

Instigators of Hysteria

Role of Media During Anti-Reservation Agitation Review of October'90 *Newstrack* Video Magazine

by

Madhu Kishwar

THE unusual hysteria that came to characterise the anti-reservation agitation leading to over 200 attempted suicides/self immolations (out of which 112 people died) was in large part due to the instigative role played by large sections of the mass-media.

Journalists, editors and academics became part of a systematic disinformation campaign, making a flood of exaggerated, alarmist statements so that it looked as if the country was on the brink of an unprecedented disaster. For example, *The Times of India* declared mournfully that the decision to implement reservations threatened to undo "at one stroke" all that had been achieved over four decades of Independence in building "a modern, egalitarian order". Reservations would "enshrine casteism, undermine meritocracy and excellence, and work against the creation of a pan-Indian identity". (Aug 9, 1990). Nani Palkhiwala, the well-known constitutional expert, described the reservation policy as a "threat to the security of the state." An article in *The Hindustan Times* described it as sowing "the seeds of social chaos". And another one in *The Indian Express* called it "The Collapse of Indian Polity" (Aug 24, 1990). Arun Shourie pronounced his judgment thus: "This way lies not only folly, but disaster." Chandan Mitra opined that with this move "... the government has snatched away the hopes of an entire generation.



The net result of the government move will be to turn a whole generation into disillusioned idlers." (*Sunday Observer* Aug 26, 1990).

With such a determined chorus relayed unremittingly day after day by various doomsday prophets in the media, it was to be expected that the young and impressionable students began to despair for their future. The student who said to the *Newstrack* interviewer, "they have declared a zero year for us throughout our lives, they have basically made a zero career [for us]", was proving the great power the media has acquired in shaping public opinion among the educated.

The support lent by the media to the anti-reservation agitation was not just confined to giving it extensive and favourable coverage. Newspaper editors wrote front page editorials glorifying the student agitation, exhorting students to "intensify their movement". Even when it became evident that the misplaced glorification of the movement was encouraging more and more macabre protests in the form of self-immolations and other modes of suicides, instead of reviewing their coverage policy which was jeopardising young lives, the media, with the help of certain articulate group of intellectuals, went on adding fuel to the fire.

Open Instigation

Here are a few samples of open breach of editorial responsibility. *The Indian Express* urged the students to fulfil their "responsibility to spread and intensify" the agitation at the same time as the student protesters were resorting to a good deal of violence and arson in addition to open display of anti-Backward Caste, anti-Dalit sentiment. Yet the *Express* pronounced the movement to be "clearly in defence of the national interest." Chandan Mitra, in his front page editorial in *Sunday Observer* (Aug 28, 1990) entitled "Best Wishes for an Idealistic Stir" went completely overboard and virtually assumed the role of a mentor of the movement: "History is replete with examples of the young turning the world

upside down for the world's own good.... The brave students of Delhi University and other educational institutions in the capital and elsewhere in India have initiated a struggle for which the nation ought to be grateful.... It is true their agitation has been unruly But what else could they do?... Even if they cannot bring, the government to its knees, they can, hopefully arouse the nation's conscience.... And when the cause is just, no price is too high. The students of Delhi have done India proud."

Indeed no price was "too high" for the press in its resolve to bring down a government which lost favour with them, not even using scores of young lives as sacrificial victims. It is well known that suicides and self-immolations tend to spread like an epidemic if such acts are romanticised and glorified. (See article in this issue by Dinesh Mohan.) A paper presented at the Indian Psychiatric Society seminar attributed the large spate of suicide attempts to "reverence historically bestowed upon the concept of self-sacrifice" in India and "the highly impressionable age, [of the victims] along with media glorification", as the factors behind the phenomenon. Another study done by the Post-Graduate Medical Institute, Chandigarh, based on case studies of 22 attempts, also highlighted, among other things, the role of media coverage in spreading the phenomenon. Some of the victims interviewed by newspapers clearly said they were inspired by the reports of such acts in the press. This is understandable especially considering the age group to which they belonged. A large number of those who attempted suicides were teenagers. Fifty-seven percent were in the age group of 18 or below and another 24 percent in the age group 19 to 25. Amongst the youngest are a 12 year-old girl in Himachal Pradesh and a 13 year old boy of Punjab. Thirty percent of total suicide attempts were by young women and girls. Some of them said clearly that they undertook this step to show that girls are no less brave and heroic than boys.

Thus very soon it became clear that the glorification of these acts was leading to a frenzied spurt of self-immolations. Yet the encouragement continued. University teachers wrote poems eulogising those who became martyrs. As late as Nov. 10, 1990, an article in *The Indian Express* praised the acts of students as "offering their burnt or half-burnt bodies to register their protest against the state which has initiated the policy of reservation." The writer then goes to luridly describe how just before dying "S.S. Chauhan with 98 percent burns, asked for water and said '*Agar mujhe pani mil jaye to mein Mandal Ayog ke khilafaur bolna chahta hoon*' (If I got some water I will say more against the Mandal Commission.) The author informs us with great approval how Raji v Gos wami is reported to have said: "The only lesson required in India is to learn 'how to die' and the only way to teach is by dying alone." Thus, to the end, the media and anti-reservationist intellectuals remained unmindful of the havoc they were causing by their romantic portrayal of these acts.

Propaganda or Tracking News?

In those passionate, furious days, large sections of the media forgot the dividing line between reporting an event and instigating it, between editorial prerogative and professional ethics. Pamphleteering journalism held sway over a majority of newspapers, print and video magazines and the media openly assumed the role of political opposition.

The mood of desperation that crept into the student movement was in large part the handiwork of the mass media.

The October '90 issue of video magazine *Newstrack* brought out by the influential *India Today* group, provides a clear example of the openly propagandist role assumed by the media. Hence a detailed review of this film is presented here.

The film opens on a blatantly partisan note: "Delhi burns, while V.P. Singh fiddles. The country was plunged into an unimaginable backlash of violence against the Mandal Commission Report

as young men immolated themselves and took poison in a desperate death wish against a deaf and blind government." The commentators indulge in a continuing barrage about how V.P. Singh and his colleagues were callously ignoring the protests. Even while young people continued to die, V.P. Singh chose "to ignore all Mandal related tragedies", that instead of being "compassionate or conciliatory even in his language... defended the Mandal Commission Report saying "efficiency won't be hit." Even a mild defence of the Mandal Report is interpreted as a "belligerent and confrontationist stand." His speech on TV appealing to students to dispel their fears and open a dialogue is dismissed as mouthing "infuriating inanities". No matter what he said he was damned. If he kept quiet, it was seen as proof of V.P. Singh's "head in the sand attitude oblivious of repercussions." Though he kept announcing concession after concession, he is accused of refusing "to budge." The viewer is not given even a minute's respite from the aggressive editorial comments. We are bullied into believing that this move was inspired by nothing other than a cynical and base calculation about buying a certain vote bank, that the proposed policy had no other rationale except greed for power. Thus the spate of suicides is approvingly attributed to the genuine "frustration of the students with a monomaniacal government" for it had "knowingly heaped such a tragedy" and whose "ostrich-like refusal to open dialogue was unacceptable obduracy in a democratic set-up".

Media's Duty To Inform

Even if one were to grant newspapers and magazines the right to become propaganda organs for social causes dear to them, yet at least a pretense of presenting basic facts and information needs to be kept up in deference to the ethics of their profession.

We are repeatedly shown people hysterically shouting: "We want justice, we want justice"—but no attempt is made to explain why and how

reservations constitute such a grave injustice.

Not that a strong case cannot be built against the proposed reservation policy. But so convinced is *Newstrack* of the righteousness of its cause, that they do not even attempt to delineate some of the basic issues involved. Instead we are subjected to a barrage of highly emotion charged statements such as: "Even the most unbiased would agree... one politically expedient decision taken by the Prime Minister has meant a giant step backwards for India in terms of raking up caste as an issue." How is it a step backward? No explanation, except unrestrained vituperation.

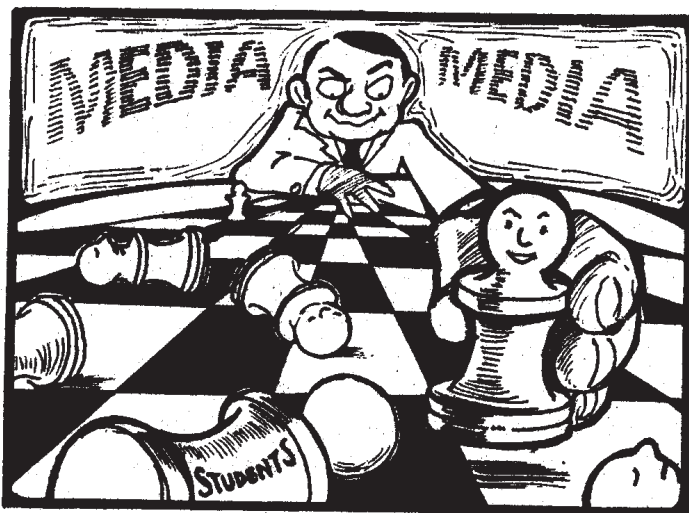
We are not even presented basic facts like how many jobs at what levels are likely to be affected by the reservation policy; the sectors where reservations will apply and where they won't apply; the experience of other states where reservations have been implemented, a review of how it has affected government functioning and inter-caste relations; the various back-tracking steps already announced

by the government exempting several key services from the obligation to implement reservations. Nor for that matter are there any interviews with the supporters of the reservation policy as well as the supposed beneficiaries —these people were not allowed to give their point of view.

All we get is hysterical assertions without substantiation that the reservation policy is terribly retrogressive, that it will be "ruinous" for the country. In addition, through blatantly selective coverage, we are sought to be convinced that "the support the students received cut across all boundaries... that support to this cause has crossed caste, age and sex barriers. Men, women and children of all

levels pour out on the street to support the anti-Mandal protest."

But interview after interview focuses only on upper caste, middle and upper class people, only on those who give opinions vehemently opposing reservations. It does not occur to the *Newstrack* team that the support base of the anti-reservation movement could not possibly "cut across all boundaries" because the backward castes did not support that movement, nor did many other sections of our society. Considering that those termed BCs constitute a sizable proportion of our population, their opinion should have



been at least included (if only as a pretense of objectivity), if not given equal weightage. This shows how limited is our elite's notion of India's people; the majority doesn't count, their opinions just don't matter to the elite.

Crusading Journalism or Hate-Soaked Propaganda?

Even when occasionally the pro-reservation opinion is represented, it comes only through ministerial pronouncements which are presented not with a view to giving a balanced view-point, but to pour poisonous invectives against those leaders. For example, V.P. Singh's TV speech and Paswan's interview are followed by a barrage of condemnation giving the

viewer no chance to judge for himself/herself. Even a mild defense of the reservation policy is condemned aggressively as "scheming callousness and worse". Without even a cursory attempt to explore the various dimensions of the issues involved, *Newstrack* keeps reiterating in various ways: "the government's stand was indefensible" — without anyone allowed a chance to defend it.

By the time *Newstrack* presents its version of the anti-reservation agitation, Rajiv Goswami's attempt at self-immolation on 18 Sept '90 had led to a series of imitative suicides. Several magazines published, on their front cover, a dramatic photograph of Goswami in flames, apart from the widespread, detailed coverage given by the media. The *Newstrack* team clearly admits the connection: "The anti-reservation movement gathered a panic momentum when Rajiv Goswami took the horrendous lead in an attempt to immolate himself. Between the 19th and 20th September 18 suicide attempts by young people followed in various parts of the country."

This clearly called for more cautious coverage. But the *Newstrack* team has no time for such considerations, obsessed as they are with the deadly righteousness of their opposition to reservations. Throughout the film every rule of professional ethics is flouted and they do everything possible to incite young people to still greater frenzy. The cause that the students were killing themselves for is not objectively presented. Instead, the *Newstrack* team adopted a biased and unquestioning advocacy position.

There are long interviews with young boys who had attempted self-immolation, morbid closeups of their burnt faces, asking them to convey their "message" to the country's people through the film.

They are presented as the greatest heroes of modern India, ready to die for a noble cause. For example, in response to the question “what did you want to prove through this [self immolation] act?” Rajiv Goswami’s reply is presented with obvious admiration: “The movement was dying down, I wanted to give it a new lease of life.” (*Is mein tezi daalna chahte thhe*). This is followed by the camera lingering with morbid zeal over the burnt body of Chhatrapal Singh as he lay in hospital after attempting self-immolation. (He died on 30 September). He is asked, “Do you want to convey a message to other students?” and his inaudible words are played to the accompaniment of hysterical commentary by *the Newstrack* team.

Chetan Gautam, a 13 year old class seven student who likewise died on 2 October, is shown over and over again as he lay dying with severe burns in a hospital ward. The interviewer asks him whether no one tried to dissuade him from undertaking this self-sacrifice (*atmadah*). Chetan’s answer is presented with admiring approval: “Yes I was told not to do it. But I had sworn by god when I left home. I am not a coward after all so I was not going to return home without doing what I said I would (*Mein ghar se Bhagwan la kasam kha ke aaya thha. Mein kayar to him nahin Id aa gaya to jab ub vapis aise lot kar nahin jaoonga.*)” The interviewer persists: “Are you regretting it?” and Chetan’s heroic reply is clearly meant to inspire viewers: “No regrets. Whatever I did is for the country”. Thus his gruesome suicide is presented as great patriotism because both the commentary and statements of other students support the view that this was a necessary sacrifice. As if this was not enough, it has to be hammered in that he died like a hero. A little later in the film Chetan Gautam’s mother is brought in to describe his last moments thus and put a further stamp of approval on his self-sacrifice: “He told me: ‘Mummy you are crying. See how much courage your son has. I am

laughing. You are crying,’” This is nothing short of cynically manipulating the young and impressionable minds to offer themselves as sacrificial victims to bring down a government hated by the educated, upper caste elite. They even manage to extract this message out of the dying Chetan Gautam by asking him: “Do you want to say something to V.P. Singh?” And he replies: “Yes, either he should resign or run the country properly.” Soon after a group of students is asked : “Do you think this kind of agitation and self-immolation is a correct step?” One of the student gives just the answer the *Newstrack* team wanted to extract out of him : “What else can we do other than this? We have to see it in the light that this government is totally deaf. I would say that if we have to die, we die doing something for the country. Immolation was one way of showing to the government that it’s really deaf.” Thus the students are forcefully encouraged to believe they have every reason to feel desperate at this “ruinous” policy and that committing suicide is an effective way of registering their protest against a callous government. No other opinion is presented and the programme commentators do not, for a minute let us forget that they whole heartedly agree with these students.

What was it that led the students to feel that the government was unwilling to listen to their grievances without their indulging in desperate acts? Not so much their own experience in trying to get heard by the government because several offers had been made by the government to discuss the issue and the government kept backtracking piecemeal on the reservation quota by exempting various services from the obligation to implement it.

That the student movement resorted to desperate measures without really exhausting all other options comes out from the tragic innocence of Chetan Gautam despite all of *Newstrack*’s obviously biased presentation. When asked to give his message to the students

he appeals: “They should not indulge in destruction and arson; they should not attempt self-immolations. If we want to do something we should go and hunger strike outside V.P. Singh’s bungalow. Go on a *dharna* there... we won’t get anything from this *todphod*” (destruction and violence). He is asked: “Why didn’t you go and hunger strike outside V.P. Singh’s house?” His reply is heartrendingly naive: “I do not know his address” (*hamein to uska ghar maloom nahin hat*).

If the elite controlled media did not have a shabbily hidden agenda behind their support to the anti-reservation agitation, they would have seriously tried to bring about a measure of restraint to the movement rather than encourage it to go berserk through systematic spread of disinformation, hatred and fear. They should have seriously attempted to calm the do or die mood instead of instigating the students into greater frenzy. **Given that the proposed reservation policy involved no more than a few thousand jobs going to this or that group, it was essential to demand of the students that they use means commensurate with the salience of the issue. It was perfectly possible to affect the withdrawal of the reservation policy through a less deathly and less violent opposition.** Self-immolations of Buddhist monks and others in Vietnam and Burma may arguably have been heroic acts in those circumstances for they were not protesting to safeguard narrow sectional interests, as the anti-reservationists were doing here. By no stretch of imagination could the “sacrifice” of life by certain anti-reservationists be put at par with that of the students who gave their lives in an attempt to bring about democracy in China.

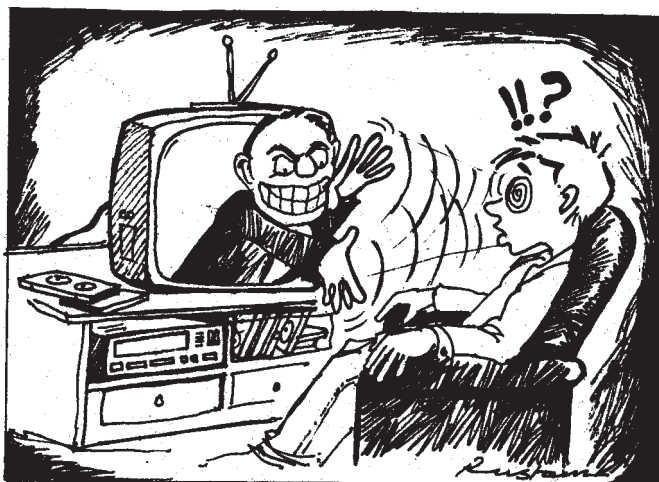
Another Jallianwala Bagh?

Considering the overall performance of the police in India, their routine brutality and inefficiency, their handling of the anti-reservation agitation was a mild affair. In fact, they were clearly on the defensive most of the time, at least in

the city of Delhi—the scene of this film. Yet, the *Newstrack* team tries to make a key issue of atrocities committed by the police. It is made out as if this was the worst example of repression in the history of India. Time and again people are approvingly shown making exaggerated statements like: “Even the British did not indulge in such brutality” ; (*angrezon ne bhi itna zulum nahin dhaya.*) “Laxmibai Nagar has been made into a Jallianwala Bagh.” Women scream hysterically: “May they be destroyed! They have eaten up our children.” Students are shown shouting abusive slogans against particular leaders and self-righteously venting their anger against the police and authorities, all to build up a case for popular, widespread revolt against the government even though in reality the protesters could never gather more than a few hundred students for their protest actions. At the height of the movement, students paralysed traffic by going around in small groups in tempos and trucks, moving from one traffic intersection to another. Even small groups were successful in paralysing the city because the police, in most cases, gave them kid glove treatment, probably because they knew these kids came from elite families. Yet the *Newstrack* team tries to convey the impression that the police indulged in wanton large scale killings and repression, that the protesting students were motivated only by the noblest of ideals.

Since in this case there weren't that many actual instances of police brutality, the *Newstrack* team resorts to the technique of incremental repetition to build its case. They keep replaying and freezing the same two or three sequences of lathi charge on students, (especially one on girl students) to the

accompaniment of a fairly high pitched condemnation. Even the pretense of fair and balanced reporting is dropped. The commentary mentions in passing that the students stoned the police, but this is made out to be a perfectly innocent, harmless activity as, for example, in the following comments: “Stone pelting was often met with personally upset policemen out for revenge.” The Laxmibai Nagar incident is described thus: “Suddenly, as described by an *Newsmakers or Newstrackers?* eyewitness, the stone pelting by students] increased in intensity. Policemen warned the students to stop,



to move away. A group of policemen got incensed by a brick that hit a colleague's jaw.” And that's what triggered off the police firing. “For eight days *the most that students did was pelt stones.* But what happened on the eighth day for the police to open fire?” (emphasis mine). By their own admission, the police had let the students stone them for eight days without retaliating. Yet it's the police alone who are put in the dock for their high handed excesses. Had it been Muslims or supporters of a Dalit party who pelted stones, the *Newstrack* reaction would have been very different, for we know that the far more brutal and large scale massacres of Muslims by the police and paramilitary forces at places

such as Malliana, Meerut, Bhagalpur, Ahmedabad, Bhiwandi have never received such unambiguous condemnation from those sections of our mass media that went berserk when upper class caste students (almost all Hindu) were given a small dose of the brutality that is routinely meted out to the minorities and the poor.

By and large, the police let the students disrupt life in the city with ease. For instance, even when called upon to clear the student blockade at the All India Medical Institute crossing, one of the busiest in Delhi, the police in the *Newstrack* coverage are shown to be behaving in quite a restrained manner. Yet the editorial comments are exaggerated and the tone of voice shrill: “Four days from the day Rajiv Goswami attempted self immolation, students had taken over the traffic crossing facing Safdarjang. ... The atmosphere that night was much like Tienanmen Square in China. Unarmed students charged up waiting for the inevitable police crackdown.... By 2.45 a.m. policemen in full riot gear... began arriving.

They started moving in on the 1000 or so students and began loading them into vans.” It is deliberately not mentioned that there was no real crackdown, that the so-called “arrests” were no more than loading the slogan shouting rallyists into vans and trucks and letting them off immediately at some distance, so that the road block could be cleared.

The Laxmibai Nagar firing is dwelt on at great length. There is a long shot of a student lying injured in a pool of blood after he was hit by a police bullet. This is followed by an equally long drawn out shot of two policemen dragging him towards a jeep in order to carry him to hospital. The camera lingers obsessively on the trail of blood left behind. This shot

is morbidly repeated time and again throughout the film. All this to prove that the police behaved with utmost brutality and callousness. However, if we ignore the shrill commentary of *Newstrack*, and focus on facts as they emerge from the visual shot presented, what comes out is a different story:

1) the policemen look more frightened than aggressive. They stand quietly as the residents hurl foul abuses at them to their faces;

2) their incompetent dragging of the injured student's body is proof of their ignorance about caring for the injured people and their poor and shabby training rather than brutality. They were not even equipped with rubber bullets. The only thing they seem to have been trained in is to shoot to kill. The absence of intermediary measures, like rubber bullets, to combat student violence at a time when the government was clearly for avoiding a violent confrontation with the students, shows the utter incompetence of our police and political authorities.

If one compares their incompetent handling of this injured student to that of their normal behaviour, say with even road accident victims, they appear almost kindly. The student who was injured during the Laxmibai Nagar firing is taken to hospital within minutes of being hit. Most road accident victims lie uncared on the road for hours, and even when taken to hospital are handled no less ineptly than was this student. Many whose lives could be saved, if given prompt, appropriate and caring attention, end up dead as a result. And if one were to compare how the police handled the bodies of the hundreds who they killed in Bhagalpur, Malliana, Hashimpura Ahmedabad and during anti-Sikh pogrom of 1984 in Delhi, et cetera, the behaviour of the police when dealing with Delhi students is almost kindly in comparison. And yet due to sheer incompetence they ended up killing five

students in Delhi itself.

The death of five Delhi students in different police firings is indeed reprehensible and was even avoidable, had the police been better trained to handle political agitations. But many mass movements, including the scrupulously non violent ones, have fared much worse at the hands of the police.

The *Newstrack* team goes berserk in its attempt to whip up anti-police, anti-government sentiments, morbidly using the above-mentioned dead student's body as a weapon. The shroud is removed especially for the cameras to give us a close up view of his dead face. Other victims are likewise named and identified, as though deliberately to provoke students in to greater frenzy. This is in sharp contrast to the mischievous code that the press in India follows voluntarily, of not naming or identifying victims of communal violence, especially when the minority communities are the primary target of violence. This is done ostensibly to avoid further flaring up of communal passions but in reality deliberate withholding of information about who killed whom gives a freer hand to those who seek to whip up hatred and fear of minority aggression among Hindus even when the majority of those killed are most often Muslims. Since the *Newstrack* team has never displayed similar candidness in covering other instances of police or state violence, such as in Uttar Pradesh, Kashmir or Punjab, one is compelled to conclude that this was done deliberately to instigate students to "intensify" their attack on the favourite *bete noire* of the anti-reservationists.

Newstrack sympathy for the student agitation wouldn't have been as suspect if they had been equally fair and honest in dealing with violence indulged in by the students. They dismiss lightly all reports and allegations about students indulging in arson and looting. Hundreds of DTC buses were stoned and

damaged, dozens of buses and government vehicles were set on fire, including several private vehicles. Yet this does not find any mention, visual or verbal, in the *Newstrack* report. Their forcible holding up of traffic for weeks on end is presented in a heroic light. Only the voices of those, (mostly the car owning elite of Delhi) are projected who declare unequivocally that they "support the agitation 100 percent" and don't mind the inconvenience caused by traffic holdups. Millions of self employed vendors, rickshaw pullers, daily wage earners, who lost their livelihood during that period are not asked for their view. Nor for that matter are the millions of poor farmers who collectively suffered losses running into crores because their entire fruit and vegetable crops lay rotting due to stoppage of transport during the agitation, asked whether they are "with the students" and whether they "mind the inconvenience caused" due to the agitation. Likewise, large sections of the student movement indulged in openly casteist abuse. Filthy slogans were painted on the walls of Delhi against SC and Backward Castes, sometimes specifically naming leaders like Paswan and Laloo Prasad Yadav. Here is an example of one of the mildest wall graffiti: "*Laloo bada badmash hoi, nau bachon ha baap hoi, Laloo bada niralai hai, daswan hone wala hai, under ki yeh boat hai, isme V.P. ka haat hai* (Laloo is a badmash, he has nine children and is expecting a tenth. The inside story is that V.P. Singh is involved.)

What is worse, even the blatant hooliganism and violence of the anti-reservationists is condoned or overlooked. For instance the October 2 rally organised by anti-reservationists at the Boat Club witnessed a great deal of unprovoked violence. Two policemen were burnt to death even though there had been no firing or lathi charge by the police yet. *Newstrack* scrupulousness avoids any detailed shots of this rally. It

is glossed over quickly. The violence and killing is dismissed lightly as the handiwork of “anti-social and lumpen elements who took over the movement that day.” The killing of the two policemen does not even get a mention, leave alone a sympathetic coverage of the kind given to student victims of violence. We are expected to believe that “no student of Delhi University was involved; people other than students indulged in violence”, quite forgetting that there is no dearth of “anti-social elements” among Delhi University students. Also that the students were not right in disowning responsibility for what happened, even if not they, but their Bhartia Kisan Union allies indulged in violence, because they had gone out of their way to forge an alliance with BKU in the hope that this would provide their movement with a much needed mass-base; The students had counted on the BKU to make the rally a massive success by bringing in lakhs to participate in it since they themselves never mobilised more than a few hundred people for any protest action.

Even when Vijay Karan, the then Commissioner of Police, (one of the few police officers known for his integrity) says to *Newstrack*: The rallyists “were armed with all kinds of weapons... they were armed with sticks, iron rods, spears, pitch forks... acid bulbs, mind you they threw acid bulbs at the police also, soda bottles and even guns”, they pulled out barricades and used them as spears to attack the police — all this is glossed over and the student’s version treated with the utmost reverence for they have to be projected as innocent martyrs: “Anyone who stood next to an unarmed young person whose body had been senselessly riddled with bullets by over-reacting police can’t remain untouched by the tragedy and waste of lives.”

Even more disturbing is *Newstrack*’s complete silence about alleged murders being passed off as protest suicides during the agitation. Among others, one school girl is reported to have said in her dying declaration that she was set on

fire by two boys. Yet the media chose not to investigate these cases. *Newstrack* does not even mention them. After the third suicide attempt in Delhi, that of S.S. Chauhan, a senior and responsible police officer asserted that policemen on duty had tried to save the boy but were stopped by the cordon of students that had formed around him. This version was studiously ignored by most of the media. In most cases the students seemed to have treated these suicides as a spectator sport, with few attempts to save their fellow students. This does not bring forth any condemnation. If anything, they provide reverential coverage to the impromptu



conversion of these suicide sites as the new shrines of the anti-reservation faithful.

Not once is the question asked: why did students attack DTC buses? The DTC authorities weren’t the ones responsible for the announcement of the reservation policy. Whenever in the past similar violence has erupted during student movements, the press has treated the students as hooligans. But not so this time, for the students were needed as foot soldiers in the war against V.P. Singh and company launched by large sections of the media.

The unrestrained propaganda indulged in by *Newstrack* and others on

this issue went much further than even government controlled propaganda media like AIR and Doordarshan. The latter have to stick to some rules; if not substantive rules, at least bureaucratic rules, whereas *Newstrack* lacked all sense of propriety and balance.

The film ends as it had begun, hurling abuses. The commentators pronounce their final judgment after having listened only to those who ech-oed their own sentiments: “I have never seen such intense hatred.... People are absolutely disgusted and hate the man.... V.P. Singh has only shown his insensitivity by going on Doordarshan and saying what he did.”

And what did he say? “I ask you the youth of India not to entertain these fears. Your interest is uppermost in my mind. I ask you for trust and patience. I ask you to join me in building a better future....”

It is hard to comprehend what is so “belligerent” about this speech. Undoubtedly, there was nothing particularly inspiring about it. But nothing so obnoxious either as to deserve all the abuses hurled at him.

In short, *Newstrack* coverage has all the ingredients of hate-soaked propaganda and little to qualify it as an exercise in journalism. Unfortunately, this kind of pamphleteering journalism masquerades under the self-righteous name of ‘crusading journalism’ and is fast becoming the norm rather than rarity as came out clearly during the days of anti-reservation agitation.

This version of events acquired such legitimacy, in part precisely because of the usual servility and lack of credibility of the government controlled media. Doordarshan, which reaches more than 300 million people, almost completely ignored the agitation. Day after day, they telecast interviews with only those people who expressed support for the reservation policy, allowing for no real debate. Thus, they were unable to counterbalance the propaganda offensive of the non-government mainstream media. □

The Process of Designation of the Backward Classes Category

India's attempt to devise a system of preferential treatment for its socially disadvantaged groups has been acknowledged as being "unprecedented in scope and extent" (Marc Gallanter). It was implemented in India long before the principle of "compensatory preference" or "affirmative action" came to be advocated in the West as a way of helping discriminated groups, such as the Blacks in the US, to overcome handicaps imposed on them due to historic injustice.

We give below a brief summary extracted from Marc Gallanter's *Competing Equalities* (see pp. 154-159). (Ed.)

The Other Backward Classes for whom preferential treatment are authorized are not defined in the Constitution, nor is any exclusive method or agency for their designation provided. For all the uncertainty surrounding the term 'Scheduled Castes' (and its predecessor 'Depressed Classes'), its central purpose is clear: to identify the victims of 'untouchability.' At the time of Independence, the term 'Backward Classes' had a less fixed and definite reference. The term had been around for some time, but it had a variety of referents, it had shifted rapidly in meaning, and it had come to mean different things in different places....

In 1917 the Maharaja of Kolhapur recounted to Mr. Montagu that he had "been taking very keen interest...in uplifting the Backward Classes and especially the untouchables"...

'Backward Classes' first acquired a technical meaning in the Princely State of Mysore. In 1918 the Mysore Government appointed a committee to enquire into the question of encouraging members of the 'backward communities' in public service. In 1921 preferential recruitment of 'backward communities' was instituted, and they were defined as "all communities other than Brahmins, who are not now adequately represented in the public service".... [It is noteworthy that Mysore at this time was considered among the best administered states and the Maharaja was a much revered and loved ruler who played a very active role in furthering

the spread of education, particularly among the under privileged sections in the state].

"The Simon Commission, though it refers to 'intermediate castes' and takes note of the non-Brahmin movement, makes no mention of Backward Classes. But shortly after, in the early 1930s, we find a flowering of the term....The United Provinces Hindu Backward Classes League (founded in 1929) submitted a memorandum which suggested that the term 'Depressed' carried a connotation "of untouchability in the sense of causing pollution by touch as in the case of Madras and Bombay" and that many communities were reluctant to identify themselves as depressed. The League suggested the term " 'Hindu' 'Backward'" as a more suitable nomenclature. The list of 115 castes submitted included all candidates for the untouchable category as well as a stratum above. "All of the [listed] communities belong to non-Dwijas or degenerate or Sudra classes of the Hindus." They were described as low socially, educationally, and economically and were said to number over 60 percent of the population....

In Madras and elsewhere the term 'Backward Classes' was used to refer to the strata above the untouchables. The Madras Provincial Backward Classes League, consisting of the less forward non-Brahmin communities, was founded in 1934 for the purpose of securing separate treatment from "the forward non-Brahmin communities." According to the list they

presented to the Madras Government in 1944, the Backward Classes comprised more than a hundred communities with about 25 million people (more than two-thirds of the non-Brahmin category and 50 percent of the total population of the presidency). In November 1947, separate reservations in the Madras services were provided for these 'Backward Hindus.'

In the meantime, the Objectives Resolution of the Constituent Assembly, moved by Jawaharlal Nehru on December 13, 1946, had resolved to provide adequate safeguards for "minorities, backward and tribal areas, and depressed and other backward classes".

Thus, the term had never acquired a definite meaning at the all-India level. There had been no attempt to define it or employ it on the national level, and there were no nationwide backward classes organisations or spokesmen. The term had definite meanings in local contexts, although these differed somewhat. After the listing of Scheduled Castes, the usage as a synonym for untouchables drops away. Two major species of usage emerge: (1) as the more inclusive group of all those who need special treatment (2) as a stratum higher than the untouchables but none the less depressed. This double usage continues today: the former in the usage of backward classes in the wide sense (including Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes); the latter in the usage as equivalent to 'Other Backward Classes.' It is with the latter that we are now concerned....

Distribution of Employees by Sex among Indian Corporate Executives

Position	Male	Female	Total
Chairman/President	542	1	543
Managing Director	671	13	684
General Manager	1,261	2	1,263
Director/Ex.Director	633	6	639
Total	3,107	22	3,129

Table showing under-utilisation of OBC seats in engineering and medical faculties

Year	Percentage of utilisation in	
	Engineering	Medical
1978-79	3.5	6.4
1979-80	3.3	3.8
1980-81	4.8	3.0
1981-82	3.7	3.6
1982-83	4.3	4.1
1983-84	4.0	5.2
1984-85	4.0	3.8

From Dynamics of Reservation Policy edited by Haroobhai Mehta, Hasmukh Patel Patriot Publishers, New Delhi 1985, p.p.100 and 537