values and the ideology propagated

13. Prabha Krishnan, "Images of Women in Advertisements," in *Indian Women in Advertisements*, p. 11.

14. Sinha, p. 112.

therein and their implications especially for the status and development of women in our society. Does this ever happen? Does anyone feel responsible for such a task?

Our Constitution clearly states the goals of the nation vis-a-vis women's status and roles. The question we need to ask is: What kind of support does Doordarshan provide in furthering the national objective of integrating women on terms of equality in all sectors of natural life and the development process?

An analysis of Doordarshan's programme indicates a wide distance from our policy objectives vis-a-vis women's development. Middle class ideologies of women's roles as wives and mothers provide the underlying basis of most programmes. In our country where over 40% of the agricultural work force is female, women continue to be projected as predominantly non-producers and as playing a limited role outside the home. Women are basically seen as performing a decorative function and as being marginal to national growth and development. Their primary place is seen as being within the home and the value is reflected in the content and setting of most TV programmes. The plural nature of Indian cultures and the diverse roles that women play are neither acknowledged nor communicated. This results in reinforcing the stereotyped images and role specifications of women and in a unidimensional projection of their social reality. This is revealed in its starkest form in the programmes relating to the commercial cinema in which Doordarshan so heavily relies. These programmes are loaded with derogating images of women and are usually explicitly or implicitly sexist. They play a significant role in reinforcing negative stereotypes such as:

- a woman's place is in the home;
- the most important and valuable asset of a woman is physical beauty;
- women are dependent, submissive, they are masochistic in their response to indignities, to humiliations and even to physical violence inflicted on them;
- the good woman is the traditional house wife, passive and submissive; the modern woman who asserts herself and her independence is undesirable and can never bring happiness to anybody nor find happiness herself.¹⁵

15. *Indian Women In Media*, Delhi: Lithouse Publications, 1984, p. 28.

Both the commercial films and the film songs contain long sequences with semi-clad women dancing for men. There is also a trend of growing violence towards women in commercial cinema. The rising incidence of violence towards women in real life cannot be delinked from the depiction of such sequences in many of the feature films which are so uncritically projected by Doordarshan.

A significant point to note is that the expanding thrust towards commercial film is in contradiction to Doordarshan's objectives which are education, development, national integration, entertainment etc. However, in effective terms the priority areas in Doordarshan turn out to be the entertainment provided by commercial cinema and its related programmes.

Now let us consider the so called women's programmes. What does such programmes try to inculcate in women? Most often they are on beauty care, flower arrangement or some related crafts, house furnishing and maintenance etc. How does this help them to be persons of dignity and worth? Moreover the programmes are oriented towards the city dwelling educated house wife so that she can leisure away the time. Only rarely programmes are aired for the benefit of the illiterate village dwelling women who are the majority. More meaningful programmes such as health and hygiene, child care, etc. could be added about which the village dwelling women may not be adequately informed of. Even the timing of programmes could be changed so that she can give full attention to such programmes.

Critical problems which are barriers to women's equality and development such as illiteracy, discrimination in access to education, health services and employment opportunities or lack of knowledge in their legal rights and responsibilities etc. are not taken up at all by Doordarshan's programmes. Instead of negative stereotyping, programmes need to project women in more positive ways as persons seeking to and capable of controlling their own lives.¹⁶

I feel Doordarshan programmes should portray women in positive roles. The existing portrayals reinforce the stereotypical images of women as dependent, submissive, superstitious, quarrelsome, ignorant and confined to the home. Programmes which uncritically show violence against

16. Cf. *Ibid.*, pp. 33-35.

women (rape, sexual harrassment, etc.) should not be telecast. There is also a need to telecast positive portrayal of men as persons of tenderness and sensitivity and of sharing an equal responsibility for childcare and house work; what is glamourised at the moment is their aggression, violence and masochism.

6. An Alternative: A Concerned Communication Media

"The vital question today is not whether there will be life after death, but whether there was life before death." This statement of Marshal McLuhan explains in a nutshell what I had been trying to expose in this paper. Yes, I must add, is there life or do the women of our Indian society truly live and enjoy life or are they just surviving somehow?

The Communication media which is by and large a most effective means to create social consciousness, thus contribute towards national integration and human development, is used for other multipurposes which gradually destroy the human dignity. We have seen how the media uses women as mere sex objects, thus instead of destroying the age-old unjust inhuman attitude towards women, promote them both for the sake of profit and to preserve the status quo.

In the UNESCO symposium on "Women in Cinema," held in Italy in July 1975, the following recommendation was made, "We participants and observers at the symposium, denounce the existing sexist images of women in the mass media and appeal to women all over the world to carefully analyze these images and to realize that they are literally living in the world of man made images which do not resemble real women or deal fairly with the realities of the woman's experience."¹⁷

Today, we in India need an alternative media, a concerned media, biased so to say, in favour of women, in order to promote a just attitude towards women. It is essential to recognise the powerful role that media can play in promoting social consciousness and hence direct them towards these causes. The mass media, if given the right perspective and direction, can become the most effective instruments for improving the status of women. I would like to conclude with a poem by Dorothee Soelle which expresses the voice of women and their cry to be what God meant them to be.

17. Sinha, p. 112.

WE DO NOT WANT to become like
the men in our society:
crippled human beings under
pressure for achievement,
emotionally impoverished,
reduced to bureaucrats,
manipulated as specialists,
damned to career-making.

WE DO NOT WANT to be provided for,
beautified, protected, to be fed,
train and adapt our children,
to mother and regenerate men.

WE DO NOT WANT to learn what men can do:
to rule and command, to be served,
to conquer, to hunt, to plunder
and subjugate.

WE WANT TO BE WOMEN,
Human beings,
with dignity and worth,
nothing more, yes,
nothing more,
we want nothing more.

WE WANT TO BE WOMEN,
WOMEN WITH THE DIGNITY
OF HUMAN BEINGS.¹⁸

18. Clare Benedicks Fisher, (ed.), *Women in a Strange Land*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975, p. 39.