

TAMIL MEDIA LACKS A CRITICAL OUTLOOK

— P. Muthulingam —

The demand that the mass media should be allowed to function independently is gaining strength in Third World countries. Modern means of communication have converted the world into a village. Like other countries Sri Lanka, too, has many modern means of communication such as the newspapers, the radio, the television and so on. However, among the various means of communication in Sri Lanka, it is the newspapers that are pre-eminent.

In multi-ethnic Sri Lanka, Sinhala and Tamil are the two languages spoken by the majority while the elite belonging to both ethnic groups also speak English. During the colonial period, these elites began to publish journals and newspapers in Sinhala and Tamil in order that the masses understand the struggle being carried out against the colonialists and to prepare them for this struggle. In this the wealthy Sinhala nationalists played a pioneering role. They showed interest in publishing newspapers in all three languages. It should be stressed that the Tamil nationalist capitalists lagged behind in this matter.

Although the English-educated elite of the two ethnic groups pioneered the agitation for independence, communalism that raised its head in the thirties disturbed the unity among them. It appears that this event may have sometimes discouraged the Tamil capitalists from investing in the field of mass media.

The Marxian-oriented elites who appeared in the mid-thirties, rose up against both colonialism and communalism. These elites brought out newspapers in both Sinhala and Tamil to awaken the Sri Lankan masses. They published a newspaper called 'Sama Dharmani' in Tamil and 'Samasamajaya' in Sinhala. These two papers were identical in content.

With the renaissance in the post-1950 period, the publication of Tamil newspapers also increased. In the mid-sixties, this grew further and the number of writers in the national newspapers such as *Thinakaran*, *Virakesari* and *Thinapathy* too increased. Mr. S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike who promised in 1952 (at the General Elections) to make Sinhala and Tamil the official languages of this country if he comes to power, yielded to communalist sentiments and declared 'Sinhala Only' as the official language after he gained power in 1956. It was during this period that the Tamil mass media gained strength and it was when communalism was at its height, communal unity and class struggle became the major content of Tamil journals and newspapers. This continued until 1983.

Although many journals and weekly newspapers, were published on behalf of various political parties and groups, during the last three decades, they were very short-lived. However, the newspapers such as *Thinakaran* and *Thinapathy* that were published in Tamil on a commercial basis by newspaper firms owned by Sinhalese capitalists, and *Virakesari* published by a commercial firm, have continued to come out regularly (*Thinapathy* is no more published).

These newspapers mainly concentrate on literary articles and news. They avoid publishing controversial essays and essays that are critical of the state. Furthermore, Tamil writers too avoided writing such articles in Tamil. If at all they wrote any such articles they were mostly written in English. On the contrary, journals of political parties and groups never hesitated to publish very critical articles. Since they were not very widely read, their impact was also limited.

The Sinhala mass media was different. Although the Sinhala and the Tamil mass media commenced around the

same time, the former has gradually grown and their reading public also expanded: The Sinhala mass media not only give importance to current events and issues, they also create a forum for discussing social problems. These fora are open to discuss art, literature, social, economic and political issues. For instance, these newspapers have had controversial issues such as the Tamil National Question. 'Do Sinhala have a great culture?' The Open Economy and *Jāthika Chintanaya* are also debated in these fora. Thus, the Sinhala mass media plays a key role in creating public opinion while the Tamil mass media is devoid of any thinking.

There is reason to believe that the Tamil intellectuals too are a cause for the present state of the Tamil media. The Sinhala intellectuals unlike their Tamil counterparts, do not hesitate to publish their English writings in Sinhala. They consider it their bounded duty to publish these essays in Sinhala. But the Tamil intellectuals while preferring to write in English try to avoid getting involved in controversial issues as far as possible. It may be construed that the anti-Tamil feelings in the country prevents them from expressing independent opinion. However they failed to discuss such matters even prior to 1977 when the anti-Tamil feelings were somewhat less or were only latent. In actual fact, the past content of Sri Lankan Tamil newspapers reveal that the Tamil intellectuals were never concerned with such issues. Thus, it may be concluded that the Tamil mass media never contributed towards the creation of public opinion or in clarifying issues related to the people.

The second important media is the radio. It is popular in all rural areas. The radio which broadcasts in all three languages is state-controlled. Today there are even regional radio broadcasts. Unlike the newspapers, radio can reach even the most uneducated. The radio functions in a manner that even those at the bottom of the social hierarchy could gather knowledge about economic, cultural and development problems and programmes. Although there is a separate channel for Tamil programmes, it is doubtful whether it has any programmes concerned with social development among Tamils. Like the newspapers,

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radio also avoids discussing controversial issues. Literary discussions and news are given primary importance.

Ever since the radio was brought under total state control, successive governments that came into power followed a communalistic policy. This prevented the radio being used by the Tamils for their welfare. The weaknesses of newspapers were repeated here. Controversial issues were never taken up for discussion. News which held an important position in radio broadcast became highly relating to the North and the East, the suffering of the masses was concealed. This turned the people, who once had much faith in the Sri Lankan radio, towards the B. B. C, the All India Radio and the Radio Veritas for more reliable information.

While the up-country Tamil group which has been recognised as the most backward among the Tamil community in this country is given only half an hour weekly, the Muslim community is allotted an hour daily in order to promote its own social and religious development. This is indicative of the relative importance attached to the two communities by the State.

Television that was introduced during the last decade is very popular among the Tamils. But the time allocated to Tamil programmes is utterly inadequate. Of the six hours daily television telecast, the time allocated to Tamil programmes is minimal and on certain days only the news is telecast in Tamil.

On the request of certain Tamil Ministers some additional time was allocated on Sundays between 2.00 and 3.00 p.m. While the rest of the middle class take their afternoon naps, the Tamil middle class is deprived of it! Furthermore, whenever an unscheduled programme is to be included, the Rupavahini is ever ready to sacrifice scheduled programmes in Tamil. It seems to be a universal Law in this country, that if some one has to sacrifice, it should be the Tamils.

On the whole, the Tamil media lacks a critical outlook on major issues. As long as the mass media is under state control, it would not be possible to bring about any constructive changes in the Tamil mass media. As referred to earlier, only private sector Tamil newspapers currently have national status.