

Need for institutional structure

By Amartya Sen

A SIMILAR story can be seen in other major famines, whether we consider the Soviet famines of the 1930s, or the Cambodian famines of the 1970s, or the famines under African military dictatorships in the last three decades, or in Sudan or North Korea in the very recent past, not to mention the famines under colonial rule.

Indeed, the Bengal famine of 1943, which I witnessed as a child, was made viable not only by a lack of democracy, but also by severe restrictions on the local press on reporting and criticism. The disaster received attention only after Ian Stephens, the courageous editor of *The Statesman* of Calcutta (then British owned) decided to break ranks by publishing graphic accounts and stinging editorials on October 14 and 16, 1943.

This was immediately followed on October 18 by a "mea culpa" letter on the size of the death toll by the Governor of Bengal to the Secretary of State for India in London, followed by further confessions of "culpas" in the subsequent days, followed by heated parliamentary discussions in Westminster, and followed ultimately by the beginning — at last — of public relief arrangements the following month, when the famine, which had already killed millions, ended.

The protective role of the press need recognition and emphasis. When things are routinely good and smooth, the sheltering role of a free press and the related democratic freedoms are typically not des-

between regions.

Even the very concept of what is to count as a "basic need" tends to be dependent on public discussion on what is important, and no less importantly, on what is feasible. Human beings suffer from miseries and deprivations of various kinds — some more amenable to alleviation than others. The totality of the human predicament would be an impossible basis for a practical discussion of our "basic needs." Indeed, there are many things that we might have good reason to value if they were feasible — such as complete immunity from illnesses of all kinds, or even immortality.

But we do not, indeed cannot, see them *as needs*, precisely because we believe them to be infeasible. Our conception of needs relates not only to the comprehension of the nature and extent of deprivations, but also to our appreciation of what can

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"countervailing powers." What is needed is not so much to obliterate any particular power, but to confront one power with another. In the present context, this would be an argument not only for the multiplicity of private ownership from different parts of the business world, but also for supplementing them with cooperative ownership as well as with ownership by independent bodies and statutory boards. The presence of other media, other than newspapers, including radio, television, the internet, can also greatly help coverage and diversity. We have to rely, to a great extent, on the countervailing power of competition and confrontation to overcome the problem of bias.

There is also the different issue of the importance of journalistic ethics and commitment, which was briefly flagged earlier. This is not just a matter of the honesty and objectivity of journalism (though they too can be importantly involved), but also one of initiative, imagination and special motivation which would be needed to break less travelled grounds. For example, even though it is very easy to be forceful on very visible deprivations such as a famine or severe unemployment, the importance of bringing less obvious adversities (such as non-extreme hunger or defective schooling arrangements) can also be very great.

For example, while press freedom, along with other democratic freedoms, has certainly helped independent India to avoid major famines altogether in its entire half a century of existence (in contrast with what standardly happened in the British Raj), nevertheless less striking but also important deprivations (such

erately missed. But they come to their own when things get ouled up, for one reason or nother. The recent problems of ast and South-East Asia bring ut, among many other things, he penalty of limitations on emocratic freedom, of which press freedom is a part. Indeed, when the financial crisis in this egion (from 1997 onwards) led o a general economic recession, he protective power of democraic freedoms — not unlike that hich prevents famines — was adly missed in some countries n the region.

Those who were newly dispossessed often did not have the voice they needed. The victims n, say, Indonesia or South Korea — the unemployed or those newly made economically redundant — may or may not have taken very great interest in democratic freedoms when things had been going up and up together for all. But when things came tumbling down and divided they fell (as people standardly do in any large economic decline), the lack of democratic institutions, including a free press, tended to keep their voices muffled and ineffective.

Not surprisingly, civil and democratic rights, including a free press, became part of the demands on which the recent agitations and rebellions have focused, and there has already been remarkable progress in political and civil rights in several countries in East and South-East Asia (including, of course, South Korea and Indonesia).

I turn now to the fourth reason for the centrality of press freedom, along with other democratic and civil rights. Informed and unregimented *formation* of our values requires openness of communication and arguments, and the freedom of the press cannot but be crucial to this process. Indeed, value formation is an interactive process, and the press has a major role in making these interactions possible. As new standards emerge (for example, the norm of smaller families and less frequent child bearing), it is public discussion as well as proximate emulation that spreads the new norms across a region and ultimately

or cannot be done about them. These evaluation and understandings can be strongly influenced by the freedom and vigour of public discussion. A free press can be a great ally of the process of development through, among other connections, its constructive role in value formation.

Before I end, let me come back to the postponed questions on limitations of practice that can make the press less effective and sometimes even less than benign in its social functioning. A criticism that is often made is that the newspapers may be far from neutral in their presentation. This need not, in itself, be a fatal flaw, so long as different newspapers present disparate points of view, and between them, give voice to many distinct perspectives that call for attention.

The problem, however, arises from the fact that given a systematic bias in the press, this may not actually happen. In this context, the private ownership of newspapers has often been seen, with reason, to be a source of concern, and there have also been suspicions, which too can be reasonable, about the selective influence of advertisers. Hannen Swaffer, the British journalist, said in frustration, a quarter century ago: "Freedom of the press in Britain means freedom to print such of the proprietor's prejudices as the advertisers don't object to." That judgment is probably too cynical and unjustifiably harsh, but there are problems here, to which we must pay attention for better use of press freedom.

There is, in fact, no easy way of escaping the power of newspapers ownership. Newspaper establishments involve property, and it is hard to see that we can have arrangements through which newspaper owners own only that property — and no other. In dealing with this issue, public ownership may not help either, since that would give the ruling government a special power that would, to a great extent, defeat the purpose of the freedom of the press.

It is useful in this context to invoke the idea of what John Kenneth Galbraith has called

as endemic, undernourishment, or persistent illiteracy, or inadequate health care) have not received the attention they deserve from the Indian press.

To overcome this what is needed is not only a fuller practice of journalistic initiative and enterprise, but also the development of dedicated pressure groups that focus forcefully on particular deprivations. This too, in a broad sense, involves the invoking of countervailing powers to broaden the overall reach of the architecture of social institutions and activist alliances. There are examples of some success in a number of fields. For example, women's organizations and feminist groups in India have been able in recent years to give greater visibility and prominence to specific aspects of gender disparity, and have made a major contribution towards advancing public awareness and debate.

So I conclude where I began. It is extremely important to see the critical importance of the freedom of the press in the process of development, but it is also necessary to seek ways and means of expanding its reach and securing its effective functioning. Press freedom does have several distinct and independently significant roles, including (1) its intrinsic importance as a constitutive part of development, (2) its *informational* function in broadening understanding across society, (3) its *protective* role in reducing human insecurity and in preventing serious deprivations, and (4) its *constructive* contribution in the interactive and informed formation of values.

However, none of these functions is mechanical or automatic. There is need for commitment, but also for an adequately broad institutional structure with ample countervailing powers to secure range and impartiality. Press freedom deserves our strongest support, but the press has obligations as well as entitlements. Indeed, the freedom of the press defines both a right and a duty, and we have good reason to stand up for both.

Concluded