

INDIA alliance hasn't boycotted journalism. It has only refused to dance with the jokers.

'Journalism' that has caused riots, lynching, and hatred must be called out. In the next step, name and shame those who write pay checks for these hate-mongers.

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Illustration: Soham Sen/ThePrint

What can I teach Shekhar Gupta, Rajdeep Sardesai, Karan Thapar, and Ruben Banerjee about journalism? Nothing. These are some of the well-respected journalists in the country. Each one has his quota of critics. But even the critics take their journalism seriously. So, when all of them take the same position on something concerning the media industry, I would normally defer to their judgment. But when they invoke larger principles of politics and ethics, I am tempted to examine their claims.

All of them, and many others, opposed the INDIA coalition's announcement to boycott 14 TV anchors. The Indian Express wrote an eloquent editorial, asking the 28-party opposition alliance to "Withdraw the List". Their position merits careful consideration, if only because these are by no means lackeys of the current regime or apologists for these anchors in question. They have cared to offer reasons without endorsing the "journalism" of these 14 anchors. Their opposing stance contrasts with the non-arguments offered by some of the toady journalists, including the cringe-worthy statement issued by the News Broadcasters and Digital Association that compared the opposition's boycott to the Emergency days!

For the time being, the dust has settled on this debate. Many other journalists like Ravish Kumar have offered powerful critiques of this position. For the record, the INDIA coalition has clarified that it is not a permanent boycott but a conditional non-cooperation. It's time to disentangle and examine these arguments, for some of these have long-term implications.

Critics of the boycott have offered three kinds of arguments. First, intrinsic moral argument: there is something inherently wrong in the act of public boycott of select anchors. Second, consequential argument: this may set in motion a chain of actions that would produce more bad than good. And third, strategic argument: this is not the smartest way to deal with the media.

An invalid moral indictment

The essence of the first argument is that a public boycott goes against the spirit of liberalism and democracy that the opposition invokes. The Indian Express comes down heavily on the opposition on this ground: "All its righteous rhetoric about not wanting to legitimise peddling of hate, all its high-minded claims about setting up a window of love in the bazaar of hate, and...restoring the nation's damaged 'secular and democratic' credentials cannot mask the intolerance that lies at this decision's core". Calling it politics of "gag and dog-whistle", the Express castigates the decision that "forecloses the possibilities of dialogue and debate". ThePrint's Shekhar Gupta echoes some of these sentiments.

On close examination, this moral indictment turns out to be a misapplication of freedom of expression arguments. It would be a strange position that a liberal must not boycott or call for boycott of anything: bigotry, hatred, or genocide. Even British philosopher John Stuart Mill, the ultimate defender of free speech, including the right to falsehood and offence, would not have called a voluntary boycott an attack on free speech. There is a difference between sealing one's lips and gagging someone else, between preventing others from speaking and not cooperating with their speech. Also, there is a crucial difference between acts of those who wield coercive power and those who don't. The indictment would hold, if INDIA coalition parties wielded State power to order these anchors to be taken off the air. Or if it had organised attacks on these individuals or their offices. There could be a milder disapproval if the opposition had decided to prevent some journalists from gathering news in their public functions. But that is not the case.

In sum: the opposition is well within its legal, political, and moral right to refuse to join a blatantly partisan circus and dance with the jokers. In fact, it is every citizen's duty not to join hate-mongering. Boycott is a perfectly valid moral response to certain kinds of situations. Let us not forget that Mahatma Gandhi had called for a boycott, exactly in this context, against newspapers that spread communal hatred. A moral act of boycott must be extremely careful about identification of its targets. And it must also be open and transparent.

There is only one real issue here: does the act under consideration merit such a boycott? Or is the reaction disproportionate to the action? In this instance, there is no argument on this count. Let me again quote The Indian Express on these “TV anchors with hateful tongues, on bended knees”: “many on the list practice, or are incentivized to practice, an upside-down journalism which seeks to flatter the government and discredit the opposition, almost by rote...whipping up hate hour by hour.” I suspect Shekhar Gupta may not disagree with this assessment, though he hides behind euphemisms to avoid calling these anchors out. If this assessment is correct, there does not seem to be an intrinsic moral argument against a boycott. Yes, the critics are well within their right to call out attacks or restrictions on media by state governments led by opposition parties. But that does not impinge on this decision.

Against ‘journalism’ that causes riots

The second argument is articulated most forcefully by Shekhar Gupta. As per his reasoning, public naming of a list of journalists is morally wrong, as it can have multiple consequences. One, it can set a bad precedent, with the other side hitting back with its own list, which can set off a chain reaction. Two, it makes those journalists into targets of possible attacks. Three, it polarises the media by reducing the space for dialogue and debate.

The argument about setting a bad precedent is simply false. The BJP had already set a precedent by boycotting an entire channel, NDTV, when it was independent. Until recently, the BJP boycotted all the Tamil news channels. Shekhar Gupta’s advice, “Never knowingly set a bad precedent”, should have been directed elsewhere.

Naming and shaming is a moral weapon that should be used very sparingly and with utmost responsibility. But it cannot be anyone’s case that naming and shaming is wrong in all instances; collective norms are maintained by this practice. Clearly, the bigotry and hate perpetrated by some anchors and channels today fall in that extreme category. This variety of “journalism” has already caused riots, mob lynching, and mutual hatred. These wrong-doers must be called out, in public. In fact, we should be prepared to take the next step: name and shame those who write pay-checks for these hate-mongers.

The anxiety about polarisation is true. But the critique misses a simple point: India’s media is already unipolar. A non-partisan media would be ideal, but a bipolar universe is better than a unipolar world. The idea of a dialogue with Republic TV’s Arnab Goswami may look like a joke today, but this ideal should not be given up. The chances of reaching there are higher via bipolarity than through the present unipolarity.

Boycotting to delegitimise hate

Finally, the strategic critique argued by Karan Thapar. He thinks that it is a blunder to make this list public. A quiet boycott would have been more effective. There are two problems with this position.

One, if this boycott is a moral act – a satyagraha as INDIA insists – there is no room for doublespeak or secrecy here. A moral act should be transparent and offer reasons in public. Two, the whole point of this boycott is to delegitimise these anchors in the eyes of the public. A debate without opposition does offer a signal to the viewer, but a public list and rationale is necessary to complete the message.

Besides, INDIA is not BJP; they need a loud declaration to ensure that their own partners and well-wishers implement the call effectively. We do not know yet if the boycott would reduce the TRP of these shows, but it has already brought public attention to the sordid state of affairs in the news television in India. That's a good start.