

SCIENCE COMMUNICATION AND THE MEDIA

ARUNDHATI MUKHERJEE*

Science communication in ancient India was not deficient but it was just not there in our country. I googled to find out that Raja Jai Sing was a keen Mathematician and interested in Astronomy. He built Jantar Mantar in mid-18th Century. Google says that under his aegis Science communication started.

Initially it was limited within the elites. There was a communication boom in the latter half of the last Century and the current Century has a blast of it.

But the blast has not much to do with Science communication, it remained not poor but abysmally poor. In mass media, it is only 3 % whereas the desired level is 10 to 15 %.

Science communication and science journalism are 2 different things. Communication can be informal, verbal – meant for one or may be many. But journalism is a conscious and pre-planned effort, always meant for a targeted audience. I have been to Mohenjo-daro and seen a lot of devices and symbols that they used for disseminating information. Those symbols, as we were told, were their scriptures and the scriptures – their language. Symbols were used as a mode of communication. Or we may call it their language.

Science communication through books pervaded the market much later when language took a definite shape. I remember, my college days when Science books in regional languages were almost zero. English it was the medium of education at higher levels, to be specific it, as soon as we left school. Thank God, (hope God exists in this Science meet) this is not a meet on Medium of Education. So controversies are averted!

Science Congress, Science exhibitions, seminars contribute to popularizing Science though not up to the expectation. Big names – political personalities, celebrities come to inaugurate or be the guests of honor and speak on these forums. It helps attract the mass and make the public aware. Science communication or any communication will just be a futile effort if it goes unnoticed. We have to admit that celebrities and political personalities matter in our lives.

The role of the Government is very important in our lives. India is so vast a country that a large population is dependent on the government for their basic needs more than many other countries. It is just too difficult to reach the huge mass mostly due to logistics and infrastructural problems. The Indian Government established the National Council for science and technology Communication as an apex body to facilitate the task in this direction.

Yet science news is generally a small and inner page item in newspapers, except for stories like Man on Moon, Solar Eclipse, Nuclear tests etc. Successful medical treatments or complicated surgeries sometimes take a front seat nowadays.

When I joined Aajkaal Gour Kishore Ghosh was its Editor. Science was a regular Beat since its inception like Crime, Politics, Government or Education. And that was the first time in Calcutta. Mrityika Mitra was Calcutta's first Science beat reporter, who is no more. I pay my glowing tribute to Mrityika, my friend and dear colleague for doing a pioneering job under Gour Kishore Ghosh's support and guidance, who himself was a Magsaysay winner for being a fearless and path-breaking journalist.

My other friend and ex-colleague Pathik Guha took this forward a few years later. I laud my friend for doing a commendable job in Science reporting and that too in

* Former Joint Editor, Aajkaal,
e-mail: arundhatiaugust@yahoo.co.in

Bengali. Before that Science reporting was at its nascent stage. They were considered to be not that important, to deserve a place on the front page. Gour Kishor Ghosh introduced Science reporting in Bengali journalism but could not continue for long as its Editor. His brief stint as its Head left an indelible mark in the History of Bengali journalism. The impact lasts even today. Pathik took the onus and Anadabazar welcomed Science Reporting with an open heart or I may say with an 'open' page. Jugal Kishore Sarkar was another correspondent who tried hard to popularize Science journalism. That too again, in Aajkaal.

Their main arsenal was their lucid language, understood by commoners like me whose love for Science was limited to Inventors' and Discoverers' names as a school going child and fear for Mathematics was 'diabolical'! Their style was not prosaic with technical jargon or jugglery filled up with dry Statistics. Readers started reading those well-written articles, cleverly headlined and nicely displayed. Ahalya came out with her beauty! Science reporting should not lackluster, if so it will be devoid of readers' attention. Sometimes they are poor translation from English or may be deficient assimilation of different articles on a particular topic. Readers value well written articles.

Probably that is why the Finance Ministers quote suitable poetry lines while presenting the budget, the most prosaic part of Parliament. This year there were several stories on budget as usual. Amidst this, there was one story featuring Nirmala Sitaraman as one Finance Minister eluding poetry, at least for her Budget speech this year, if not from her life.

Science journalists nowadays have Science background. They have a nose for news, like other Political or Crime Beat reporters and most of them have a mighty pen like many others. So their reports are not poor translation but have the taste of originality. They understand their subject or sometimes they take the help of their sources, experts or academicians to well-digest the issue before penning and present them in proper perspective. They know what their readers or the target audience want to know. In Bengali, we say "khaiye dewa" or "pathok konta khai", that is, what attracts readers' notice and catches their imagination immediately. They make the intro or put an angle the way their audience wants it. They use the essential ingredients then add spices to it for a perfect recipe and thus make their report lip-smackingly newsy.

If we need to develop Science journalism the foremost condition is to provide them space in newspapers and magazines. Science magazines are actually meant for experts, academicians, higher level students and so on. But mainstream newspapers or media are for the mass, that means, open to all. To make Science communication more meaningful, more effective media in regional languages should work in this direction and these forums should be utilized to the fullest.

Environmental issues are the most pertinent ones in our lives today, locally nationally, or globally. Environmental Science can be one forte for Science reporters. River pollution, felling of trees, illegal filling of ponds are dominant evils of our society. Science reports can handle them deftly. These are very often local problems so local people read these stories. Those stories get noticed, often come out on the front page. They are burning issues so those stories not only attract the attention of local people, they create ripples and sometimes compel the Government or the local agencies to act. This winter Delhi pollution went up to such a level that schools were closed, the CM appealed office goes to work from home.

And now the Covid19 issue. That too is a local national, and international phenomenon. Scientists are working round the clock to discover an effective method to prevent covid19 and Science reporters of the world are trying hard to break the news. The Wuhan affair and its aftermath put many challenges to Science reporters of the world. Medical Science reporting has become a predominant factor of Journalism today

For this Science reporters have to do much leg work like any other reporter. Science journalism was a kind of reporting done in libraries or newsrooms. But not now. They have to use their legs as briskly as any other reporter. It is time to understand this. Science journalism is not data, is not foreign jargons or jugglery of a bad wordsmith that goes beyond the commoners' comprehension. When Ganesh idols were drinking milk it was the onus of the Science reporter to investigate and mar the miracle, delve into the incident to bring out the truth.

We have not understood the Universe. It means there are so many unresolved mysteries that remain beyond our comprehension. Nothing is a miracle. Everything has logic. A science reporter takes us to the world of logic and reason from the absurd the improbable. Let us cogitate. □