

Bearing Inconvenient Witness

Notes in Pro/Confessional Mode

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The Changing Textures of Crisis

I recall the excitement that I felt as a child when faraway but dramatic events unfolded in the course of a day: the quiet morning, with no presentiment of momentous happenings; the first buzz of rumour at school; then long-distance telephone calls from relatives (a most unusual occurrence twenty or twenty-five years ago, and imbued with the rarest significance, and if the calls came from relatives in the armed forces, you knew the crisis was of national importance). Then Father coming home from the office, with the confirmation printed in the evening papers. Finally, State-run television reluctantly announcing the death of the President or the assassination of the Prime Minister, that a cyclone had swept through coastal Andhra Pradesh, or that a border skirmish had intensified into a war. *The slowness of media technologies meant that there was time to assimilate the shock, to savour the drama in its nuances of fear, trepidation and anxiety, to absorb the textures of the crisis and prepare for its denouement.*

Today, all is immediacy: the denouement is staggered across a fluctuating pattern of sub-shocks. There are no buffers, no modes of gradual effect by which the faraway becomes proximate and immediate, no degrees of internalization. By a butterfly effect, reportage intensifies the import of events and reproduces their repercussions at an accelerated rate of amplification. The twin towers are hit and collapse before our eyes, over and over again, as we sit at the breakfast table. We follow troops into war in the deserts of West Asia as we eat lunch. Teatime finds us accompanying the ever-watchful eye of the TV camera into the backwoods of former Soviet Central Asia. By dinner, we are prepared for a vicarious night-vision penetration of hostile strongholds in Afghanistan. Satellite television, running twenty-four hours all week, has robbed horizons and time differentials of meaning. And yet this ubiquity of sight conceals motive, context, backdrop and detail – the myth of instantaneity and on-site coverage conceals the fact that these self-repeating, self-sustaining phenomena do not add up to produce either information or insight.

The old-style ethical question that confronted news coverage had to do with fundamentals: What is the *raison d'être* of the news operation? That is: Was Hearst justified, if we are to believe the apocryphal tale, in bankrolling a war so as to justify his correspondent's trip to an uncharacteristically quiescent Central America? The new ethical questions for news coverage address the same question, somewhat differently. Whose interests is this proliferation of information meant to serve? What are the limits that a news operation ought to set before it launches itself on a wave of information that unsettles, defames, disturbs

and misinforms people with breaking news that is unchecked? Does rumour become more respectable simply because it is purveyed by smart young newscasters, rather than making the rounds of the marketplace?

In the celebration of crisis as the chief justification for endless news coverage, do we not perpetuate specific modes of presenting, and even packaging, crisis – modes that are, in turn, determined by our investments and compulsions in the arenas of power and influence? And is not the faculty of critique, the critical consciousness, a casualty of such pre-programming? When the script is already in place, testimony laid out in prescribed formats, where can the act of bearing inconvenient witness be accommodated?

Crisis and Critique

I have already counter-posed crisis to critique in this discussion. Significantly, the two words derive from the same Greek root: *krinein*, to decide. A crisis, in its original Greek sense, meant simply a point of decision: an aberration in the fabric of normality, when society and the cosmos waited upon the epic hero to commit himself one way or the other; and on that decision depended the path of the hero's individual destiny, as well as the history of those connected to him. A critique also marks a decisive moment: it is the culmination of a process of weighing, reflecting and arriving at judgement, a commitment that places the individual in a certain position to his society and its axioms, its debates. But where crisis denotes the forcing of an individual decision by structural compulsions, critique connotes an autonomy of decision, a power of reflexive agency on the part of an individual.

Since we live in the aftermath of epos, and in the absence of heroes, I would hazard the suggestion that critique is the current and secular translation of the old, sacred sense of crisis: it connotes an interrogative mode of addressing reality, an *ethical* understanding of decision-making that embraces the value of means and ends and the imperative of justice. Critique, thus read, incarnates *responsibility*. Correspondingly, I would read crisis, today, as *the ongoing and foundational text of our epoch*, determined as it is by the erratic interplay of hegemony and resistance, by the workings of emergency states and improvisational guerrilla groups, randomized societies and transitional economies. Crisis, thus read, denotes a stimulus summoning forth a *pragmatics* that embodies decision-making in the form of *resolution*, however arbitrary.

The identification of critique with the ethical imperative, and crisis with the pragmatic, bears a specific polarizing implication in the context of mainstream media practice in contemporary India, for the *writing of crisis* – whether that crisis is international or local in nature, whether it arises out of military or ecological causes, whether it is precipitated by the actions of groups towards whom the media practitioner has a definite antipathy or sympathy.

By writing I mean here all forms of mediatic representation and reflection, whether textual, televisual or auditory: whatever the medium, the individual media practitioner must confront the dilemmatic nature of the act of writing crisis. As we have seen, crisis calls for explanation and defusing; it invites *resolution* as a singular closure. By the very gesture of defining a given situation as a crisis, one may be tempted into idioms of writing that do not complicate themselves by engaging fully with the issues under review – idioms that serve only to perpetuate crisis as a condition of mind by *disassociating*

specific crises from their specific environments of causality.

Critique, by contrast, demands a sustained investigation premised on the disclosure of *truth* in its multi-faceted fullness, so that the practitioners of critique cannot hope to make friends, although they may well influence people through the depth and range they bring to their examination by *confronting* specific crises in their specific environments of causality. I propose to consider, necessarily somewhat schematically within the brief compass of this essay, the landscape of social, political and cultural determinations in which media practice in India negotiates between these etymologically twinned but actively opposed phenomena.

Organizing the Delivery of Crisis

Media practice, almost more than any other form of cultural production, must take into account the public contexts in which it articulates itself. These public contexts, making particular conceptual and material demands as they do, form the pretext for the manner in which the media organize crisis for presentation. The media claim that they must work within the implicit and explicit parameters of say-ability and show-ability laid down by the State; they cite public culture – the hazy spectre of ‘popular feeling’ in its religious, regional, linguistic or ethnic biases – as a marker of limitation. More often than not, media corporations tend to manipulate directly, or acquiesce in the manipulation of, the public contexts of their operation. Media corporations are being somewhat disingenuous when they identify their interests with those of the people. As evidenced in their patterns of reportage, analysis and comment, their interests are more often contiguous with those of the nation-state, or of influential actors in the polity and the economy; or then, they align their interests with those of globally dominant institutions – a fact that demonstrates the compromised nature of their pragmatics.

Media corporations deploy various strategies of representation in organizing the delivery of crisis as they deal with a scale of situations ranging from the mere disturbance to the cataclysm. Typically, they *cast the catastrophic as the spectacular*, playing the occasion for theatre. The newsroom has its Procrustean formats, to which the rawness and complexity of crisis situations may be reduced. Guided by the commandment of speed, obsessed with projecting the illusion of confident authority, caught up in the succession of variations that pass for updates, the news operation tends to ignore the weave – the knitting together of the local and the global, the mediaeval and the contemporary, the religious and the secular. Conflicts over the allocation of resources and authority in Sri Lanka or Bihar may be glossed through the default narratives of inter-ethnic strife or inter-caste rivalry; material desires and constructed identities, entering into complex transactions and belligerences in Iraq or East Timor, can be accounted for under the readymade rubric of religious antagonism.

At a time when identity has become a fluid bargaining position, the news operation assumes entrenched, even primordial identities of self and community: the intricacies of otherness pose difficulties of interpretation and hold up the speed with which news must now be disseminated. The other, even when it has penetrated the self, is sought to be captured in alienating definitions; tradition is reified into an immutable formula, even though the news derives a considerable proportion of its events and its substance from the recen-

sionary acts of revanchism, irredentism, revivalism and neo-tribalism, which illustrate how tradition has become a special form of modernity. A nineteenth century colonialist mentality continues to determine the media view of its subjects: ethnicities and nations, languages and regions are routinely essentialized, with dangerous results, as we have seen in Rwanda and in the countries that were formerly provinces of the Ottoman Empire.

Another basic feature of contemporary media treatment, especially in its televisual dimension, is what I would term *repeatage*, which has comprehensively supplanted reportage. By repeatage, I mean the impoverishment of discourse, both visual and explicative, that results when the media reinforce key images to the point of banality, or replay unexamined clichés to package a difficult situation in a semantics of simplification. From repeatage, there follows naturally the phenomenon of the shallow present: a present that floats without reference to the deep archive of the past, dangerously buoyant in the programmatic absence of contexts and frameworks in which to assess the information offered by the media on any given situation. The shallow present is a particular malaise of the electronic media, although the print media in India are struggling to catch up. It is to be hoped that in a utopian but not-too-distant future, the news operation will extend itself through inter-media options, linking TV with the internet in ways that would achieve a currently unobtainable relay between instantaneity and the archival.

The emphasis on the shallow present serves a crucial ideological function: it focuses the attention of readers or viewers on the narratives that are sanctioned by the media apparatus, and such steady focus confers upon them a dominance and widespread acceptance. As a corollary, the mainstream media render various 'unsuitable' narratives inaudible. Entire histories of struggle, suffering or resistance thereby become invisible, *unspeakable*. Among these, in the Indian media context, are phantoms of lost solidarities (between India and the Arab world), tokens of a discarded compassion (in relation to project-displaced people), awareness of provinces governed in quasi-military fashion (Jammu & Kashmir, and the North-eastern regions, which are, for all practical purposes, under martial law). These unsuitable narratives have either become yesterday's, or the last decade's, news; or they are perceived to be irrelevant by the manipulators of public opinion – under which rubric I place the owners and editorial mandarins of many print and electronic conglomerates, as well as their political respondents and interlocutors. It is still possible, with courage, tact and ingenuity, for individual media practitioners and individual media corporations to secure 'liberated zones', even within a mediascape sustained largely by such manipulation, but this tends to be the exception, not the rule.

In practice, through the 1990s – as the two terms around the hyphen in 'nation-state' have come apart, and the idea of the consensual nation has collapsed to reveal a hegemonic and even paranoid state apparatus – it is through the mainstream mediascape that various conceptions of the public, the people, and even the nation have been constructed and floated. To no one's surprise, these are instrumental fictions of collectivity, constituted around entertainment events such as cricket matches, around sports icons, quizzes, game shows and talk shows; they reflect a subscribership to high-consumption culture and resurgent nationalism. This offers us a clue to the influence of powerful interests on the domain of the media.

While I do not wish to reify or essentialize the mainstream media as a monolithic entity, it must be said that large sectors of the Indian mass media apparatus (with a few honourable and courageous exceptions) are complicit with, or neutralized by association with, the *fixities* of State hegemony, resurgent majoritarian nationalism, and globally fluid capital. Such compromising involvements weaken the Indian media's claim to independence, objectivity and critical mobility. What we see in the mainstream media – despite occasional campaigns against corruption or nepotism, which cannot mask the fact that their columns have no place for long-running droughts or famines, the dilapidation of infrastructure and the immiseration of the rural artisanate – is a *surrender of critique*.

The Paradoxes of Complicity

The complicity of the media with the formations of the State, majoritarianism and global capital has translated as a conflation of its attitudes with theirs, an identification of its material and symbolic interests with theirs. The outcome of such conflation and identification is manifested in three specific paradoxes.

First: while claiming to act in, and speak for, the public interest, the media deliver their readers or viewers to their advertisers and protectors, as so many minds, bodies and sensory imaginations to be subjected to State and corporate agendas. The media, on examination, will be seen to be replicating the pathologies of the State and exponentiating the market-lust of the corporations – a tendency that is greatly dramatized during the reportage of periodic catastrophes that threaten State or corporate agendas. In these instances, crisis is packaged within definite parameters. When India tests a nuclear device or Pakistan is caught shipping nuclear technology or materials to regimes intent on manufacturing nuclear weapons, the Indian media follow an official line, as though the State's foreign policy were also the foreign perspective of the media. In dealing with the war mythology of Kargil, too, the media follow the State in its triumphalism. So too, in reporting and analyzing the attack on Parliament in 2001, most of the media have gone along with the official account.

I would contend that this unquestioning adoption of the official line on terrorism, militancy and foreign affairs – doubtless in the national interest – has only served to further restrict a public sphere already constricted by draconian measures concerning the expression of dissent, the articulation of contrary viewpoints, and the advocacy of the cause of individuals, groups or entire regions officially classified as inimical to the State.

Second: as the Indian media lose their autonomy – reflecting a nation-state hemmed in by its commitments to a world economy dominated by the industrially advanced nations – they have begun to take their cue from the global (i.e.: American) media, in matters that range from the number of column-inches or air-minutes devoted to soft news designed around Page 3 people, the beauty industry and entertainment, to the mapping of international perspectives, as on Iraq, the House of Islam, South-east Asia, environmental issues and the patterns of world trade.

This reliance on American media directives – a loss of *swaraj*, if there was one – takes its place in a culture of defeatism, animated (if that is the right word) by a general belief that India has been chasing shadows for five decades, that the Non-Aligned Movement, India's tilt towards the Soviet Union during the Cold War, and Nehru's insistence

on economic autonomy, were grievous errors. Conventional wisdom suggests that it is far better to follow the State Department, the *LA Times*, CNN and Fox TV, in the management of our public life; signals from the mass media, both subliminal and overt, encourage us in this delusion.

Third: (and this is the paradox in chief so far as media practice is concerned): while claiming to mediate and reflect the desires of their subscribers by mounting a sometimes farcical *populism* – the spirit behind numerous call-in polls, email surveys and random interviews – the Indian mainstream media often display a remarkable *solipsism* towards their subscribers, treating them as pawns, addicts or creatures *produced by the mediatic process*, recorded as numbers in the periodic warfare over popularity ratings and circulation figures, to be toyed with at will, their passive and un-empowered reception mitigated by token efforts towards interactivity.

The renunciation of autonomy, the marginalization of the dissident critical function as too adversarial to be countenanced, the proposal of a symbolic order of dependency for the nation – all these speak of that particular tragedy which overtakes the media when its practitioners forget that theirs is, *or must be*, a discourse of communicative action, *not* a discourse of hegemony. What I have sought to trace here are the outlines of a *crisis of representation* that faces Indian media productions. It is also, at once, a *crisis of self-understanding* for its practitioners: What are we meant to represent, and how? And who, precisely, are we meant to function as, and from what platform of credibility? In these circumstances, as media practitioners, how exactly shall we render our self-avowed function as *bearers of truth*?

Redemption by Critique

Nothing can be easier than to transfer the blame for individual compromises on the parameters of the institution, the systemic constraints. But media practitioners must face themselves squarely: their selves, as compromised observers. On such inquiry, the media-practising self unravels. We must be prepared, after unpeeling the institutional skin, to place our personal conditioning under the interrogative scanner of critique. At which point it becomes inescapably clear that the crisis is not external – comfortably out there and elsewhere, a feature of the institution and the system – but that it is inside you; that you *embody* the crisis in your anxieties, as you find your *truth-bearing claim* breaking down.

There are no holidays for the media practitioner. You cannot set aside your media-practitioner self, with its guarantees of neutrality and its actualities of compromise, silence and evasion, ready with the answers. You cannot sidestep this role and slip into the role of concerned citizen, full of questions. This brings us to a consideration of the paramount question of the ethics of media practice.

In times of crisis (and which times, now, are not?), are you a media practitioner first, or a citizen first? How meaningful is this dichotomy, this Plotinian model of two natures in one body? Whatever one self wishes to leave unsaid, in times of crises, the other will wish to articulate. The option of *self-censorship* is an agonizing one: to strip the self to its commitments and convictions in order to meet the criterion of neutrality, only to find that neutrality is a vexed and contested state. You find that you have sometimes internalized the

defence mechanisms of the system. Often, too, you will have played mouthpiece to a populism that phrases itself in blithe talk of 'national interest' and 'popular feeling', justifying elisions and omissions in the name of avoiding offence to patriotic sentiments or religious sensibilities. This is the voice of a media practice that has become so embedded in civil society, polity, economy and their emotional investments, that it cannot stand apart and play the role of agonist and questioner – a media practice that has failed in the function of critique.

Consider a redemption from this fallen state, achieved through the resumption of critique. Consider, in other words, the media practitioner who acknowledges his or her occupancy of the skin of the citizen: here is a self that must avow its doubts, its hesitations, even its *alterities*. And not by writing in a self-indulgent, autobiographical vein, but rather by pursuing allusion, oblique provocation, inserting uncertainty in place of dogma, even in the conventional formats of the mainstream media paradigm, playing subtly through the protocols of report, feature, analysis, and comment. Critique is all too often thought of as a corrosive move; but it can accomplish its redemptive moves by being playful and riddling, by affirming the excluded through festive rather than solemn resistance.

Eventually, in the inter-media future to which I have alluded briefly above, critical media practice would move towards tactical, transitive, inter-genre modes as alternatives to the mainstream paradigm. As necessarily partisan modes interrupting the circulation of dominant discourses, these would cast the media practitioner as a combatant, an ally of other agents of resistance, such as activists, artists and literary producers. Media practitioners would evolve, through such alignments, a new subjectivity; they would explore the materiality of their media in refreshingly novel ways, developing new communities in spaces of convergence that are also spaces of emancipation.

Concluding Caveats

The festivity with which I have delineated the future of critical media must be balanced by the discipline of ethical vigilance. Practitioners of resistance in the media ought not to lapse into an irresponsibility of their own, to match that of the dominant discourses and their purveyors, which they oppose. *If the crisis is embodied by the practitioner, so too must the critique be embodied by him or her.*

This caveat acquires urgency in the light of the repeated instances when resistance in the media has been guilty of its own errors of omission. The complacency of the high moral ground assumed by exponents of the Left-liberal position can cause a blindness towards crises that do not fit into their prescribed paradigm of grievance and horror. No sadder instance of this can be found than the prolonged Left-liberal refusal to recognize the predicament of the Kashmiri Pandits, whose travails were not only *not* accorded recognition, but were even dismissed as State-sponsored hallucinations, through the 1990s. In this account, the Kashmiri Pandits were viewed as members of the 'majority community', and therefore, by definition, immune from suffering. In truth, the impartial criterion of minority status, and the mandate of protecting minority rights, ought to have been applied to the Pandits, who were a minority in Kashmir; their membership of India's Hindu majority did not help them while they faced militant persecution and exile. Predictably, Left-Liberal commentators

blamed the government for this tragedy, rather than the increasingly far-right Wahabbist forces of militancy, which also destroyed the Sufi openness of Islam in Kashmir, virtually unchallenged by resistance media practitioners and human rights activists.

When the Pandit predicament became too visible to be denied, the script changed: Left-liberal observers were discouraged from commenting on it because 'this was not the right time' (it never is) and we ought not to 'weaken the cause' (perish the thought). Robust honesty was regarded as a strategic disadvantage, while the desire to project a favourite victim ('the Kashmiri people', presumably excluding the Pandits) over other candidates (the Pandits), and the immediate and automatic privileging of a carefully rehearsed underdog narrative (that of the militants), conspired to destroy Left-liberal credibility on the Kashmir issue.

Among the victims of this victimology-gone-wrong were, in addition to the Pandits, the Muslims of the Valley, who suffered the violent attentions both of the State and the militants, as well as the Ladakhis and the denizens of Jammu. Across religious lines, political freedoms were snatched away by the State (reported by resistance media practitioners) while cultural freedoms were robbed by the militants (silence from the above, some of whom would, in other contexts, have upheld the rights of women, of dissenters, of variations in belief). In the end, the cause was weakened – and large numbers of potentially liberal Hindus tipped over the fence into the arms of aggressive *Hindutva* – because of the foolish hypocrisy of the Left-liberal intellectual formation.

The moral of the parable is a simple one: that, while celebrating the festivity of resistance and overturning the ideological restrictions of the establishment mass media, we ought not to replace one dogma with another. Partisan as we are, we must submit ourselves to our own professional structures and mechanisms of review, cognisant of the realization that, in many conflicts and other crisis situations, neither conventional even-handedness nor defiant partisanship are relevant – since there are more than two sides to the truth. These are issues that will become ever more urgent, it seems to me, in a media environment where the newspaper aspires to the televisual, the electronic media rejects depth, and the internet, in its very freedom and relative absence of refereeing, becomes vulnerable to regressive agendas.

This text was presented at the "Crisis/Media" workshop, organized by Sarai-CSDS and the Waag Society in Delhi, March 2003.