

The Right Role For Newspapers Now

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THE number of newspapers in the country has increased. The increase in all the major languages. The number of their pages too has risen in a big way. And they have now more sections than before, including for women, youth and entertainment of diverse genre. Their sports sections have become larger. And they are using more colour, some say too much colour with too little substance.

The sheer number of the newspapers now makes it difficult for the government to achieve much by banning some of them or exercising various restraints: to make them toe the line or not deviate too far from the official line or

become too critical. To that is extent the newspapers have become stronger, that when the owners and editors really want that, and do not barter their political support for official patronage even in a democratic setup.

But are the liberated newspapers making the best use of their enhanced number of pages? The judgement may be more subjective and opinions or evaluations can vary.

Newspapers in Pakistan cannot go on in the old conventional manner, putting out what they regard as news. They have to compete with TV and foreign news telecasts received through the dish antenna, to add to the fare provided by the CNN, which too, is subjected to various censorship in Pakistan. Then there are the foreign radio stations, including the BBC and All India Radio.

Clearly newspapers have to report far more than what appears on our TV the night before. They have to report major events in depth and give the coverage the full dimension it needs to enable the people know all that they should, if they are interested in such happenings.

In this area the government is hopeful to them as the opposition gets too little coverage on PTV, whose newscast has to be repeated by NTM as well, which is a travesty of a second channel or an independent TV. But then the NTM does not claim to be a proper TV channel as its name Network Television Marketing itself suggests. It has to mix its very lucrative marketing message with entertainment and to obtain official permission for that it has to telecast PTV's news as its own and use other political programmes of the government as well as directed by the Ministry of Information.

All that leaves plenty of scope for newspapers to cover political events, even more the opposition doings and sayings. And in a country where political instability has become chronic and political uncertainty endemic, the newspapers have to give a lot of space for politics. And they do. But do they go far beyond the headlines and go into greater depth to identify why what is happening is happening, and happening again and again? Do they go down to the root causes of our political instability? Seldom.

IN a way, the newspapers cannot be blamed. In the manner history is said to repeat itself, our political follies too repeat themselves. One set of rulers or one party is ousted from office and their rivals come to office and do the same, in fact far worse. When martial law rule is about to end, we presume those who come to power through the electoral process would behave far better and be

because the newspapers give them the space, while the voters know better.

In many cases the tape recorder, while helpful to the reporters has become the bane of the readers. The tape recorder is placed before the leaders and others and whatever they said along with the long questions asked or comments by the reporters is reproduced in full in newspapers and magazines as if the readers have nothing else to do in the world besides reading column after column of such inanities or irrelevance. The readers need to be saved from such editorial excesses or lack of editing.

The readers do not want such inflections to continue at a time when newspapers are costing more and more. They do not want to pay as much as Rs 5 for a newspaper daily to read such inanities at great length. Let leaders of little parties write letters to the editor or articles if they are capable of, or books or booklets if they can. If newspapers can weed out the pocket parties and puny leaders they will be doing a great service to the country.

Newspapers also ought to be covering the deeper causes or sources of our political maladies including the economic, social, cultural, religious, sectarian, caste and the increasing dominance of money, black or grey, money including the heroin earnings, on our politics. Today the man who has money can command political power and the man whose political power can multiply his wealth.

If Yunus Habib of the Mehran Bank had not gone too far playing his rapacious game he might still have too many politicians of diverse parties at his back and call. Are the newspapers going to uphold or condone such a perverse political system and become the victims of such men as they come to power and continue and escalate such corrupt practices from the top?

A refreshing change in the newspapers is the large space given to the economy now and special sections devoted to it daily by several newspapers. Newspapers specialising on the economy is also on the increase. But instead of the coverage for such newspapers being done by general reporters without any economic background there is need to recruit economic graduates as reporters. And more economic specialists too need to be invited to write on the subject, but not at the great length in which they write and in a language which is too academic.

It is amusing to see newspapers which editorially condemn the bureaucracy asking retired bureaucrats to write on the economy often and in great length.

and business acumen? There is a dichotomy in damning the servicing officers in the economic sector and praising the retired and placing too many columns of the newspapers at their disposal.

It is when it comes to art and culture that the weakness of newspapers become more glaring. Too many beginners as painters are given the master treatment or described as potential masters. There is less of critical analysis and more of flattery, idle flattery. Art criticism or writing on art should become more purposeful and realistic rather than patronising or excessively adulatory.

It is in the area of the performing arts that the newspapers face

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would behave better and be more responsible. That seldom happens — they elected newcomers instead repeat the kind of follies which had earlier drove them or their party out of office.

When it comes to political parties we have far too many of them. And more are born from time to time. But their manifestoes sound more or less alike, except in respect of minor details. And we cannot take the tall promises of miniscule parties seriously for they can promise heaven itself to the voters and not fail to deliver it as they would not be put into offices by the voters.

And yet newspapers are giving all and sundry among the leaders and parties undue display. Leaders who have never been elected despite trying for 20 or 30 years are given the same kind of display and space as major leaders are there is lack of a sense of proportion in this regard. Many of the leaders and parties are there only

only often and in great length. Were such bureaucrats right when they were promoting the kind of economic system they did and landed us in such a mess or are they right now when they claim to be citadels of economic wisdom

