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“Media is a reflection of our society”: Sakshi Chief Editor

In an informal interaction with the research team of FDR, Mr. K. Ramachandra Murthy, Editorial Director of Sakshi Media Group discusses the quality of public discourse, and journalism in India today. Read on to find out more.

There is a recent surge in online magazines and other sources of digital media. Does this pose a challenge for print media organizations?

Yes, it will be challenging, but more so in the future. In India, unlike some other countries, newspapers have not lost their share to digital media yet, and readership remains static. In fact, according to a recent survey, there is a growth of 5-10% in readership for our newspapers. However, youngsters rely on mobile apps and

digital media for their news, so the future belongs to digital media. A prime example showing this transition from print to digital media is the TOI group whose digital media resources generate more revenue than its print media resources.

This transition is not restricted to national newspapers. Even Sakshi has an online newspaper, and so does Eenadu. Our digital presence is doing well, owing to more editorials and advertisements. Print media may not perish completely, but it will be at a disadvantage.

In the current political climate, the dominant public discourse rarely addresses issues like education and health. Is the

quality of debates and public discourse coming down?

Absolutely, it is indeed very disappointing that public discourse has become quite polarized and nobody talks about issues such as education. This is unfortunate, especially considering the sad state of affairs of our education and healthcare systems, compared to other countries. For example, no parent wishes to send their children to government schools - even those who cannot afford sending their children to private schools are doing so.

The quality of public discourse has surely fallen. Earlier, people would come fully prepared to press conferences armed with facts and figures. Now, they just present their piece and do not take any questions - there is no preparation done by politicians or spokespersons. There is deterioration in fields all around us - the judiciary, the media, legislature. Some sort of revolution has to take place, if we want to stop this deterioration. The next

generation should take action to improve matters.

What role do you think newspapers can play in instilling such a discourse in the country?

Newspapers have no choice but to report what is being spoken about. We do emphasise real issues plaguing our country in our editorials. We also make it a point to publish articles by prominent experts in the field of education at least once a fortnight, and actively support any positive initiatives put forward by civil society. It is not enough for a private newspaper to be doing this - but it is all they can do.

Media houses are owned by corporate bodies or political parties, and have their own ideological orientations and loyalties which affect the kind of issues being covered. If marginalized communities like Dalits and Adivasis are not our readers, we cannot report issues that relate directly to them. We are

bound by whatever interests our readers. We cannot have a better media if the society does not improve.

Do you think there is disproportionate attention given to issues in Delhi, at the cost of regional events?

I agree – just like large Telugu newspapers from Hyderabad do not report about Khammam or Adilabad, there is definitely more attention given to news in Delhi, where Hyderabad is of practically no importance.

There are fewer books and newspapers being published in Telugu in recent times. What is the future of vernacular print media?

The top newspapers in India are dominated by vernaculars such as Dainik Jagran, Eenadu, and Malayala Manorama. Times of India is close to tenth on the list, in terms of readership and popularity, in spite of being the world's largest English-language newspaper. The

regional language press is actually very strong and robust.

In certain regions of India, citizen reporting is on the rise. One example is *Khabarlahariya* in Bundelkhand, where most households of the region subscribe only to this publication. Do you think such citizen reporting is a threat to mainstream media?

I don't think citizen reporting as a model is going to take off in India. It is not sustainable financially at a large scale. Newspapers cannot rely on advertisements which target small local populations who form the readership of such papers.

Does competition in the media influence reporting?

It depends - if a newspaper takes the risk to cover issues that aren't being given enough importance, and its circulation goes up, other newspapers will catch up and start reporting on those issues. But there is no guarantee that circulation will go up. The risk is too high.

What is the ideal model of ownership in media – public or private? Are trust-run newspapers any better? Is crowdfunding a possibility?

Ideally, a journalist who wants to start a newspaper should be able to do so, without any fear of having to do the government any favour. There are newspapers owned by trusts such as Deccan Herald, but they might be controlled by powerful vested interests – the government, opposition, or a lobby group. Crowdfunding is not realistic. 10TV tried it out, and initially managed to collect a lot of money. However, they couldn't sustain it, and sold it away to a politician.

Al Jazeera in Qatar, is funded by the government but is given editorial freedom. Do you think this model holds promise in the Indian context?

Al Jazeera might report freely on matters in other countries, but cannot report anything negative

about its own country or government. Similarly, the BBC will not print anything against the UK government. Whoever funds the newspaper cannot be attacked – that is the principle.

Do you think that the move towards social media, where the patterns of ownership are not so clear, will turn out to be a progressive change?

This depends on who runs the social media account and what is being written there. Most of what appears on social media today is nonsensical or misleading. Bias due to caste and religion is very much present even on social media. Besides, there is no accountability, unlike a media house where there is a system in place with a publisher, editor, and so on.

Could you share your experience of the talks you initiated between the Maoists and the government?

The credit goes to the government. It was the only state government

that entertained talks with Maoists. I was the editor of a newspaper that sent many letters to the government, to convince them to hold these talks. Unfortunately, the talks did not succeed. The only condition laid before the Maoists was to give up their arms, and they said that they would do so if the government fulfilled all of their demands. But the two parties did not trust each other, so the talks broke down.

What is your opinion on the recent trend of advertorials [a combination of advertisement and editorial]? Will that lead to readers questioning the legitimacy of the paper's views?

We at Sakshi prescribe a different font for advertorials, so that readers are aware of the fact that they are not regular pieces. Some newspapers do not indicate in this manner, and that is disgraceful – if an advertisement is being published, the newspaper should take ownership and let it be known to readers. In fact, we have written

to the Press Council of India as well, to discourage advertorials.

What do you think can be done to improve the situation of journalism today?

There is a regulatory body - the Press Council of India, and a Code of Conduct. However, anybody in the media can be taken to court, whether they are an editor or publisher. Journalists in India do not have any special rights or privileges, unlike other countries, so we have to work within our constraints. Anybody who is affected by our writings can take us to court, which is always in favour of the reader. For example, if a case is filed against a journalist in Nagarkurnool, the journalist will be forced to go there. The lack of privileges is by itself a caution, for journalists to behave, and not write anything that causes harm or goes against anybody.

What is your advice to students of journalism?

My advice would be to remain honest, as far as possible. If you have to decide between your personal future and the truth, you must always choose the truth. A journalist should always stand by their principles, and always be ready to quit if the need arises. I had quit once, when the MD of my newspaper published an article although I did not approve of it. I never went to that office again, despite not having another job. You should be able to take such decisions, without having to worry about your family and lack of income. Principled journalists are greatly respected in society. ▪

Mr. K. Ramachandra Murthy (b. 1948) is the Editorial Director for Sakshi Media Group. A distinguished public intellectual and long-time journalist, Mr. Murthy has had an illustrious career working with a variety of Telugu and English-language newspapers and media houses. He is known for his pro-underdog social philosophy, and is widely respected for his sensitive journalistic stance and his

legacy as a media professional. Of particular eminence is his role in having laid the groundwork for the 2004 talks between the Andhra Pradesh government and Maoists operating in the state. His career is marked by noteworthy instances, such as his work promoting greater awareness on the bifurcation of AP and creation of Telangana.