

## METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS ON MEDIA AND COUNTER HEGEMONIC PROTEST IN INDIA

My work examines the potential for newspapers to act as an efficacious tool for democratic expression in the discourses of the public sphere. I trace in my monograph a longer process of evolution in a relationship between women as social actors and newspapers as mediators of change, so today I want to extend our attention beyond representation, to consider the nature of mediation and how it facilitated counter-hegemonic actions in civil society. Obviously this implies interdisciplinarity. My work on newspapers is germane to literature, anthropology and sociology, where for some time there has been interest in historicising fields of study. This was pioneered, for instance, by the work of Clifford Geertz and Michael Schudson. Equally, 'New Cultural History' has been influenced by literary studies, resulting in close examinations of texts although mainly for contemporary social, economic and/or political comment.

Thus I'm interested in categories of knowledge and power as much as categories of representation and in particular the symbolic media category of cultural citizenship. Cultural citizenship encapsulates activities conducted in the public sphere for political and/or social ends, as articulated through or by the media. It is also a normative phrase that describes the effect and the process of engagement in newspaper publicity by women. Cultural citizenship emerged as part of the process of press mediation and is used to describe that very process, as it became embedded within civil society and public consciousness.

This is examined in my monograph that is a historicisation of how female citizenship was framed, developed through the prism of the public press, with examples taken from a time frame of the 1860s through to the 1930s. It looks at women as an influence on editorial, how women were perceived as a readership and/or as consumers by newspapers, how they themselves by their actions in the public sphere sought and received coverage. Various strands of developmental explanation emerge: business factors, labour movement roots, direct action protests, women participating in representational politics and 'educational' or peaceful persuasion for reforms, sometimes as journalists themselves. They also produced newspapers and were represented in them, wrote and distributed leaflets, made and carried banners, organised conferences, gave speeches, marched, canvassed, and took leadership roles.

Increasingly extrovert protest tactics enabled and enhanced regular interaction with the media. How were moments of political and economic resistance and rebellion mediated? Did newspapers, as vehicles for public articulation, lead or follow? Newspapers other than activists own papers needed to be hijacked in a performative way as tools for communication. At the same time, cultural citizenship became multi-faceted, encapsulating both a discursive, educational identity and more extreme, dramatic activities. This process is compared trans-nationally and between periods of history, using the suffragettes and India's anti-colonial female protest, for instance. These provide a context for post-Orientalism.

Judith Butler has theorised how a subject is formed through repetition, through a 'practice of signification'. The process by which women acted counter-hegemonically to first

achieve that repetition in and through newspapers is less familiar to scholars, although Foucault has provided philosophical guidance on conflict, hierarchy and power emerge as underlying factors behind the linguistic process and are inherent to it.

The decolonisation of India provides an important arena for the development of critical models. Subaltern studies, for instance, are re-writing the history of colonial India from the perspective of peasant consciousness and insurgency - a history of subaltern agency - but writers such as Edward Said, Bhabha, Guha and Spivak have stressed that subalterns are exclusively framed by colonial power. They have not looked in detail at communications historically – this is a gap that I aim to fill.

Their work has its theoretical roots in studies of Gramsci's hegemony and, more recently, counter-hegemony, relevant to the relations of power and disempowerment in connection with newspapers. 'The 'normal' exercise of hegemony ... is characterized by the combination of force and consensus which vary in their balance with each other, without force exceeding consensus too much. Thus it tries to achieve that force should appear to be supported by the agreement of the majority, expressed by the so-called organs of public opinion- newspapers and associations'.

In particular Gramsci's theory on hegemony, that has led to theories of counter hegemony post Gramsci. Since Gramsci's time, scholars have argued that if there is hegemony, then there can also be counter-hegemony. The concept was first developed - in terms of definitions of modernity - by structuralist philosophers such as Althusser, Adorno, subsequently critiqued by the post-structuralists Berman and Derrida and has been widely discussed within journalism history by scholars in relation to minority communication (Downing, Murdock, Cottle, Chapman).

In media expression, the selectivity of sources referred to above allows alternative media to use a different set of sources and voices. Hence the insider/outsider divide has prompted categorisation of attempts to challenge existing ideological frameworks. These have been labelled as 'counter-hegemonic' and are referred to by John Downing as 'radical alternative media'. One factor that needs to be addressed is how far counter hegemony in texts acts as a social mirror and how far it acts as a social agent for either change or continuity. There is a symbiotic relationship between print communication and social movement, characterised by the use of advocacy journalism, revealing important traces of early cultural citizenship in a subaltern context. Despite the democracy of the Internet, there is still sufficient evidence of the commercial dominance of English language and of a western-dominated global communications cartel for Gramsci's influence to still provide a framework for forms of insider/outsider communication.

Before I look at these 4 categories, just a word on Arundhati Roy, Narmada and, more recently, the Maoists: The Booker Prize award in 1998 for Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* opened up a new opportunity for the novelist to turn her attentions to India's nuclear policy and the campaign against the Narmada dam projects. She earned the label "writer- activist". In the case of Narmada, Roy has presented India as a theatre of

conflict with universal relevance and her skill as a writer-activist can be seen as a complement to the existing body of development journalism emerging from India (more on this later).

Her intervention as a 'writer-activist' introduced two new elements to the Narmada debate. First, a popularisation through eloquent, passionate and politically engaging narrative, characterised stylistically by use of some fictional literary techniques, and backed on occasions by a huge amount of relevant data. Second, by exposing the injustices and corruption perpetrated by Enron and its connections with the US and Indian organs of state, Roy has relentlessly moved the spotlight to an investigation of power politics. The effect in creative terms has been to bring a fresh dimension and also a boost to activist journalism.

There has been some debate about her personal projection, with criticism in the Indian press of how the novelist has 'hijacked' the movement. But on the ground it is clear that ... Ms. Roy is an external sympathiser and a useful means of drawing attention (Hindustan Times). But Roy uses her literary skills to encourage us towards activism as the inevitable conclusion that she would have us make. It is this technique that gives particular potency to her specific brand of literary journalism, aimed at global dissemination. Roy's aim is to influence internationally and she disseminates widely. What are the implications of this counter-hegemonic perspective? First, it enables us to establish that, despite censorship, the historic expression in both hegemonic and counter hegemonic communications of economic and social protest provided a challenge for the media by extending the scope of newspapers' role within the evolution of gendered citizenship. Second, counter-hegemonic scholarship, especially that of Downing, has provided a transportable model for the analysis of media and citizenship when he identifies four characteristics that can be tested in the case of Narmada communications: rule breaking, democratic methods, combined lateral and vertical purposes and attacks from authority.

### *Rule-breaking*

Radical media, according to Downing, 'break somebody's rules, Roy, for instance, adopts a hybrid literary style – part journalism of opinion, part essay, part descriptive feature, part rhetorical narrative. This journalistic technique shamelessly challenges all the golden rules of conventional 'professionalism': fact and comment are intermingled, emotion and use of the personal take pride of place along with political didacticism.

*Democratic Methods* - democracy relates to how the cultural producer connects with the people who are the subject of their communication. Roy became a public face for the NBA and joined in their protests, donating her Booker Prize money to the organisation for much-needed boats in order to facilitate contact between the sometimes remote communities.

'Combined lateral and vertical purpose' is probably the most complex but also the most relevant of the four Downing points radical alternative media generally serve two overriding purposes: (a) to express opposition vertically from subordinate quarters

directly at the power structure and against its behaviour; (b) to build support, solidarity, and networking laterally against policies or even against the very survival of the power structure. In any given instance, both vertical and lateral purposes may be involved. (Downing 2001, p.xi) According to Gramsci, future counter strategy against hegemony entails mass involvement, that is, social movements. Downing argues that the relationship is not one of base to superstructure, but one of 'dialectical and indeed acute interdependence'

*Attacks from authority* 'Writers have proved when they turn their back to power and start to feel the pulse and pain of society, they become powerful' writes Sharma in an endorsement of Roy's *Power Politics*.... 'That is the power beyond power that Arundhati Roy brings forth'. She believes intellectuals and artists "will be called upon to take sides" in the future, and to ask themselves some difficult questions about "corporate globalisation". Roy's technique is to tell us not only how she researched the story, but also how she felt as she was doing it. This is a form of literary journalism. In the past I have argued a corner for Roy within this field, in relation to *The cost of living* and *Walking with the Comrades*. Roy's use of symbolism, capitals, lay-out, parenthesis, and catch phrases for repetition. Arguably Roy's best use of symbolism in *Walking with the comrades* emerges from the strongest and probably the most important aspect of her content – revelations about women.

The attention to detail and symbolism- alluded to by Sims as a hall mark of literary journalism.

Here are 2 examples from *Walking with the Comrades* to demonstrate the point: 'We're walking in pitch darkness and dead silence. I'm the only one using a torch, pointed down so that all I can see in its circle of light are Comrade Kamla's bare heels in her scuffed, black chappals [sandals], showing me exactly where to put my feet. She is carrying ten times more weight than I am. Her backpack, a rifle, a huge bag of provisions on her head, one of the large cooking pots and two shoulder bags full of vegetables. The bag on her head is perfectly balanced, and she can scramble down slopes and slippery rock pathways without so much as touching it. She is a miracle. '

'When I looked back, they were still there. Waving. A little knot. People who live with their dreams, while the rest of the world lives with its nightmares. Every night I think of this journey. That night sky, those forest paths. I see Comrade Kamla's heels in her scuffed chappals, lit by the light of my torch. I know she must be on the move. Marching, not just for herself, but to keep hope alive for us all'.

It is a sad commentary on the both the print and electronic media that they have singularly failed to uncover the nexus between the government and the big corporations leading to the destruction of tribal cultures in central India and other states. With *The cost of living*, Roy broke new ground as a writer-activist in support of the largely pacifist protests of Narmada. Yet she has remained distinctive in comparison to Gandhi and development journalism.

In *Walking with comrades*, the literary techniques of immersion, symbolism, and accuracy are omnipresent, but the voice has moved ground politically towards discussing more controversial and violent tactics, even though the Maoist guerillas are presented as

being forced to use the gun in retaliation, as the only possible response. Nevertheless Roy's risky content (she has been forced to deny that she is a Maoist) underlines the fact that polemics form part of her unique approach and are integral to her style. Provoking a response, as she does, should also be a salient characteristic of good literary journalism.

As stated earlier, Roy's work can also be compared to other 'development journalism'. To Gandhi, journalism was a form of public expression stemming from communitarianism and humanitarianism, a vehicle for the articulation of politics, economics, religion, ethics and morality. Despite the constant threat that editors would go to jail, his "viewpaper" discussed issues that would be considered relevant to the Adivasis of the Narmada valley today – untouchability, sanitation, rural reconstruction and employment. Indeed, Roy's essay Ahimsa [non-violent resistance] - published in *The ordinary person's guide to empire* - is ostensibly an essay about four hunger strikers who fasted two days longer than Gandhi did on any of his fasts for freedom against colonial rule. In India the profession itself has promoted the concept of development journalism as a shift in focus to news of economic and social development. Journalists have put the needs of the poor, deprived and marginalised social groups under the spotlight, emphasising the requirement for their effective participation in developmental planning. The aim has been to encourage active participation within the public sphere of the very people who are at the receiving end of development issues. Palagummi Sainath reports on ordinary peoples' daily struggles for *the Hindu*, where he is Rural Affairs Editor. Also a photo-journalist, Sainath established himself as an eminent chronicler of rural life and a leading expert on famine and hunger after spending two years in India's poorest areas.

Also worth noting is the work of Dionne Bunsha who has won two journalism awards for her reportage on the Gujarat violence but development journalism's window on the disadvantaged in society is not necessarily synonymous with the encouragement of protest groups, but Roy is unique in that she goes further towards political engagement. With Narmada it was the encouragement to activism when she became a public face for the NBA and joined in their protests on this issue; in 2010 it became the opening up of a new range of political discussion – between Roy and the Maoist revolutionary movement, the Naxalites.

I have also looked at 2 documentaries - Anand Patwardhan's (with Simantini Dhuru) *A Narmada Diary* (1997) and Franny Armstrong's *Drowned Out* (2004) - as works of advocacy. These media communications popularised the Narmada conflict internationally, and through their narratives and styles, have brought an extended creative and political repertoire of 'engaged' journalism on development issues to mainstream outlets outside of India.

In conclusion, in our attempts to analyse all of this, we need to go beyond close readings to context and economic/social roots. This leads to considerations of politics and hence of class and gender. Subaltern Studies has raised the issue of how far people be telling their own story, and documentary is good at this, e.g. Patwardhan's *Narmada Diary*, made on behalf of the NBA. But in the print medium, subalterns organised into social movements need to be able to profit from the enhanced media profile that writers such as Roy can serve to kick start. Thereafter, when the media focus begins to fade, they need

Butler's repetition of a performative act, and they need the regular symbiosis in their usage that Downing has analysed. The NBA, as India's longest running protest movement, can be said to have fulfilled all of these aspects.