



Media and Literature

By BS Murthy

Being a land of many languages, India's media is no monolithic phenomenon. Nevertheless, notwithstanding the regional differences, the vernacular media has a uniformity of character. Thus we can broadly categorize the Indian media into the English version and the vernacular variety. The difference between these is more pronounced in the 'space value' of the print media than in the 'airtime quality' of the electronic variant.

Over to the English print media first. The lament of the learned is that sparse is the space for literature in it. And their nostalgia is for the media that propped up fiction through its columns in the golden era of the novel in Europe. After all, weren't the classics of yore dawned on the world as the serials in newspapers there? The lament continues and the nostalgia persists as the Indian media fails to address the concerns of the connoisseurs. It's not as though it had turned its back on literature as such but has come to be hand in glove with the mainstream publishers to publicize the stuff they want promoted. And what it is like? Well if the writer were to be famous, never mind his notoriety, or established, don't worry about the quality, then the publishers sign up without a second thought. And why not it is so? Wouldn't some hype ensure initial sales? The eulogy-interview-review regimen in the media sets the tone for the book release. Thus willy-nilly the media helps the commercial publishing coup de grace by hyping the author as a new literary avatar. Of course, all this, more often than not, tends to favour the dubious writer than to highlight a deserving book. After all, it's one thing to glamourize the author of questionable quality and another to evaluate the literary worth of a writer's work. Well, the media hype might help buttress the publishers' bottom lines but critiquing genuine works only would serve the cause of literature. While the publishers shun the genuine literature for the lack of guts, the author-published books get a short shrift from the media for want of space.

But for wasting the precious media space on many a penny work, the hype wouldn't help, for after all the discerning readers would have seen through the game any way. True, in the short run, the hype turns the novice into a literary celebrity before anyone had shown any inclination to read his work! But being the talk of the town for a while, most of these books collect dust in the bookstores before they become fodder to the shredding machines in time. Well the newspapers/magazines that hyped them too would be no more than waste paper by the month end, in time to turn pulp in the paper mills. What an irony of hollowness of both! What is more, being a victim of its own propaganda, the media periodically props up the image of those that it helped create in the first place! It is thus the media space is made to supplant the reader base that made the authors of yore the leading lights of literature. That being the case, where is the space for the emerging talent to get sighted when all attention is bestowed on those that it has established in the first place. That the media only covers the activities of the celebrity authors but seldom discusses about the sum and substance of their works might sound absurd. Well there is a method in this madness for the hype was built around the authors' persona and not over the content of his books. Won't all this prove Shakespeare right? He did aver that reputation is a most idle and false imposition often got without merit and lost without deserving!

However, this sad state of affairs could be redressed, while yet catering to the modern media's penchant for the trivia. It's a pity though that the media managers seem not to apply their minds to the malaise that afflicts them. And it boils down to managing the media space for profit with a corner still left for literary promotion. But for the naïve, none would fault the media for the red carpet it spreads for advertising. Why, it is the advertising revenue that enables the media houses to get their dailies delivered at the doorsteps of the readers. What about the rest of the vast space in the print and round the clock airtime on the cable networks? Can't a literary niche be created in them both without hurt to the rest of what goes on for the news? Any SWOT analysis would underline the need for the media to nourish quality literature.

When the world was not a global village, the news was not thick and fast, and that afforded literature to get its due. Well, the times have changed, just not for the media alone! On the flip side, it may be said that the 'writing of the day' too is not the 'literature of the past'. Be that as it may, the media needs to help nourish quality writing in its columns for its own well-being in the long run. How else the language skills of the future media personnel would have got honed than by going through the language grill of the current newspaper columns? And if the media mangers-of-the-day fail to keep an eye on the literary quality of the writing in their columns, then tomorrow's dispatches from their correspondents would bear e-mail mark. And that would be that, but how to avert that!

All said and done, it needs to be borne in mind that bringing out newspapers is a rush job. After all, they have to reach millions of homes far and wide well before the subscribers stir out of their beds. Thus, the time available at the editorial desks to process the gathered news leaves no time to make literary drafts out of it all. It is this constraint that all the more calls for the development of language skills in the reporters and the journalists alike. And that would be possible only when the books the would-be newsmen take to have a literary quality of their own. And that in turn depends on promoting books of literary quality in the media for a beneficial reader orientation. Shouldn't one find adequate media space for that?

One only needs to scan the newspapers of the day to note that much of the precious space is mindlessly wasted. Understandably, politics, business and sports besides crime, cinema and trivia take the bulk of the media space for these are the topics that make the average readers buy newspapers in the main. And in what could be seen as tokenism, some, if not all, newspapers concede moderate space for literary subjects; mainly in the form of book reviews that is whatever is left after hyping the selected works. Nonetheless, the space for the 'news that sells' itself could be better structured so as to make enormous room for

the less glamorous literary cause. It is not unusual that the news on one page figures on another, wasting the precious media space, and if only properly drafted and edited, the space so saved could be used to accommodate literature and its poor cousins of fine arts. If and when that happens there would be media space enough for the promotion of literature and arts as well.

Besides, road accidents, murders, rapes, dowry deaths, and such mishaps are accorded the status of dispatches with headlines, and all that occupy so many columns. If all of them were grouped together under the relevant headings, the space so released would be no mean a space. Another wasteful practice with the English media is its penchant for the 'carpet coverage' of the cricket news. What the special correspondent elaborates in the main story is as well carried in the guest column of an eminent past master of the game. It is a different story with other sports though. Well, it seems we have come to have media haves and media have-nots. Same is the case with the trivia that is given so much space in today's media along with cinema. The way trivia is highlighted makes one suspect that the media is starved of newsworthy material. However, if all the trivia could be clubbed in a corner, wouldn't that suffice to satiate the appetite of the curious? Besides, that would save the bother for the interested readers to scan through the entire paper and miss some of it some time. Thus, if imaginatively structured, half a page or more a day could be made available for literature and the fine arts in all English dailies.

This is about space creation and what about its utilization? If that extra space goes to hype the favoured or fancied writer as the case may be, it won't make a value addition to literary columns. Book reviews are meant to be windows of literature for the potential readers to peep at the book world. But are they as positioned in today's media, be it newspapers or magazines? What one would like to know is about the 'new arrivals' and what they 'are about' so as to find out which of them are likely to interest one, for which one would like to be briefed about as many books as possible in the media. Here too the media fails the book-reading public. The books that are taken up for reviews are the same that are hyped throughout though it's another thing that what gets hyped gets rubbished as well in the same media! The media mindset being such, no book, whatever its worth would never get reviewed so long as the publishers wouldn't throw their weight behind the same. And the books that get reviewed in every newspaper and magazine, without exception, are the ones the leading publishers push for. If not, how come all the book review editors in the country unerringly select the very same books for review in their columns? Moreover, it can't be a case of coincidence-in-perpetuity. So the media, instead of bestowing upon the readers the 'variety of many' burdens them with the 'monotony of a few'. Wouldn't that suggest that it is not the editorial selection but the publishers' pull or the celebrity push that's the *raison d'être* of the book reviews?

While the English media chokes the Indian English writing thus, the vernacular media through the weeklies tend to trivialize the *bhasha* produce by providing ready space to it. Thanks to the preponderance of magazines in all regional languages, there is space out there for the *bhaasha* writers to get published. This largesse of the vernacular media naturally lowers the standard of the *bhasha* literatures what with writers in scores having hundreds of short stories to their credit! This magazine space produces poets by their dozens who are incapable of rhyming a couplet even. As a measure of mediocrity of the regional writing these manage to compile anthologies of their poems in a couple or more volumes. On the other hand, those who take to writing in English have to pen full-length fiction as a prelude, as there are no magazine routes to take his or her piecemeal work along. And the only publishing avenue available for these aspiring authors is the commercially governed mainstream publishing. While the budding *bhaasha* writer's short story is not expected to steamroll the magazine sales, the English fiction publishers have their own calculus about the return on the investment on the manuscripts they take up.

But with a right intent the media could play a sterling role in promoting quality literature. If only the extra half-page that was talked about is earmarked for excerpts from the author published books, then the book lovers would have opportunities to make their literary choices. Likewise, instead of parroting the same news 24x7, the cable networks could air the book readings of the budding authors, who would spare no effort to send in the videos of their reading for the screening. Of course the interested could obtain the chosen books from the writers themselves as there would be none to undertake distribution of the unheralded authors. Wouldn't this in time determine the type of books that the public favours forcing the publishers to get onto the right literary track away from the commercial path on which they have been treading for long. So it is left to the media first to arrest the decline and then to help the Indian literature reach the creative heights it is capable of attaining.