

BETWEEN TRUTH AND MANIPULATION: JOURNALISM AND ITS ETHICAL DILEMMAS IN S. L. BHYRAPPA'S TANTU- THE LOOM OF LIFE

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Abstract

This paper examines the representation of journalism and media ethics in s. L. Bhyrappa's novels Tantu: The Loom of Life, Parva, and Mandra, with particular emphasis on the dialectical struggle between ethical responsibility and the pressures of political power, commercial interests, personal ambition, and social expectations. Tantu, set against the political and cultural landscape of Post-independence India and the emergency of 1975, foregrounds the conflict between journalists committed to truth and those who compromise journalistic integrity through sycophancy, favouritism, sensationalism, and political allegiance. Through characters such as Ravindra, Talwar, Shantamurthy, Shashikala, and Gautam Narayan, Bhyrappa presents journalism as both a crucial democratic institution and a vulnerable instrument of power. The paper further establishes a continuity between the ethical questions raised in Tantu and Bhyrappa's treatment of information and truth in Parva, where Sanjaya's reporting of the Mahabharata war becomes an early literary configuration of the tension between truth and the appeasement of political authority. In Mandra, this concern extends into the domains of celebrity culture, privacy, sensationalism, publicity, and the commercialisation of information. Across these novels, journalism emerges not merely as a professional practice but as a cultural arena in which competing conceptions of righteousness are negotiated. The paper argues that Bhyrappa's largely non-didactic treatment of these conflicts allows readers to confront the ethical ambiguity of reporting and to independently examine the relationship between truth, power, responsibility, and social values. His fiction thereby presents journalistic ethics as part of a wider and continuing cultural struggle over the meaning and practice of righteousness.

Keywords: S. L. Bhyrappa; Tantu; Parva; Mandra; journalism; media ethics; ethical journalism; righteousness; political power; press freedom; cultural struggle; truth and representation.

1. Introduction

Media moulds the minds in millions. It is one of the four pillars of democracy. The other three pillars are Legislature, Executive and Judiciary. Legislature includes the Parliament, State Assemblies etc.; the Executive comprises of the Central and State governments etc.; the Judiciary functions through the Supreme Court, the High Court and other judicial bodies and the Media works through newspapers, magazines, social media, internet, electronic media etc. A good contribution of these four pillars is extremely important for the fulfilment of the ideals of democracy. Of these four pillars, the Media is undoubtedly a source of opinion formation, perception building and information. It is a voice of the society, of the people. It acts as an interface, an interpreter and an interlocutor between the state power and the people. The Media is the platform on which they interact with each other. Hence, the Media plays a vital role in sustaining the democratic ideals to build a healthy society. The privileged position of the Media is also rounded with a responsibility. If the values of non-partisanship, political neutrality and ethics are not observed in the various functions of the media and journalism, this non-observance proves to be detrimental in the pursuit of fulfilment of democratic ideals. That is why ethics are inseparable from Media. Journalism is an honourable Profession, though many of those who should practise ethical journalism, its own Professionals, have dishonoured it. At times, the ideologically inclined governments try to censor or control it and owners use it as a means to satisfy their quest for wealth and power. A sycophant journalist is as bad as a tyrannical government. Some are 'fallible' to the extent that they may not need to be bribed to be unethical in their Profession. Their lust for money, position and power, at times, rises above the interests of people, of society. Such journalists reduce the nobility of this service to a mere commercial and political enterprise. Even consumers, intellectuals, influential members of society internalise these repulsive practices as the norm instead of questioning or challenging the megalomania of the media houses. It is because of this degeneration of this noble Profession that 'ethical journalism' becomes necessary. 'Yet, journalism remains an honourable Profession, because it has an honourable aim,' observe Andrew Belsey and Ruth Chadwick. The health of a society depends on whether this aim is achieved or not.

The novel, *Tantu- The Loom of Life* has the 20th century, post-independence period of the 1960's and 1970's as its setting. S.L. Bhyrappa has skilfully incorporated the political, cultural and the Media scene of the 1970's into the narrative of this novel. The protagonist of the novel, Ravindra is the Editor of the state edition of a national level newspaper along with Shantamurthy, Shashikala and Talwar. They practise ethical journalism by the virtue of their uprightness and conviction into a non-corrupt, non- sycophantic media, whereas, the journalist Gautam Narayan, the Manager of the newspaper-Khetri and the owners of the newspapers are seen indulging into favouritism, sycophancy and a gross violation of the ethics of the venerable Profession of journalism.

Shantamurthy, the bright reporter of *The Tribune* has cracked a corruption scam of illegal mining in a village in Karnataka. The scam involves the local MLA, Hanumantappa. Shantamurthy and his colleague Shashikala carry out some investigation at the mining site putting fake identities of a film crew, extract information from the supervisor and take photographs of workers who are almost made to live and suffer like slaves. The nexus between politicians, businessmen and corrupt government officials is exposed. The publishing of the news results into antagonism between the ruling party ministers, the government and the newspaper. Those who are exposed, make counter allegations on the newspaper. Few days later, nobody gets to know what happened to those enslaved workers. Ravindra thinks that nothing can be done in the morally and ethically apathetic times.

Later in the novel, when Ravindra's son Anup puts himself into a trouble by his spoiled behaviour which leads to a police inquiry causing much embarrassment to Ravindra, a journalist uses this opportunity to defame Ravindra to avenge Ravindra's criticism of the government. Gautam Narayan, the journalist, writes one article accusing Ravindra of protecting his wayward son, thus, to win the favour of the ruling party for, Ravindra often criticised the ruling party leader's favouritism towards her son and also because Ravindra always criticised the party and its politics. In a reply to this derisive article, Ravindra states his position as a journalist in criticising the then Prime Minister's sycophantic relationship with her own son. He makes a difference between him criticising a public figure misusing the public office and Gautam writing the article accusing Ravindra of protecting wayward son.

He points out that Gautam is playing in the hands of the politicians who were displeased when Ravindra and his colleagues had exposed the illegal mining scam. Contrary to Gautam's charge on Ravindra, he had never called up the police to influence the case against Anup and had never misused his position to influence the inquiry. Gautam's derisive article against Ravindra clearly reveals how favouritism, sycophancy and unethical journalism put society in danger.

Bhyrappa shows how, in the 1970, politics controlled journalism and the media. Post- Nehruvian national leadership was quite interested in establishing the legacy of her family in Indian politics. If the media criticised her or her party, or government, she would be vindictive against the media. This aspect of the novel *Tantu* highlights the issue of the cultural struggle over power politics controlling the politically neutral media. The threat to democracy becomes clear when the media is not even allowed to question and criticise the government in the interest of democracy. What was still worse was the fawning attitude of the media. Khetri, the Manager of the newspaper advises Ravindra to 'go soft' in his writings on the ruling party. Thus, the commercial and political paybacks remain as the sole interest of the media houses and the owners. Talwar, the honest and upright Chief Editor quits *The Tribune*. He resigns his job due to disagreements with the management on the issue of going soft with his criticism of government and national leader and he starts a new newspaper which criticises the government vigorously. As a fallout of this ethical journalism practised by Talwar, his family, son-in law, son are treated maliciously by government officers on the provocations of some ruling party political leaders. New Editor joins in. He has the reputation of being close with the government. Ravindra quits his job too. He

meets Talwar. He learns that Talwar has started one newspaper with the purpose of exposing the autocratic government and corruption. Ravindra joins this newspaper. This cultural struggle between an oppressive government and the upright journalists reach a disturbing level during the Emergency of the 1975 which starts a darkest phase in the history of independent India. Through the atrocities practised against journalists like Ravindra and Talwar, who continued their protest against the government tyranny, Bhyrappa shows how even the fundamental rights as guaranteed under the constitution were suspended and the Press was barred from producing 'dangerous' news.

Pre- Independence media, journalism ethics, ideals declined in the post-independence period. The aspirations for independence and values of righteousness, nation-building, man-making, got replaced with favouritism and power mongering. Media houses abandoned the Gandhian principles and got totally commercialised with a profit making style of functioning. Money and power became the major attractions for those who worked in the media. Amidst these degenerating values, persons like Ravindra, Talwar, Shantamurthy, Shashikala continue their struggle against political dominion, dictatorial rule of the government, nepotism and corruption. Hundreds of such assertive journalists were arrested under the Press Objectionable Matter Act which was passed by the Nehru government in the parliament in 1951. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi had perceived a potential threat from the media and journalists to her power. Hence, the arrest of journalists, social workers and opposition leaders was used as an instrument of suppressing the dissent. In the times of such atrocities and autocratic rule, the media, journalists got divided into factions. Most journalists turned sycophant and many newspapers almost became the mouthpiece of the government. There were others, the unwavering and upright journalists who strongly protested against the internal Emergency imposed by the then Prime Minister. Bhyrappa's narrative of Ravindra, Talwar and such fearless journalists in the backdrop of the Emergency of 1975, recaps the intensity of cultural struggle over righteousness and ethics in journalism. The dialectics and polarisation of values, principles and philosophy in these circumstances are summed up by

Dr. Juhumur Ghosh, Assistant Professor, Future Institute of Engineering and Management,

Kolkata in a paper, "*Indira Gandhi's Call of emergency and Press Censorship in India: The Ethical Parameters Revisited*", in the following words:

"It is really important for the Press to discriminate between right and wrong circumstances and report accordingly. The discretion of course is subjective but so are matters of ethics. The world over journalistic associations and bodies has framed Professional code of conduct for members to ensure ethical standards are not sacrificed in the search of sensationalism and scoop-news. The Indian journalistic associations are no different but still a section of the Press could not be absolved of dereliction of duty and irresponsibility for momentary gains." (Ghosh, 15)

Thus, the novel *Tantu* brings out the dialectical struggle of cultural values and practices in our own times. What is remarkable about this struggle is that, though the issues, concerns and matters are rounded by modern times with the inclusion of foreign elements in the dialectical situation of Indian culture, the dialectic vein of a society with the co-existence of pluralistic values of righteousness is still the same since times immemorial. The fabric of life in India is hemmed with this dialectic approach to everything. *Tantu* brings this unique feature of the dialectical struggle of culture. It shows very clearly that the continual stirring of cultural values and practices is the typical feature of the Indian society. This is a permanently on-going phenomenon of reaching the truth of all matters. This phenomenon is not operated, channelized or controlled by any monolithic centre. This decentralised, discrete and dispersed phenomenon accepts the existence and presence of all values, all practices. The acceptance of western values, lifestyles and culture is a major impetus to the cultural struggle as fallout of colonisation of India. The presence of the western values and lifestyle in India even after forty years since the Independence, as shown in the novel, contributes in making the social and cultural scene dialectic and immensely diverse. This cultural struggle is not a measure of elimination of the western elements in Indian way of life, thinking and culture but it is a measure of understanding the 'humanoid commonality' as a meeting point of different identities. The formal exit of the British from the political scene in India did not lead to the elimination of their 'cultural footprints'. We can experience this amalgamation of native Indian cultural values with the western lifestyle and values as the essential feature of Indian society today. It is the understanding of 'righteousness' in everything which is reached through questioning, challenging, resisting, arguing and debating over the 'truth of righteousness' in all values, in all practices.

It is important to note that S.L. Bhyrappa shows us a similar situation of dialectical struggle of culture of righteousness of the media and reporting in the times as olden as the Mahabharata. The novel *Parva* which is a realistic retelling of the epic real has sound undertones of cultural issues relevant in our own times. Of all such cultural issues which have a similar dialectical vein, the issue of 'ethical journalism' is interwoven into the narrative of the novel *Parva* with absolute coherence and creativity. Of course, the modern term, 'journalism' may not be applied to the fictional element related to this which Bhyrappa casts into the mould of Mahabharata, yet, the novelist's dexterous handling of the issue in this novel reinforces the permanence of the dialectical and thought provoking treatment of the narrative of 'ethical journalism'.

In *Parva*, the dialectics of the cultural struggle over 'ethical reporting' are delineated through the interaction and debate

between Sanjaya, the charioteer of Dhritrashtra, the Kaurava king. The blind king has assigned Sanjaya the task of reporting the war to him. Bhyrappa shows us in a realistic manner in the novel that Sanjaya travels to and fro Kurukshetra, the war site and Hastinavati, the capital where he gives a blow-by-blow account of the war to the king. Sanjaya's narration of war news to Dhritrashtra and Gandhari is full of the rhetoric of Kaurava's bravery. He minces the facts, alleviates the facts of setbacks to Kauravas, exaggerates the losses to the opponents- the Pandavas- all this to win the favour of the king by giving a soothing account of the war even when it is far from reality. When Vidura, the half-brother of Pandu and Dhritrashtra, the man known for his sound intellect and composed thinking, one who retains his nonpartisan position during the Great War, asks Sanjaya,

"Why did you tell so many lies in your account of the war?" (p. 714)

Sanjaya replies to Vidura's question quoting what his father, Gavalgana, had told him in his farewell advice. The dying old man had said,

"You must always give happy tidings to those in power and office. You can be sure that there has never been, and will never be a person in power, especially one on throne, who can stomach unpalatable news. Never forget this point when conveying news to kings." (p.716)

The even minded Vidura counters this reasoning of Sanjaya and asks him to convey only the truth of anything exactly as it happened and as was seen. But, Sanjaya persists with his stand and continues telling Vidura his sorry state. He complains that he gets no salary from the king for working as his reporter. In such a case, he states defending himself, he has to depend on the rewards he keeps extracting from the king for giving him the news that make him happy. Additionally he also argues that his lowborn condition compels him always to satisfy the king through his appeasing information of the war. Thus, we find that the tendentious flaw of servility, greed for money and power of those working in the field of disseminating information marks a departure of individual and society from righteousness. This abnormality leads to a fractured democracy and unfortunately those who should care for it, namely, the state power, media and society cause harm to it.

The same aspect of ethical journalism as righteousness is addressed by Bhyrappa in yet another novel called, *Mandra*. The novel *Tantu* has journalists like Gautam who exploit their office for personal benefit and for political favours, Parva shows Sanjaya, the reporter to the king who gives untruthful reports of the war to please the king to win his favour whereas *Mandra* has Guha and Paranjape, the freelance journalists who '(un)cover' the private, personal life of celebrities, artists, actors, famous people, politicians etc. Guha's salacious news item on Manohari Datta, the famous dance artist's relationship with different men, her affair with Mohanlal, the famous singer and the bitter end of their relationship, Guha's provocation to Manohari's Guru, Sohanlal against her for her deviation of the standard dance form taught to her by her Guru, all these instances reveal the intrusive attitude of the media persons. This intrusiveness and sensationalism of the media to capitalise on the private life of famous persons highlights the issue of righteousness in journalism and ethical journalism. The celebrities, in turn, are no less responsible for this deviation of the media and journalism from the norm of 'ethical journalism' or righteousness. In the novel *Mandra* we see that Manohari is quite happy to see that the same articles written by Guha which she had found detestable and outrageous for invading her personal life, have actually given her enormous publicity making all her shows houseful and enormously successful. Guha's comment, "The film people pay money and get the gossip column written", speaks a lot about how, at times, the publicity mongering of the celebrities exploits the society orientation of the media and journalism to help them rise in their career. Such salacious reports in newspapers and magazines are savoured by most people. This shows how the society too plays a role in the process of deviation of journalism from ethics. Similarly, the commercial interests of journalists like Paranjape who is a long-time friend of Mohanlal, the eminent classical maestro, complicate the media scene. He takes an undue advantage of his friendship with the great singer by acting as a middleman in the deal between Mohanlal and a cassette company. When Mohanlal sees through his selfish interests, he cancels the deal. This infuriates Paranjape against Mohanlal and he goes on writing defamatory articles against the singer criticising his failure in innovating his singing. As a consequence of such reports, the cassette company withdraws the deal causing a great annoyance to the artist. This incident reveals how the political, commercial interests of journalists engaged with the field of art can manipulate the otherwise beautiful and pleasure giving aesthetic activity of music. The novel *Mandra* shows a gross violation of media ethics in the incident of Mohanlal- Laurence quarrel. After getting treated badly by Mohanlal, Laurence, the American student of Mohanlal, confides everything with Paranjape, of course, only after he promises her that he will not publish the story. However, Paranjape breaks the promise and runs a very derisive story on the unfortunate incident. This causes a rift between Mohanlal and Laurence permanently and she leaves India forever leaving her dream of learning Indian Classical music incomplete. In this way, we see that the aspect of dialectical struggle of culture of journalism and media ethics over righteousness stands out prominently in the novel *Mandra*. It is important to see that the novelist does not take any moralistic or didactic stand on how his characters behave in this regard. Bhyrappa only conceives a plot, contrives an intriguing situation and portrays his characters according to the requirement of the plot. The inclusion of the narrative of 'ethical journalism' in the novel *Mandra* which primarily

concretises the otherwise abstract melody of music in the form of a novel by revealing the inner recesses of the mind, personality and character of a singer, shows the all-pervasive role and significance of the media in our life.

The contesting tendencies in journalism, the cultural struggle between the ethical and non-ethical practices in media, the dialectical debates between different point of views and practices are merely depicted by Bhyrappa in this novel as a reality. The novelist's 'impersonal' treatment to these issues heightens up the objectivity of the consciousness of righteousness. The plot, characters, situations offer a tremendous scope to the readers, critics and researchers of Bhyrappa's novels to obtain their own, personalised understanding of righteousness, of what would be the most unstained act, choice, thought on the part of the characters in the situations that provoke the examination of righteousness.

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