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Mass Media without masses

The unfree universe of corporate power

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"The twentieth century [was] characterized by three developments of great political importance: the growth of democracy, the growth of corporate power, and the growth of corporate propaganda as a means of protecting corporate power against democracy".

Alexander Carey

The words of the Australian sociologist and political scientist have proved to be equally true, even much sharper, in the first quarter of the 21st century. Huge oligopolies also confer on corporate media the power of propaganda by silence.

Every time you visited the protesting farmers at Singhu, Tikri, or Shahjahanpur from November 2020 to December 2021, you would hear slogans invoking the names of our two super-billionaires: Ambani and Adani.

And you had to reflect on the almost complete absence of these particular slogans in the media. Newspapers might have mentioned them once or twice, but never pondered on them in their editorials. They did cover the boycott of Reliance Jio in Punjab and Haryana (particularly in the Punjab), but more from the viewpoint of recording the 'gains' of Jio's rivals such as Bharti Airtel and Vodafone India.

There was even the odd, occasional mention of the state-run BSNL, an entity being strangled by successive governments, gaining subscribers in both Punjab and Haryana in 2020-21. And that these were the only two states in the entire country where Jio lost subscribers that year. But hardly any detailed reporting (outside of

Punjab), much less analysis of, why the farmers were boycotting Jio.

Television channels never focused on groups of farmers raising anti-Ambani/Adani slogans. In fact, the Ambanis and Adanis never figured in what passed for a debate on the 'mainstream' (read corporate) media.

So, while your media did tell you that Mukesh Ambani's personal wealth in 2021 as computed by Forbes – that oracle of global billionaires – was \$84.5 billion, they did not once mention these facts:

Ambani's personal wealth was already ahead of the Gross State Domestic Product (GSDP) of Punjab. In the first year of the pandemic, when the national economy shrank by 7.7 per cent, his personal wealth grew 129 per cent to reach \$84.5 billion, well ahead of Punjab's GSDP for 2020-21.

Adani at the time was still way behind Ambani but his wealth was piling up at a much faster pace.

Taking the latest Forbes figures on their wealth, which has grown even more since March 2022, Adani's wealth in October 2022 stood at around \$129 billion. Ambani's at around \$86 billion.

Punjab's GSDP (RBI figures) was roughly \$66 billion, and Haryana's was \$94 billion. The farmers were looking at two people who would be great beneficiaries of the new but since repealed farm laws.

One major reason for the media's pussyfooting around the Ambani-Adani spectre in the lives of the farmers was that these major corporations are very important to a media industry dependent on an advertising-based revenue model. Also, the dominant sections of media are themselves corporate-owned.

Ambani was at the time of the farmers protests the largest owner of media in India. And probably still is. Those sections of the media he does not own – for them he is a crucially important advertiser. Perhaps, for many, their largest private advertiser. With the collapse of much of private, luxury advertising as a major revenue source early in the pandemic period, Indian media houses became more dependent on government advertising. The way the central

and state governments were able to scotch the critical reporting on bodies piling up at the river banks in Uttar Pradesh shows us that.

But the shrinking of private advertising only made the role of the Reliance group even more significant within that depleted pool.

Adani is a relative newcomer to the media but has already taken control of Quint and the industry believes he will succeed in wresting control of NDTV. But even before these events he was already wielding considerable influence as a major advertiser. And as a super-litigious entity who cracked down on independent journalists trying to tell stories of his group's functioning. This past decade, dozens of journalists – and public intellectuals articulating dissent on the corporate capture of the public space – have been hammered by a SLAPP strategy: Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation, or intimidatory litigation.

In an era where the media themselves are major corporations, the space for independent journalism within those entities is rapidly shrinking

So, it should not prove surprising – though shocking and saddening it surely was – that the media were so supine when it came to reporting the farmers' struggle.

But then, your dominant corporate media never once told you, either, that what we were witnessing at the gates of Delhi was the largest, peaceful, democratic protest in the world against inequality and injustice, in a decade. Prior to that, Occupy Wall Street – or the main part of it – had lasted a few weeks between September and November 2011. At the end of that time, the protestors were evicted from New York's Zuccotti Park, the main venue of the OWS. The movement did have a wider, inspirational impact, with similar 'occupy' movements springing up across the United States and other countries. But OWS itself was stifled inside of ten weeks.

The protest of the Indian farmers lasted over a year. During which time it is almost impossible to spot one editorial in 'mainstream' newspapers that explicitly supported their demands. Even those newspapers prone to endless prosing about democracy and democratic methods called for ending the protests and said little about democracy until the laws were repealed.

Some publications perceived as politically more liberal, did 'criticise' the government – not about the laws themselves, but for the way they were pushed through. Their editorials spoke of the need to win the farmers' trust, to make them understand that what was happening was in their interests. Such editorials, almost sentimental about the (in their eyes) naïve and innocent farmers who failed to see what was good for them, usually ended with the lines that while the government's manner had been bad, the laws themselves were good, even much needed.

Editorials like those were also buttressed by opinion pieces one of which, by Surjit Bhalla, carried a title above his byline in capital letters: **SOCIALISM FOR RICH FARMERS**. Bhalla is executive director of India at the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

Surely, it would have taken very little effort for the media to quantify the income and riches of the farmers of Punjab and Haryana. The latest data on the issue available at that point was the NSS 70th Round Survey on the Situation Assessment Survey of Agricultural Households (2013). It could have made an interesting comparison, and very informative for audiences, to look at how these 'rich' farmers were doing – as against how Ambani, Adani, et al were doing.

The average *monthly income* of a farm household in Punjab, according to the then NSS survey, was Rs. 18,059. The average number of persons per agricultural household was 5.24. So monthly per capita income was about Rs. 3,450.

Such wealth! The half was not told unto us. The corresponding figures for Haryana (farm household size 5.9 persons) was Rs. 14,434 average monthly income and roughly Rs. 2,450 per capita. Sure, these abysmal numbers still placed them ahead of other Indian farmers. Such as those, for example, from Gujarat where the average monthly income of the agricultural household was Rs. 7,926. With an average of 5.2 persons per agricultural household, that meant a monthly per capita of Rs. 1,524.

The all-India average for the monthly income of an agricultural household was Rs. 6,426 (about Rs. 1,300 per capita). By the way – all these average monthly figures include income from all sources. Not just from cultivation, but also from livestock, non-farm business

and income from wages and salaries. [The newer NSS 77th Round shows us some increase in earnings from wage labour and livestock – but an actual decline in real income from cultivation].

Sure, there were rare exceptions and a couple of papers (and most of the media in Punjab) did project the farmers' viewpoint. Nationally, the overwhelming output was corporate apologia euphemised as 'pro free market.' Once the laws were repealed, several papers and channels rolled out predictable platitudes about the need in a democracy to move forward in a process of wide consultation.

There were not too many editorials about democracy when the protestors in their tens of thousands saw their water and electricity cut off; when police and paramilitary barricaded them into cut-off zones while imposing dangerously insanitary conditions on them; when they were blasted with water cannons and fenced off behind barbed wire and trenches; or when journalists found it was almost impossible in that crackdown period to reach the protesting farmers. As many as 200 of the protestors had died of various problems, hypothermia among them, up to that point (the figure rose to over 700 deaths by the end of the siege). Surely, these merited a debate on democracy.

Nor did the media engage with this question: who had drafted the hated (now withdrawn) three farm laws? They were certainly not drafted in Parliament or by any members of Parliament. They were never seen by any special committee, let alone submitted to the standing committee on agriculture. They sprang up as Ordinances around, roughly, June 2020 and were finally rammed through parliament in September that year by throwing some eight MPs out of the Rajya Sabha on ridiculous grounds.

The farmers at the protest sites had a clear idea of the corporate power behind the drafting of those laws. The media knew that equally well – but their corporatized character made it most unlikely for them to dwell on this as an issue.

So, what are we talking about when we speak of corporate ownership/control of the media? And why is owning media different from owning other industries, which these corporations do in large

numbers? How is corporate ownership different from other forms of ownership?

The Great Leap backwards happens when media houses are acquired by corporations with countless other industrial and business interests.

What are some of those other industries that media owners are heavily involved in? It would take many times the number of words this essay contains to list those interests. But a very cursory look and sample shows: Corporate/business-owned media houses in India are also into:

Entertainment (indeed Media & Entertainment have to be clubbed as one industry), coal blocks, mining, thermal power plants, telecom, digital, private education, luxury hill stations, hotels and resorts, aviation, agriculture, agricultural machinery, private banks, traders, tractors, cement, steel, shipping, jute, casting, chemicals, pharmacy – i.e. big pharma – agro chemicals, Cricket (IPL), cotton, rubber, tea, coffee, electronics, film, dairy, construction, real estate, power, call centres, captive power plants, books and music, chit funds, processed foods, textiles, man-made fibres, gas, spectrum, mining...the list is endless.

Post-1991, they were enabled to vastly expand the scale of their involvement. Additionally, the privatisation pandemic that the policies of that year unleashed excited and enthused them to enter new fields. Everything that India has seen in the post-1991 privatisation has benefitted large – indeed, particularly the largest – media owners.

The era of privatisation conferred this unique distinction on the industry:

Never in the annals of Indian media have so few profited, so much, from so many, while giving them so little.

The total value of ALL the industries linked to media owners is impossible to calculate. But just the value of the Media & Entertainment (M&E) sector alone is staggering. An Ernst & Young-FICCI report out in March 2022, estimates that the M&E sector, even with all the setbacks of the pandemic, was expected to grow

17 per cent in 2022 and hit a total value of Rs. 1.89 trillion (\$25.2 billion).

The E&Y-FICCI report further predicts that the sector will move at a Compounded Annual Growth Rate (CAGR) of 13 per cent to notch up a value of Rs. 2.32 trillion (\$30.2 billion) by 2024. This sector is just one, but critical, organ of the growing behemoth the political opposition will largely be up against in that election year.

The interlocking of so many different industries with media, the rapidly growing concentration of ownership within it in fewer and fewer hands, is also reflected in the composition of boards of directors of media. Heads of top private banks sit on some of these, alongside very big stock market players. The interlocking is incredibly complex and bewildering. The picture is pretty much what Ben Bagdikian in his classic work *The Media Monopoly* (in the USA) described as ‘corporate incest within corporate incest.’

The words ‘conflict of interest’ mostly disappeared from media discourse. Even in relation to covering politics. For two reasons: it becomes embarrassing to call attention to ‘conflict of interest’ in other sectors when your own reeks of it so shamefully. Second: corporatisation saw a new kind of (non-technological) convergence taking place. So many corporate leaders and big business owners were also entering politics or just getting elected to parliament. Vijay Mallya is the name that springs to everyone’s lips, but there have been quite a few more.

It's a very Indian phenomenon. Large business houses have bought into politics. Major politicians or political forces have bought into media. And major media houses are deeply embedded in both political dynasties and corporate houses. The Badals in Punjab, the Reddys in Andhra Pradesh, the late CM Jayalalitha and the Marans in Tamil Nadu, and several more.

The process is not altogether novel and has been underway for some decades. But it is post-1991 that this ‘convergence’ really takes off on a scale never dreamed off. From that year, corporate houses seized the opportunity to act on the lessons of the 1980s.

Those corporations acquiring large media holdings gain a political power, a public persuasion power that their non-media owning rivals in business do not have. Mukesh Ambani's father, the late Dhirubhai – founder of Reliance – learnt that the hard way. In his clash with rival industrialist Nusli Wadia in the 1980s, he found the latter backed by yet another industrialist (or trader) with a media empire: Ramnath Goenka, owner of the Indian Express group. The great Dhirubhai found himself humbled in the public eye.

His group was shown to have done many things violative of the then regulatory process. Two decades later, Arun Shourie, who was editor of the Express at the time of its investigative exposes on Reliance would publicly say about the 180 degrees turn in his equation with that entity: “the Dhirubhais are to be thanked, not once but twice over: they set up world class companies and facilities in spite of those regulations, and thus laid the foundations for the growth all of us claim credit for today...” This was Shourie speaking in 2003 – as Minister for Disinvestment in the Vajpayee government. It's possible Shourie looks at it differently today, again, but this is what he said on record in 2003.

Mukesh Ambani surely took the lessons of the 1980s to heart. His group didn't get to be the biggest owner of media without learning and trying.

But corporates everywhere, and particularly those headed by Indian billionaires have a two-level connect with governments. At one level, that connection makes them much more powerful in their business dealings. Both in relation to their rivals – and more importantly vis a vis their workers. At another, simultaneously, it renders them much more vulnerable to governmental pressures. Especially corporations that depend on government contracts that hand over huge public resources to them at throwaway prices. Like oil, natural gas, mining...

Giant (corporate) media owners making a lot of money from corrupt practices like paid news, from obtaining licenses by dodgy means for exploitation of public-owned resources; from government privatisation orgies handing over thousands of crores of public property to them; and who handsomely fund the election campaigns of ruling parties – such media bosses are unlikely to permit their journalists to upset their partners in power.

There is also a flowback from the corporates to their friends and partners in government in multiple ways. The most recent of course is through the electoral bonds. Or even through the PM Cares Fund set up during the early days of the pandemic.

Of Rs. 3,435 crores going into electoral bonds in 2019-20, according to election commission data, over 75 per cent went to the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). This year (2022), between just October 1 and 10 (just ahead of the Himachal Pradesh and Gujarat assembly polls), the sale of these bonds brought in some Rs. 545 crores. Again, the lion's share went to the BJP. Much of this money from 'anonymous' donors, is simply from corporate contributors (some of them well embedded in the media industry).

The 'PM Cares Fund' (derided by critics as the PM Scares Fund) pulled in over Rs. 10,000 crores in its first year ending March 2021. Again, a lot of corporate money within that sum. The government has made it clear, though, that it has no intention of sharing any information relating to the fund.

The fund bears the words 'Prime Minister' in its title, displays his visage on its website, but argues it is not a 'public authority,' nor subject to RTI and in fact "is not a fund of the government of India." And that it is not bound to submit to any institutional audit by an arm of the state.

In today's neo-liberal world, even the corporate media have been using terms like 'crony capitalism.' An interesting term. We all know what capitalism is. But who is the crony in crony capitalism? Amongst others, the corporate media.

The onset of the Covid-19 pandemic saw corporate media overcome the hit from the immediate fall in private advertising. They could do so, in part, by exercising the power they derive from the first of two of their levels of connection with government.

On the night of March 24, 2020, Prime Minister Narendra Modi gave a nation of 1.4 billion people four hours to shut down their lives. But one positive thing followed that speech: an announcement listing the essential services that would remain operational through the

most stringent lockdowns. These services – hospitals, police, fire brigade and many, many more.

Possibly for the first time ever, ‘print and electronic media, telecommunications, internet services, broadcasting and cable services’ were listed among them. Many of us journalists were happy to see this.

Being labelled an essential service bring you both risks and privileges. The upside is that your job is understood to be protected. You cannot just be thrown out.

Yet in the three months of the first lockdown major media houses, mainly corporate-owned or controlled, sacked 1,500 journalists. And, according to the Delhi Union of Journalists, at least 3,000 had lost their jobs by May 2022. This was apart the innumerable non-journalist media workers also retrenched.

The government remained silent.

Corporate media returned the Modi’s government favour of silence with its own favourable silence (and sometimes even applause). In this period, some of the most regressive labour legislation in the country’s independent history were rammed through first as ordinances by state governments, then as ‘Codes’ by the Centre. Some of the ordinances promulgated set Indian workers back by a century, by suspending that gold standard of labour rights – the eight-hour day. Obviously, there is little space for investigating any of these in a media owned by corporates employing many workers. And several of those journalists who would have been game to take this on – were jobless, having been thrown out by their media owners.

A sub-committee was set up by the Press Council of India to look into the retrenchments. I am a member of that group. We sent out questionnaires to the big corporate media houses that accounted for most of the sackings, asking about how many people they’d laid off; how many had suddenly taken ‘voluntary’ (read forced) retirement. Many simply did not bother to reply. One of the largest corporate media houses did send us a reply – through their lawyers.

This ‘reply’ contemptuously informed us that the Press Council had no locus standi in the matter. The Council, it informed us, had only

'Press Freedom' within its purview. The retrenchments and/or retirements or whatever, had to do with labour and employment issues and was a matter for another set of institutions and laws. They had nothing to do with press freedom.

This was really arguing that sacking journalists in no way infringed on their press freedom. That had to do with issues of employment and so on. Maybe for the tribunals and issues under the Working Journalists Act. Nothing to do with the Press Council.

That exemplified the corporate media's take on press freedom. As A.J. Liebling famously said in the New Yorker magazine way back in 1960: "Freedom of the press is guaranteed only to those who own one."

The UPA government was pretty close to corporate media themselves – it's easy to forget the cloying adulation the media poured at the feet of Manmohan Singh as he unveiled his corporate-driven reforms agenda. But the BJP (or what's left of the NDA) government is far closer. It reflects how both politics and economics have evolved over the last 15-20 years, though.

Today's India is ruled by an alliance of socio-religious fundamentalists and economic market fundamentalists. The bed this happy union cohabits is what we call corporate media. It is a very Indian phenomenon – so many corporate leaders and almost every corporate media chief subscribes to or follows one or the other Baba, or Mata, or Godman. And that so many of the latter are deeply embedded in the saffron camp. There are increasingly fewer exposes on such personages any more. And when there are – nothing much happens to them.

The sensational 'Acharya Atal' sting operations by Cobra Post in 2018 saw chief revenue officers, even proprietors of important media houses drooling over mythical lucrative advertising contracts a reporter posing as a godman dangled before them. Nothing ever happened to them. Just as between 2009-11 the Paid News scandal broken in The Hindu, which named and shamed the country's top corporate media houses – ended unfulfilled.

The corporate ethic of profit at any cost is the parent of India's current paid news scandal. Paid news is not about Manufacturing

Consent, it's about Manufacturing Content. Nor is it merely paid content – advertising too, is paid content. Paid news is much more.

With the 2009 Lok Sabha polls and the later Maharashtra assembly polls, paid news emerged a full-fledged industry worth thousands of crores of rupees. Journalist unions estimated that in (unified) Andhra Pradesh alone in 2009, it was worth Rs. 1,500 crores. There are many kinds of paid news, of course: pre-paid and post-paid – and yet to be paid (those candidates who, having lost their polls, haven't been able to settle their bills).

But in essence, powerful media houses took crores of rupees from political parties and contestants to present their propaganda as news. So, you ended up with a single individual like then Maharashtra chief minister Ashok Chavan - having 100s of full pages of 'news' about him (of which 89 were collected in the course of The Hindu's investigation). Not a word of criticism of Chavan appeared on these pages. His rival's name was never once mentioned. (You can get your rival bashed, but those costs extra).

The Press Council ordered an enquiry into the Paid News scandal to be conducted by two members (Paranjoy Guha Thakurta and K. Sreenivas Reddy) on the Paid News issue. They produced a rather devastating report on the subject after a thorough inquiry. But corporate power reaches well into that august body, too. The Press Council killed its own report! It reduced the report to about a tenth of its size and only made public the last section on recommendations. Obviously, this carried no names of the offenders

It was months later that the PCI made the full report public – following the orders of the Central Information Commissioner to do so. It did. But the moment had been lost and the corporations went Scot free. Strong condemnations of the Paid News practice came up in Parliament – but found little space in media coverage.

That was while the UPA was still in power.

With the BJP coming in, the ability of corporate media to crush journalistic dissent, to hire and fire at will, to suck up shamelessly to the ruling dispensation, was exponentially enhanced.

The principle of profit-first, ensconced in that alliance of religious and market fundamentalists, is now a given. And there is not even a pretence of the media playing the role of a pillar of democracy.

That has of course, all but killed critical coverage of our realities in most of the media. There are television channels that cheerlead Prime Minister Modi and his government in ways his party's own PR people would be too embarrassed to attempt.

Inequalities in India, including economic inequality, were always on the rise since 1991. In the past few years, they've gone ballistic – but you wouldn't know this from following the news on the media.

In today's India, we have 168 dollar billionaires and rank third in the world in the number of such worthies a nation has. A rise in number and ranking that is mostly reported in a celebratory tone. Audiences are not told that these 168 individuals account for personal wealth equivalent to over a fourth of India's GDP. Much less are they advised on what the implications of such gross inequality, not seen since the heyday of the British Raj, are for Indians.

While ranking within the top 3 in this (Forbes) index, India has slipped to 107 (of 121 nations) in the Global Hunger Index and to 132 out of 191 countries in the United Nations Human Development Index. Similarly, to 150 of 180 nations in the World Press Freedom Index – our lowest ever, there. Also, we ranked 180 out of 180 in the Environmental Performance Index 2022, a joint project of the Yale Center for Environmental Law and Policy, and Columbia University's Earth Institute.

But it is hard to find any serious discussion of any of these in the 'mainstream' media. They exist for profit, and coverage of the poor and marginalised brings in no revenue.

And what about this government's own attitude towards media freedom?

Let me share my direct experience of this government's approach. Furious with India's humiliating 142 rank in the World Press Freedom Index, the Union cabinet secretary, no less, called for the formation of an Index Monitoring Cell, a committee that would set the record straight on press freedom in India. Asked to be a

member, I accepted on the assurance that we would be more focused on the real state of press freedom in the country, than with rebutting the WPMI ranking.

There were 11 bureaucrats and government-controlled-institution researchers in a committee of 13. And just two journalists – in a committee dealing with freedom of the press! And one of those never spoke a word in the couple of meetings he attended. The meetings went off smoothly, though I found myself the only one speaking up, raising questions. Then a ‘draft report’ was drawn up by the working groups, notable for the absence of the word ‘draft.’ The report reflected nothing of the serious issues raised in the meetings. So I submitted an independent or dissenting note for inclusion in it.

At once, the report, the committee, everything – *vanished*. A committee set up on the directions of the country’s top bureaucrat – who reports, perhaps, to only the two most powerful men in India – disappeared. RTI enquiries have failed to unearth the report – on freedom of press! I do though have my copy of that ‘draft.’ The original exercise was not even investigative journalism – it was *investigating* journalism, as it functioned in India. And it disappeared at the drop of a dissent note.

It should surprise no one then, that in 2022 we dropped from rank 142 to 150 of 180 nations in the World Press Freedom Index. Nor should it surprise us that the government has openly denounced the various index rankings (except the billionaires’ ranking in Forbes) as conspiracies against India. What should shame us is the cowardly but inevitable silence or playing down of all of the above by our increasingly corporatized media.

Why inevitable?

The Indian big media in the 1980s and ‘90s was a cash-rich crowd. Plus, they owned many tangible properties in real estate – some of which came to them as a gift of governments in the 1960s. Some of that was well-intentioned. Leaders worried about the financial security of the press – sections of which still enjoyed high prestige for its brave role during the struggle for India’s freedom. In the event, most of them milked the land given to them at throw away rates with rentals and enterprises that had nothing to do with press

freedom. By the turn of the century, it was hard to tell the Fourth Estate from Real Estate.

This period also saw them shift focus from tangible assets (which the biggest still indeed possess in abundance) to more involvement in the share bazar. They were and are deeply involved in the stock market and vulnerable to its (often rigged) volatility. When the 2008 Wall Street collapse happened, they found themselves having to lie constantly and shamelessly about the impact on India's own stock markets and economy.

As a matter of fact, the impact flattened many groups that had not seen losses in decades. Then too, like after the onset of the pandemic lockdowns, they sacked thousands of journalists. But kept up the sham that Indian markets and economy had not suffered much owing to 'prudent fiscal management.' (Words that Congress leader P. Chidambaram would later use to pat himself and his party on the back).

But there was no way they could have admitted to the level of devastation it caused (even if that was quite a bit lower than in the West, relatively speaking). Admission would further sink the value of millions of shares held by them. They would have taken an even bigger hit than they already had. Paid News on a large, industry-scale came in as a survival strategy at this point. It was off the record books, no income tax to be paid on it, and had many other advantages.

One ugly truth sticks out from the transformation of the Indian media from the child of the freedom struggle to a profit-seeking and ideological arm of the corporate world. It is too deeply embedded in the markets, too greatly compromised in its social role.

For the last 20 years at least, the Indian media are characterised by a Structural Compulsion to Lie.

Internet and social media platforms have turned into "potent instruments in the toolkit of terrorist and militant groups" for spreading propaganda, radicalisation and conspiracy theories aimed at destabilising societies...

External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar

This time, Minister Jaishankar has a point, though perhaps one that could be expressed differently. No country presents greater evidence than India does of the subversion of the Net and the conscious use of social media to bully, intimidate, threaten, troll, propagandise, and promote hate speech that leads to violence and terror. This is also where the world's largest troll army exists and thrives, supported and protected by arms of the state and government.

Not an hour passes without the maligning of political opponents, the hounding of minorities, the campaigns leading to forced withdrawal of films, cancellation of plays or performances by those critical of the ruling regime and its Hindutva ideology.

Remember the 1990s and the romancing of the Net? How would it democratise communication and shore up free speech?

In celebrating what was never to be, democracies did not stand up to what was really emerging – the formation of the nastiest monopolies in history. And/ or the suppression of free speech at the whim of these monopolies or at the behest of governments of nations whose markets they need to access.

All across those years of romancing the Net, there were some voices across the world that warned of what was coming. That saw the digital monopolies as uniquely different from and far more powerful than any monopolies preceding them.

They had a point: the digital giants were unique in this respect – they owned, traded and trafficked in our personal data. In short: they are human data traffickers.

And the ways they can intervene in the political and social sphere showed up clearly, to take just one instance, in the Facebook-Cambridge Analytica scandal of 2018 where Analytica even claimed proudly to have intervened powerfully in the Bihar elections. Initially, Facebook denied possession of any Indian data. But on April 5 the same year, *India Today* quoted this admission from the company: “Data of an estimated 562,455 Indians may have been accessed by Cambridge Analytica through installations of the app developed by GSR and installed by Indians.”

On September 14, 2022, many media outlets reported on the revelations of Twitter whistle blower Peiter “Mudge” Zatkó – the company's former security chief. Zatkó alleged that the social media company knowingly allowed foreign governments, including India, to place agents inside the company. Governments doing this were potentially able to access sensitive data about Twitter users. Zatkó's assertions came in testimony before the United States Senate.

Within India, the hounding of individuals/celebrities not toeing the line – is too well known to bear repetition. But social media were also effectively deployed to create chaos leading to and during the Delhi riots and in tarring many, including journalists, trying to probe those riots.

As always, the government-monopolies equations operate with the digital giants and social media too. Where they have a lot at stake commercially, the monopolies simply fall in line with demands of governments. Accounts have been blocked, even taken down, on the raising of an eyebrow by the Modi government.

And governments – certainly, this Indian government – have been able to effectively censor, even redirect what were puffed up as platforms of free speech and democracy.

It seems clear that the digi giants fiddled algorithms to deny due space to the farmers' protests in 2020-21. And it doesn't take much ingenuity to guess at whose instance they did so. Around the time of the absurd Disha Ravi “ToolKit” case, there were even tweets by Delhi Police acknowledging they had received information they had sought from Google.

You have to concede one thing to Elon Musk, Twitter's new owner. On taking over the company, Musk has systematically shredded any illusions still lingering about the raison d'être of a platform like Twitter. Musk who once tweeted that he “hated advertising,” went on record in October 2022 to say that “Fundamentally, Twitter aspires to be the most respected advertising platform in the world that strengthens your brand, grows your enterprise.”

In short, a commercial advertising platform. Far more Free Market than Free Speech.

While the giants strike their compromises – deals, even – with the Indian government, the latter cracks down ruthlessly on any democratic platform in the digital space. The latest of these is the attacks and raids on *The Wire* which has done outstanding work in its investigations – such as in the Pegasus scandal.

The crackdown on *The Wire* and the ridiculous charges brought against it by the crime branch of the Delhi police – including forgery, cheating, criminal conspiracy, dishonesty – are hugely over the top. What's more a raft of charges has been brought against a journal that has owned up to a botched investigation, apologised for it publicly – and retracted all stories retracted to that investigation.

Further, the crackdown came after a complaint made by BJP leader Amit Malviya – who is national convener of that party's IT cell. The police have seized several devices and hard disks from *The Wire* which they had absolutely no reason or cause to.

So on the one hand, the platforms of “free speech” in the digital world connive with government in a crackdown on dissidence. On the other, the anyway limited Net space (not just social media) for independent journalism is shrinking – and openly under assault in India.

Perhaps nowhere else in the world has a major region seen the kind of Net suffocation as has Kashmir. The region has seen internet shutdowns for months on end, causing immense hardship to ordinary people. And devastated publications and journalists.

There was a particular heightening of repression and tightening of the noose during the pandemic. Journalists were arrested under the Epidemic Diseases Act 1897 for merely publishing stories explaining the situation in local hospitals. That is what happened to Andrew Sam Raja Pandian in Tamil Nadu after he published a piece in his portal *SimpliCiti*, saying that doctors were facing shortage of food and PPE kits in Coimbatore Medical College Hospital, among other things.

There was also the case, in April 2020, of the freelance journalist Zubair Ahmed being arrested in the Andaman Islands for a simple tweet: “Can someone explain why families are placed under home quarantine for speaking over phone with Covid patients?”

This related to an astonishing development in the islands where people who had no physical contact with relatives testing positive for the coronavirus – ended up in quarantine after simply speaking to them on the phone. Ahmed was accused by authorities of spreading panic and fomenting communal tensions. Also charged with spreading fake news – though the local daily Andaman Chronicle reported on a very similar case even before his tweet, without similar consequences.

The Calcutta High Court while trashing the case observed that allowing the criminal proceedings in terms of the FIR “would amount to sheer abuse of process of law and misuse of power of the court...”

There are scores of such instances arbitrary arrests and filing of cases. The total number of laws affecting or impinging on the India media were anyway over 50 in number in 2019. But in the pandemic time, arrests of journalists were also made under colonial laws like the Epidemic Diseases Act and more.

However, no amount of hate speech by people with or in government, no amount of incitement to violence, seems to get any of them into any trouble, whether on social media or in other publications on the internet.

Cut it any way you like, we return fundamentally to the era and role of corporate media monopolies. Never forget that the largest tech monopolies in the world are also the largest (by market capitalisation) corporations in the world. The alliance of these Tech T-REXs with tyrannical governments is a lethal combination, devastating to democracy.

In all, corporatisation of the media means (to sum up just a few of its impacts):

That the fundamental feature of the media of our times is the disconnect between mass media and mass reality.

That corporate media enforce a structural shutout of the poor and the marginalised. The principle is to cover what brings in revenue, not what is important. (The average national daily gives no more than 0.67 per cent of its front page space to news originating from

rural India, according to data analysed by the Centre for Media Studies, Delhi).

The boundaries between journalism, public relations, advertising and political propaganda have withered. As corporate ownership and control have strengthened, journalism has shrunk. Since the 1980s in the USA and since the late '90s in India – jobs in public relations (PR) have grown much faster than those in journalism.

At the same time, the erosion of those boundaries has seen the industry bring about an ever-revolving door between PR (now grandiosely titled corporate communications) and journalism. People move seamlessly both ways between these sectors.

In India, corporate ownership is further complicated by the alliance of religious and market fundamentalism. And by that 'peculiar 'convergence' of political dynasties and regimes, big business houses, and media groups. That makes the power of corporate media even more lethal to the interests of democracy.

Journalism and journalists – and hopefully growing numbers of them will see this – are up against the same forces as others in society: corporate power. And there is no hope of return to the roots of Indian media, nor any progressive transformation, without confronting corporate power. A corporate power whose strength grows in sync with India's consolidation as a Corporate-led state. Meanwhile the arbitrary raids on media and arrests of journalists, of dragging them into jail on charges of 'money-laundering' will only intensify.

Till about ten years ago, it could be said of the Indian media that they were politically free, but imprisoned by profit.

Today they seem still imprisoned by profit, but increasingly, politically imprisoned as well.