

THE MEDIA IN INDIA: AN ANALYSIS ON ACTORS AND THEIR ROLES IN POLITICS¹

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Abstract: Media holds a very significant role in liberal democratic regimes. Media actors influence the way social and political events are seen and evaluated. Free and plural media is the safeguard of a healthy democracy. Media has critical functions in a democratic regime. Journalism serves functions such as giving information, making investigation, and providing society a public forum. The main objective of this article is to seek answers to the questions of “how can the media profile and ownership in India be described” and “what is the nature of the relationship between media and politics in India”. India has a developing media scene with thousands of outlets in multiple languages. Media in the country has been subjected to a structural change in recent years. India has a multi-party parliamentary democracy and media -as in other democracies- has a key role for Indian politics.

Keywords: *Media in India, Media freedom, Democracy, Media ownership.*

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HİNDİSTAN'DA MEDYA: AKTÖRLER VE SİYASETTEKİ ROLLERİ ÜZERİNE BİR ANALİZ

Öz: Medya, liberal demokratik rejimlerde çok önemli bir role sahiptir. Medya aktörleri, sosyal ve siyasal olayların görülme ve değerlendirilme şeklini etkiler. Özgür ve çoğulcu medya, sağlıklı bir demokrasinin koruyucusudur. Demokratik bir rejimde medyanın kritik işlevleri vardır. Gazetecilik; bilgi verme, araştırma yapma ve topluma bir kamusal tartışma forumu sağlama gibi işlevlere sahiptir. Bu makalenin temel amacı, “Hindistan’daki medya profili ve mülkiyeti nasıl tanımlanabilir” ve “Hindistan’da medya ve politika arasındaki ilişkinin doğası nedir” sorularına yanıt aramaktır. Hindistan, birden çok dilde binlerce medya örgütü ile gelişen bir medya yapısına sahiptir. Ülkede, medya, son yıllarda yapısal bir değişiklik yaşamıştır. Hindistan, çok partili bir parlamenter demokrasiye sahiptir ve -diğer demokrasilerde olduğu gibi- medya, Hindistan siyaseti için de kilit bir role sahiptir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Hindistan'da medya, Medya özgürlüğü, Demokrasi, Medya mülkiyeti.*

Introduction

This article aims to analyze media and politics relationship in India with a special emphasis on media structure, media actors, and media ownership within the framework of the role of media in modern democratic regimes. Media actors play a major role in liberal democracies. Media discourses shape the perceptions and preferences of the masses and the political elites generally use media as an instrument to influence the masses and gain consent to reproduce their dominant ideology.

This article consists of three sections. The first section provides a theoretical framework about media-politics relationship. This section also includes a literature review on the topic. The second section addresses the Indian media profile in a general framework with actors in print and online media scene as well as radio. The third section will be the discussion part analyzing the role of media in Indian political life and also covering media ownership practices and the impact of these practices.

The primary argument of the study is the view that, in order to empower democratic rule in a country, a free and independent media is required and Indian experiment is not an exceptional case. In modern democracies, government policies are generally shaped by the members of the society. It can be said that, there is a direct relationship and interaction between the elites and the masses. This is evident in the establishment of public opinion. The phenomenon of public opinion has great significance for a democratic system. Public opinion emerges in the process of relationship and interaction. The primary tool of this relationship can be regarded as the mass media.

Media is seen as the “*fourth estate*” in modern democracies besides the judiciary, executive, and legislative branches. It can be regarded as a “*watchdog*” for government affairs. Media has major tasks in a democratic regime. Journalists serve democratic roles such as giving information, making investigation and analysis, providing a basis for mobilization, and education.³ Media freedom is, therefore, vital for democracies.

India has powerful media organizations with thousands of outlets operating in different languages. Indian media has been active since the late 18th century. The print media started in

³ Michael Schudson (2017), “How to Think Normatively About News and Democracy”, in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Communication* (eds. by Kate Kenski & Kathleen Hall Jamieson), New York: Oxford University Press, p. 99.

India as early as 18th century. Indian media is seen as one of the oldest in the world.⁴ The media in India entered the period of privatization in the 1990s. It is known that there are no regulatory safeguards against political control over media actors in India.

1. Literature Review: The Relationship between Media and Politics

The ruling elites need media support in order to be able to hold effective public support and to be successful in the decision-making process. The press has been an indispensable part in establishing working democracies. The phenomenon of press freedom is a concept introduced as a vital prerequisite among democratic principles. In line to the economic and technological developments, the media has gained a more important dimension with the adoption of digital journalism. Thus, the “*press freedom*” today has more weight in democratic debates than it used to do in previous decades.

Owen Fiss emphasizes the important role of the media in democracies in his work on modern democracies.⁵ The public must be fully informed in democratic regimes. Thus, a healthy relationship between the public and the ruling elites is only possible with media freedoms. Freedom of expression and freedom of press are indispensable for a healthy democracy.

As a critical agent in giving information, one of the main functions of the media is providing a sphere for the public to reach information. However, it should be noted that, the media acquires most of the information from official resources to fill the news hole on a daily basis in a more affordable way⁶ and this makes it hard to make unbiased news. It is to be noted that, in today’s societies, it is essential for individuals to be informed correctly in order to vote for both domestic and foreign policy issues. Being a source of information for the masses, the media is vital in modern democracies. The multiple forms of news-making work as a “*watchdog*” on government policies in democratic countries.

Free and independent media is a must for democratic regimes. Media freedom is essential in democracies as the agenda-setting is one of the significant roles of the media. The agenda-setting role is known as one of the most influential roles about the media’s political influence.⁷ There must be internal and external diversity (which is also called as “*media*

⁴ The National Institute of Mass Communication, “History of Mass Media in India”, Date of Accession: 30.12.2020 from <http://www.nimc-india.com/history-mass-media-india.html>.

⁵ Owen M. Fiss (1996), *Liberalism Divided*, Westview: Boulder, CO, p. 92.

⁶ W. L. Bennett (1990), “Toward a Theory of Media-State Relations in the United States”, *Journal of Communication*, 40, p. 106.

⁷ D. H. Weaver & D. A. Graber & M. McCombs & C. H. Eyal (1981), *Media Agenda-Setting in a Presidential Election: Issues, Images, and Interest*, New York: Praeger, p. 4.

pluralism”) in media actors for a functioning agenda-setting mechanism.⁸ According to Schudson, journalism is a major component of the public life and media institutions play a decisive role in liberal democratic countries.⁹

Framing theory on the other hand states that interpretation of the news on different issues is very significant in reflecting political discussions. In other words, framing theory can be defined as a mechanism through which certain parts of reality are picked and some other parts are not picked by news-makers. It could be said that frames draw attention to some perspectives of reality at the expense of other perspectives.¹⁰ News directly shapes the masses’ perception of social and political events and in this regard, political outcomes are generally shaped by the media representations of specific political events. In democratic regimes, as a result of the existence of plural and independent media actors, political competition is high and every political actor has a saying in the media scene.

It is known that the relationship between political elites and communication tools has been discussed in terms of media freedoms. However, this is only one side of the coin and on the other side; there is the question of “*how democratic the media itself is*”. Especially in the second half of the 20th century, the problem of democratization of the media was also emphasized in media studies.

Political, economic, and social structures of the media have different characteristics in every country. Political interactions with the economic system and the legal framework affect the system and forms of media ownership. Legal framework in the field of communication determines the general functioning and activities of the media actors in a country. In many countries, it is seen that, media serves the interests of the dominant classes. Moreover, even in democratic countries, media is often used as a tool of “*manufacturing consent*”¹¹, and thus, playing the role of increasing public consent about governmental policies and decisions. Herman and Chomsky argue that media is influenced and manipulated by governments and therefore, plays a major role in politics.

⁸ Daniel C. Hallin (1988), *The Uncensored War: The Media and Vietnam*, Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. 3-12.

⁹ Michael Schudson (1989), “The Sociology of News Production”, *Media, Culture & Society*, Vol. 11, No: 3, pp. 263-282.

¹⁰ A Ardèvol-Abreu (2015), “Framing theory in communication research. Origins, development and current situation in Spain”, Date of Accession: 30.12.2020 from <http://www.revistalatinacs.org/070/paper/1053/RLCS-paper1053en.pdf>.

¹¹ Edward Herman & Noam Chomsky (1994), *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*, Third edition, London: Vintage, p. 2.

Hallin notes that institutions like the media actors are part of the process by which a worldview compatible with the existing structure of power configuration in society is produced and reproduced.¹² Today, media actors most of the time serve the interests of ruling elites or wealthy actors in the society; so, disadvantaged groups like women or ethnic minorities are often misrepresented or underrepresented in the media. This can be seen as a direct threat to democracy. In addition, it is to be noted that the close relationship between elites and media owners undermines media freedoms and pluralism. Political and economic pressures exercised on the media owners and media professionals prevent citizens from getting correct information. In addition, media actors sometimes manipulate the masses in order to serve the interests of the political authority. From time to time, media actors frame a negative image of other countries, traditions, civilizations, and religious views.¹³ This also promotes the dominant ideology and serves the interests of the powerful classes in that society, which ultimately may cause democratic erosion.

On the other hand, the role of media in the political socialization process is important while analyzing media-politics relationship. Acting as an independent political communication tool between different groups within a society, media contributes to the awareness of citizens especially in election times while contributing to their awareness in the case of abuse of power and political crisis as well.¹⁴

With the changing dynamics in world affairs and technological developments, democracy and media relationship has been subjected to change too. As known, after the Second World War, a new type of democracy emerged. John Keane called this type as “*monitory democracy*”. For Keane, if assembly democracy is linked to the spoken word, today’s democracy [“*monitory democracy*”] is connected with the multimedia societies.¹⁵

2. The Media Profile in India

Indian media has been active since the late 18th century. The print media started in India as early as 1780. In 1927, radio broadcasting was launched in the country. Indian media is known as one of the oldest in the world.¹⁶ Based on 2019 data, there are around 900 private

¹² Daniel C. Hallin (1988), *The Uncensored War: The Media and Vietnam*, p. 213.

¹³ Cited by İhsan Yılmaz & Begüm Burak (2011), “Instrumentalist Use of Journalism in Imposing the Kemalist Hegemonic Worldview and Educating the Masses in the Early Republican Period”, *Turkish Journal of Politics*, Vol. 2, No: 1, Summer 2011, p. 117.

¹⁴ James Curran & Jean Seaton (1992), *Power Without Responsibility: The Press and Broadcasting in Britain*, London: Routledge, p. 278.

¹⁵ John Keane (2009), *The Life and Death of Democracy*, London: Simon & Schuster, p. 737.

¹⁶ The National Institute of Mass Communication, “History Of Mass Media in India”, Date of Accession: 30.12.2020 from <http://www.nimc-india.com/history-mass-media-india.html>.

satellite TV stations and nearly the half of them are devoted to news coverage in India. In 2009, India was among the fourth largest television broadcast stations in the world with around 1,400 stations.¹⁷

India has witnessed a huge media sector growth with the rise in the number of news television channels as well as online and printed newspapers. As of 2018, there are more than 100,000 registered publications in the country. India holds the second-largest newspaper market in the world, with daily newspapers having a circulation of over 240 million copies as of 2018.¹⁸ It is stated that, by 2007, 62 of the world's bestselling newspaper dailies were published in China, Japan, and India. India consumed 99 million newspaper copies in 2007 having the second largest newspaper market in the world in this year.¹⁹

With regard to radio broadcasting, India is a unique example. India is one of the democratic countries in the world which also keeps a state monopoly on radio news coverage. In the country, only a state-owned All India Radio (AIR) is permitted to broadcast news and current world affairs.²⁰ Radio broadcasting in the country was launched in 1927 freely; however, it became within the scope of state responsibility later. When India became a fully independent state in 1947, the number of radio sets had reached to 275,000.²¹

In terms of the digital media, it can be said that, the early 2000s were the years when the advent of online publishing started in India. According to *BBC*, there has been no systematic filtering for the web in India. However, it is stated that political authorities have clashed with leading social networks over the censorship of contents that are deemed to be rude and offensive.²² It is to be noted that, the impact of social media in Indian politics has been increasing steadily. In 2008, India has used social media for the first time at the time of Mumbai Attacks and later in 2009, the mass use of social media was witnessed in elections, when, for the first time, online voter registration and transparency campaigns had begun.²³

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ DBPedia, "List of Newspapers in India", Date of Accession: 08.01.2021 from https://dbpedia.org/page/List_of_newspapers_in_India.

¹⁹ Tasha Singh Parihar, "Journalism Education at Crossroad in India: A Swot Analysis", Date of Accession: 30.12.2020 from <http://www.publishingindia.com/GetBrochure.aspx?query=UERGQnJvY2h1cmVzfC8xNTc4LnBkZnwwMTU3OC5wZGY=>.

²⁰ Media Ownership Monitoring, India, "Radio News Monopoly", Date of Accession: 30.12.2020 from <https://india.mom-rsf.org/en/findings/radionewsmonopoly/>.

²¹ *Ibid.*

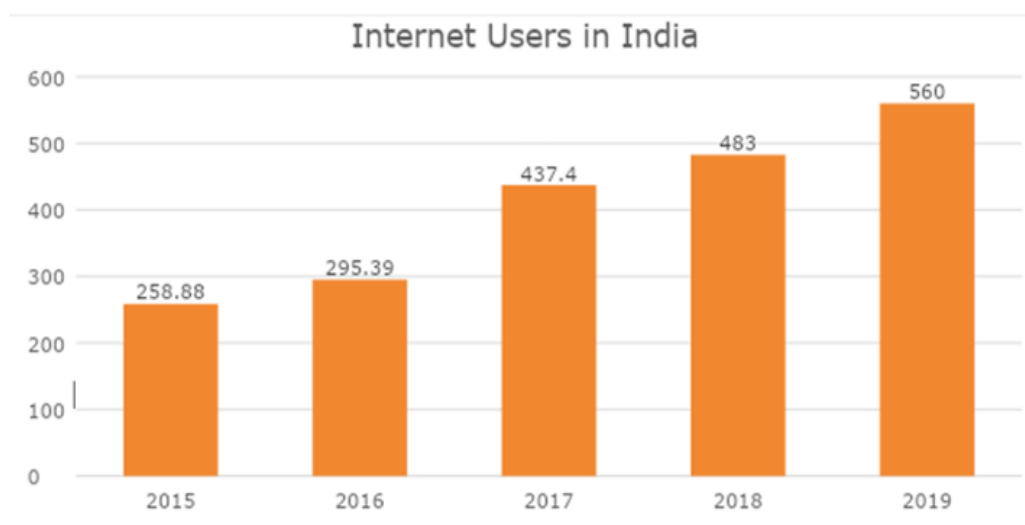
²² *BBC* (2019), "India profile – Media", 29.04.2019, Date of Accession: 30.12.2020 from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-south-asia-12557390>.

²³ Federation of American Scientists, "OSC Media Aid: Overview of Leading Indian Social Media", Date of Accession: 30.12.2020 from <https://fas.org/irp/dni/osc/india-social.pdf>.

India has around 574 million active internet users as of 2019. India is known as the second-largest online market, behind China.²⁴

In terms of political orientation, it can be said that, the media of India is regarded as left-leaning liberal, especially the English-language media outlets. The main media actors in India are largely family-owned. It is known that, media ownership remains concentrated in the hands of the few (elites) in India. It is to be noted that, the country currently hosts a growing tendency towards the cross media ownership where the same content property in one sector is promoted through a different sector while audiences remain the same. In fact, the cross media ownership has become considerably important in current years concerning the relationship between the media and politics. Cross media ownership can be defined as a situation in which a single corporate body owns multiple types of media outlets. According to a report²⁵ based on a seminar titled “Cross Media Ownership and Concentration in Indian Media” that was held in 2017, it is stated that the cross media ownership has gained a new momentum with the privatization of more media sectors.

Graphic I: *Internet Users in India between 2015 and 2019*²⁶



The Press Council of India is known as the actor responsible for the press regulation. It has the function of ensuring that the media in India is free. However, it is very hard to keep the media free in Indian context as the big families own media outlets and compete in different business sectors as well.

²⁴ SANNAM S 4, “Digital and Social media Landscape in India”, Date of Accession: 30.12.2020 from <https://sannams4.com/digital-and-social-media-landscape-in-india/>.

²⁵ Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (2017), “Cross Media Ownership: Seminar Report”, 15.02.2017, Date of Accession: 30.12.2020 from <https://www.csds.in/sites/default/files/Seminar%20Report.pdf>.

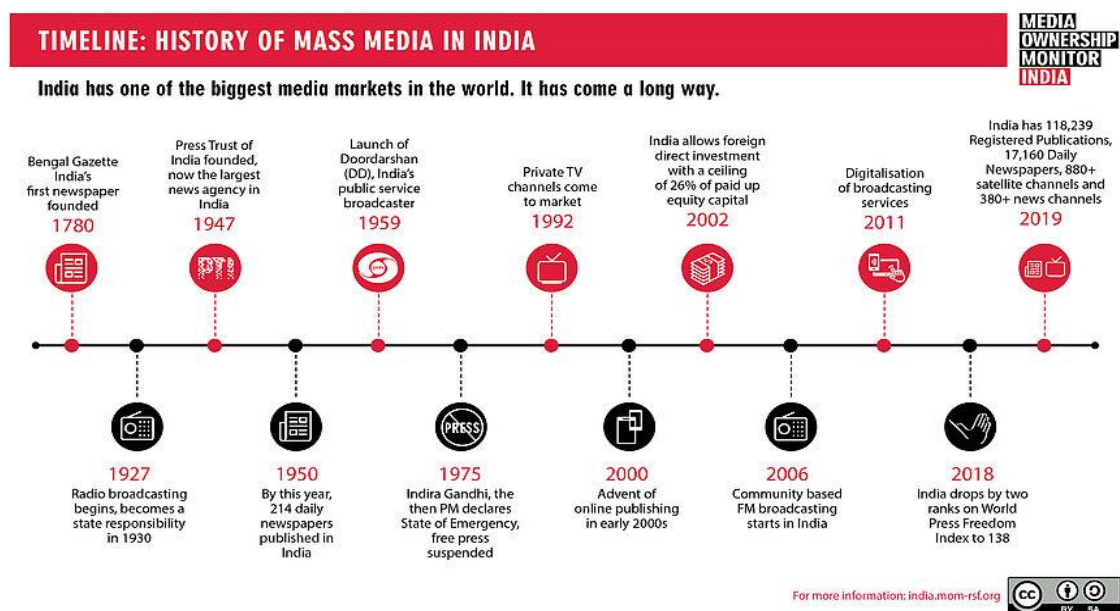
²⁶ SANNAM S4, “Digital and Social media Landscape in India”, Date of Accession: 30.12.2020 from <https://sannams4.com/digital-and-social-media-landscape-in-india/>.

Based on the circulation figures for December 2019²⁷, the best-selling daily in India has been *Dainik Bhaskar* with a circulation number of 4,579,051 per day. This newspaper is published in Hindi language. However, the third most popular newspaper *The Times of India* is in English and holds a circulation around 2,880,144 copies per day.

On the other hand, there are influential radio and TV channels in India. Some of the radio and TV stations in India are as the following:²⁸

- *CNN News18* - 24-hour news in English
- *New Delhi TV (NDTV)* - news channels in English and Hindi
- *Zee TV* - satellite, cable
- *Radio One* - commercial
- *Radio Mirchi* - commercial
- *Radio City* - commercial
- *Red FM*– commercial

Graphic II: History of Mass Media in India²⁹



²⁷ Audit Bureau of Circulations, “Daily newspapers Across Languages”, Date of Accession: 30.12.2020 from [http://www.auditbureau.org/files/JD%202019%20Highest%20Circulated%20\(across%20languages\).pdf](http://www.auditbureau.org/files/JD%202019%20Highest%20Circulated%20(across%20languages).pdf).

²⁸ BBC (2019), “India profile – Media”, 29.04.2019, Date of Accession: 30.12.2020 from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-south-asia-12557390>.

²⁹ Media Ownership Monitoring, India, “History”, Date of Accession: 30.12.2020 from <https://india.mom-rsf.org/en/context/history/>.

3. The Role of Media in Indian Politics

“I want this government to be criticized. Criticism makes democracy strong. Democracy cannot succeed without constructive criticism.” These words were stated by the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2014.³⁰ As Modi government faced with the rising crisis in the economy at home and increased tensions across the country, the Prime Minister took steps to weaken free media.

An important dimension related to the analysis of media freedoms in India today is the lack of an effective and independent regulatory regime. A significant point to emphasize while discussing media and politics relationship in India is the issue of advertising. In addition to direct ownership, advertising also presents a form of control over editorial content as media holds greater dependence on advertisement revenues. Financial problems make media companies more vulnerable to such dependencies and this ultimately undermines media freedoms and pluralism. It is known that, in 2019, the Modi government used advertising campaigns to reward and punish the Indian media. In 2020, it was announced that the Modi administration stopped its advertising spending for the three biggest English-language newspapers; *Times of India*, *The Hindu*, and *The Telegraph*. The decision had come after all three newspapers published articles that criticized the government. When media actors in India are not aligned with the government, the government cut advertising revenues in order to punish them.³¹

Until the 1980s and the 1990s, English newspapers published in India were mostly concerned with domestic political affairs and they were dominant in terms of circulation, technology, and earnings, as well as shaping the elite press. However, Hindi newspapers made a big leap forward both in numbers and with their local print and circulation. Today, newspapers are read more than before. It is seen that political problems are covered intensively in both local and regional newspapers with high circulation. It is not coincidental that India's move from the center of politics from New Delhi to regional centers coincides with the time when the press in mother tongue started to gain strength.

Considering the context of media and democracy in India, the media broadcasting in the mother tongue was not welcomed. While the English press is perceived as a model in the

³⁰ Aman Madan (2019), “India’s Not-So-Free Media”, *The Diplomat*, 23.01.2019, Date of Accession: 03.01.2021 from <https://thediplomat.com/2019/01/indias-not-so-free-media/>.

³¹ Adam Withnall (2019), “How Modi government uses ad spending to ‘reward or punish’ Indian media”, *Independent*, 20.07.2019, Date of Accession: 03.01.2021 from <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/india-modi-government-media-ad-spending-newspapers-press-freedom-a8990451.html>.

developing world, these newspapers, which cannot be read by a large part of the population, were found to be politically and ethically problematic. Hindu newspapers, on the other hand, met with incredible support from the Hindu nationalist movement. It should be noted that, the strong tradition of Indian journalism that used to focus on national politics with high elitism and urban centricism has changed over the years. Nowadays, there is a localization and commodification of news.³²

In today's media landscape in India, media actors are not only act as the intermediaries between the public opinion and policy-makers, but as significant formulators of the public opinion itself. *Ananda Bazar Patrika*, *The Hindu*, and *National Herald* newspapers have played an important role in the shaping as well as the putting forth of the public opinion.³³ On the other hand, with regard to TV media, it can be said that India also witnessed the rise of Hindu nationalism in the age of the tele-media. There is also a positive correlation between television-mediated politics and the rise of Hindu nationalism.³⁴

Another important development regarding media-politics relationship in India is related to the economic developments. Indian media has been in a close relationship with political and financial actors, especially with the economic policies adopted in the 1990s that opened the Indian market to foreign investments. This development paved the way for a transition from a publicly owned media sector into a privatized media sector. The shift in the media structure brought huge changes in terms of media ownership.³⁵ It is clear that, the media ownership significantly affects the perspectives presented in the news analysis and the editorial contents.

In India, some political elites partly or completely own various regional news channels. Politics and media are closely intertwined because regional political parties are playing an important role in the Indian political life as they are strong in reaching out the masses, and national parties build partnership with regional political parties during elections.³⁶ So, while analyzing the relationship between the media and politics, it should be noted that, most of the Indian media is directly shaped by those people who have access to political power.

³² Yasemin İnceoğlu (2014), "Hintli Gazeteciler Üzerine Antropolojik Bir Analiz", *Biamag Cumartesi*, 12.04.2014, Date of Accession: 03.01.2021 from <https://m.bianet.org/biamag/medya/154904-hintli-gazeteciler-uzerine-antropolojik-bir-analiz>.

³³ Manjari Katju, (2001), "Review: Changing Times: Visual Media and Indian Politics", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 36, No: 39, p. 3759.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 3760.

³⁵ Arani Basu (2014), "Understanding Media-Politics-Economy-Society Interrelationship in India: Relevance of Habermas and Chomsky", Date of Accession: 03.01.2021 from https://www2.hu-berlin.de/transcience/Vol7_No2_27_35.pdf.

³⁶ Media Ownership Monitoring, India, "A Delicate Handshake", Date of Accession: 03.01.2021 from <https://india.mom-rsf.org/en/findings/politicalaffiliations/>.

More importantly, India has got no regulatory safeguards against the political control over media outlets. The legal mechanisms are not sufficient to put a limit to political ownership in television or print media with the exception of radio. The media ownership issue is one of the major factors contributing to the threat of the media freedoms in India. Also, India today requires an effective and independent regulatory regime for media freedoms.

Conclusion

Media-politics relationship is one of the main determinants showing the quality of the democratic governance in a country. A free and independent media is an indispensable actor in liberal democracies. It both presents information to the masses in a variety of issues from politics to economy and world affairs and it also functions as a watchdog, as an actor of surveillance over the activities of the government against corruption. It is to be noted that, the more pressure the government exercises upon media actors, the weaker the accountability and transparency principles become in a political regime.

Media and politics have always been in constant interaction and communication with one another. The media's function of reporting and monitoring should be kept away from political pressure. For this reason, a well-functioning regulatory regime along with institutions and legal regulations must be established to protect media freedoms.

The main problem of the media in India is related with the media ownership structure. The use of advertising as a tool for reward and punishment by the political elites (as in the case of Modi government) is the main factor that undermines media freedoms in India. The media ownership in India rests within the hands of a small group of elites who have certain political or financial affiliations and this paves the way for the weakening of democracy. The media actors cannot function freely in editorial and reporting processes as they need profit-making in order to survive.

The media sector in India is growing faster than the country's economy. However, it is not functioning as a watchdog to monitor elites and political affairs. It should be noted that not only India, but every country should adopt the goal of providing an appropriate ground for media actors to be able to make news and reporting in an open and free way based on editorial independence that serves the public interest.

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