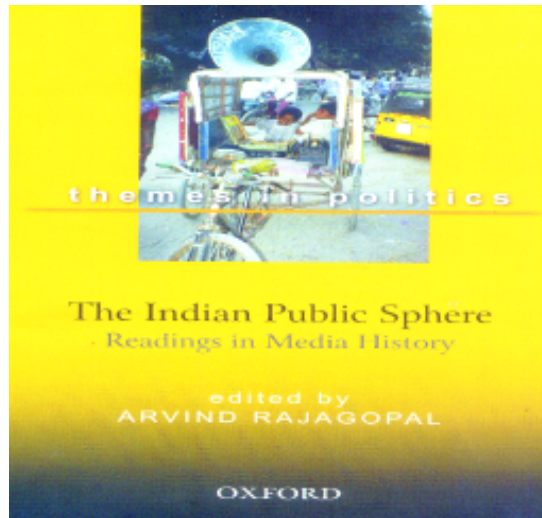


The Indian Public Sphere : Readings in Media History

Ed. Arvind Rajagopal

Review by Ravi K. Dhar*

The book “The Indian Public Sphere: Readings in Media History” is a valuable addition to literature on media history from the perspective of cultural studies. The editor, Arvind Rajagopal, is a well known authority in the area and is presently teaching as a professor in the department of media, culture and communication at New York University.



such novel insights surely stand to benefit from reading the book cover to cover. The editor springs a surprise on the reader in the very first sentence when he traces the usage of the word communication ‘to the act of letter writing, the technology of conveying information, or the event of transportation.’

He goes on to add that the ‘Annual reports of the

The book is divided into five parts thematically. Each of these parts follows a somewhat historical sequence beginning with the colonial times, moving into the post-independence phase which it further subdivides into the phases of the national popular public sphere, the national developmental narrative and the emergent orders. In each of these parts, there are chapters that bring out the finest nuances of a post modernist engagement with the history of Indian journalism and communication.

The editor has given a wonderful introduction to these chapters by not only telescoping the history of Indian media but also critically examining it from the fresh perspective of post-modern studies. Students of journalism in India who are very rarely exposed to

colonial government in India used the term to refer to the movement of goods, assessed for the purposes of state revenue.’ Students of journalism come in for yet another surprise when they get to read that mediation ‘is a social process that extends beyond the media.’ The editor is clearly drawing the reader away from the technological determinism that he/she has been inured to in his/her mass communication classes.

With its focus on the shaping of the Indian public sphere right from colonial times to the present day, the editor has taken a comprehensive view of such a process by drawing attention to the power of the spoken word in its formation as against the generally and academically held view that communication technologies alone constitute the bases for such a process.

*Director, Jagannath International Management School, New Delhi-110070
(email ID: ravikdhar@gmail.com)

To this end, Arvind Rajagopal dips into post-modernist theory to draw out Habermas's sociological account of the formation of the public sphere through communicative practices outside the realm of the state and potentially independent of it. He identifies two main strands of communication thoughts with regard to the public sphere in India. According to the first line of thought, the growth of communication technologies is viewed as a linear process in which the preceding technology leads to the succeeding one by not only a linear progression but also linear embedding. This approach holds that the communication technologies determine the public sphere and that 'the implicit purpose of the growth of the public sphere... (is) understood to be the propagation of nationalist mobilization; once national independence... (is) achieved, the graph flat-line(s), since the basic goal... (is) thought to be achieved.'

Such an approach misses the split within the public sphere, both before and after independence. Rajagopal clarifies that in the pre-independence era, despite the emergence of print media, rumour was the strongest weapon of mobilization of the people falling outside the pale of the literati. Similarly, in the post-independence era, despite the proliferation of news channels, newspapers and magazines, radio stations and other media such as films, the public sphere has remained restricted to the urban middle class, in particular the upper caste Hindus, leaving out in the cold the majority of population comprising of the other castes and communities as well as the economically depressed sections of the society.

In a very beautiful reference to the 'tamasha' performers, Rajagopal highlights how folk art gets stigmatized for its raucous bohemianism while films

pass muster even for acts of over exposure of female skin. The Janus faced approach of the upper classes to the cultural symbols of the subaltern reveal the insensitivity of the literati to the marginalized sections of the society and their incomprehension of the significance of modes of communication other than those which are technologically determined.

Commenting on the inadequacy of the linear historicist approach followed in mass communication books, Rajagopal writes, "The battles within the independence movement over how the nation ought to be defined tend to be sidelined in these accounts..." Such histories, he avers, tell the story from the viewpoint of the victor. In the case of India, the victor is none other than the elite upper class/caste Hindus population. Such accounts therefore conceal their inadequacy under the carpet of the developmental agenda which the Indian state implemented after independence.

The second approach gives due weight to the modes of communication which are traditional and culturally determined. Commenting on the significant role played by these modes of communication in pre-independence India, Rajagopal writes, "The oral tradition was far more difficult to control, and with its ability to connect at key points with literati who could give new force to rumours through print, its effects could be deadly, if erratic." Realizing the potential of mischief in the oral tradition the colonial masters employed a system of intelligence gathering not dissimilar from that of the Mughals who employed an army of spies to snoop on the oral social networks.

Rajagopal cites an incident in which a folk singer was sentenced to rigorous imprisonment for singing nationalist songs to incite people against the colonial

Government. He cites similar reasons for the independent Indian government's suspicion of mass communication, in particular radio and television. He writes, "A restrictive colonial legacy and an underlying fear of the public undoubtedly accounted for much of the reserve towards mass communications; to these can be added a residual Gandhian suspicion towards modern media. Broadcasting was, therefore, deprived of funds and little attention was given either to program development or to cultivating audience interest."

Rajagopal's assessment is not way off the mark because Governments in all countries of the world have always been wary of the electronic media due to its direct reach among the masses and its ability to spawn oral communication networks in the society, which are beyond the control of the state.

Even after the liberalization of the economy and a similar liberalization of the media and entertainment industry, the situation has not been redeemed. Though the state control over the media has given way to the mushroom growth of privately owned media organizations, it has not translated into the inclusion of the subaltern in the communication network of the country. With their emphasis on marketing and increased TRPs, most of these media organizations have been churning out content that is both inane and effete. Rajagopal observes, "If the old Nehruvian public stood discredited as a proxy for all embracing state power, a new one appeared ready to take its place however—a Hindu public in which the symbols of the majority religion became included as sanctioned and even proud indicators of national sensibility. If in the Nehruvian era, popular participation was theoretically included but in practical terms considered interference."

By way of a solution to this critical stalemate in the growth of Indian media and the shaping of the Indian public sphere, the book suggests a policy intervention that stops short of meddling with the independence of the media organizations. It argues that media can't be left to the devices of the market because when "Half or more of the population does not even own a radio set and more than a third can't even sign their names, a reliance on market forces is not adequate since this segment of the market is not guaranteed to attract businesses." So while eschewing licensing and direct government control, there is a need for a policy frame work which can guarantee the inclusion of the subaltern in the communication network of the nation. Rajagopal prefers to use the word political society instead of the civic society while referring to disempowered section of the society.

The book is, all in all, a compulsive 'read' for students of journalism who want to engage sincerely with the growth and the operation of mass media in this nation. The book is full of answers to questions often raised in mass media seminars about the growing vulgarization and fictionalization of mass media content in recent years. The analysis of the problem and its solution is backed up by scholarly discussions by leading media critics and scholars and should encourage media students to go for further exploration of the themes discussed herein. Besides, the book is priced reasonably well and should not tax the pocket of a book lover.

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