
UNIT 4 MEDIA AND HUMAN RIGHTS

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4.0 OBJECTIVES

The equation between the mass media and human rights is essentially symbiotic. By their very existence, human rights ensure the freedom of speech and expression of the media. In turn, it is the responsibility of the media to ensure that everyone in society enjoys the privilege of human rights. After reading this unit, you should be able to:

- define the concept of human rights
- briefly describe the origins of this concept
- enlist the current human rights issues in our country
- outline the general role of the newspapers, radio, television, cinema, video news magazines and documentaries in projecting human rights issues.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

In the previous unit, we read about the media and approach to consumerism. We defined consumerism and studied consumer laws and consumer rights. We discussed the active involvement of the media in guiding consumers to the right purchases. We even studied how the media attempts to resolve consumer problems.

In this unit, we shall discuss the role of the media in reporting human rights issues. We shall also see how the media can make people aware about various schemes and programmes to improve their general living conditions.

The concern over human rights has taken on new dimensions in recent times. People are more aware of their freedoms and rights now than ever before. There is a general will to implement these rights and make them meaningful in daily life.

Human rights have been legally granted to citizens of countries all over the world. They pertain to the right to a decent life, protection from ill-health, and unemployment and many other rights.

When addressing the human rights situation of a country, the media can throw light upon the actions and inactions of the administration. In all likelihood, such exposure will alert everyone involved. This will result in creating a favourable human rights scenario in the country.

We have come to the last unit of this block. In the next block we shall take up the issue of "International Communication".

Activity 1

A student of Indian nationality is refused a seat in a medical college in Karnataka. The reason cited is that she has not been a resident of that state for the stipulated number of years. However, the constitution of India grants an Indian citizen the right to reside in any part of the country.

Now, select three human rights of your choice. Then, give an instance each of similar violation of an individual's rights.

S.No.	The Human Right	Its Violation
1)
2)
3)

4.2 CONCEPT OF HUMAN RIGHTS

The present concept of human rights took shape in the late 18th century. The American Declaration of Independence in the Virginia Bill of Rights of 1776, the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen and the American Bill of Rights were among the first charters of nations to include human rights.

Human Rights may be defined as those privileges which can justifiably be claimed by any person. Everyone is entitled to these rights. Any one can make fair claim to these rights. For instance, there is the right to dignity of living and the right against discrimination on the basis of one's caste, class, creed, colour or nationality. We shall deal with these in detail in another section.

4.3 U.N. DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS

The United Nations, Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted on 10th December, 1948. It is the only official document of its kind, world wide, till date. It proclaims economic, social and cultural rights in addition to political and civil rights and freedoms for the people of the world. These rights are considered the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world.



The preamble to the Declaration quite rightly points out that contempt for human rights has resulted in barbarous acts. These have outraged the conscience of mankind. It further proclaims that the freedom of speech and belief and freedom from fear and want are the highest aspirations of the common people.

The United Nations reaffirmed their faith in the worth of human beings and in the equal rights for men and women, through this declaration. They expressed a determination to promote social progress and better standards of living, for the large majority of the people.

The Declaration states that all are equal before the law and are entitled to equal protection from it. The right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favourable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment are personal rights granted by this declaration. The right of employees to form and join trade unions for the protection of their interests is a freedom they possess as a group. There is special emphasis on the basic provision of the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well being of individuals and their families. It includes access to food, clothing, housing, medical care and necessary social service.

It is important to note that these rights are universally accepted. However, a successful mechanism to enforce them is yet to be developed. This is the reason for the large-scale inequalities among peoples of the world. Even within a country, inequalities on the basis of caste, class, wealth, creed and gender exist. This is quite apparent in India where the structure of the society is based on a rigid caste system.

The United Nations has also adopted two International Covenants (agreements), effective from 1976. These are the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Check Your Progress 1

- Note :** i) Answer the following questions in one or two sentences each.
ii) Compare your answers with those given at the end of this unit.

1) 'Health for all by 2000 A.D.' 'Complete literacy by 2000 A.D.' are oft repeated slogans. Do they reflect any concern for human rights ?

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2) "Dignity of labour" implies that there is a certain respect in performing even a menial task. Work of any kind is neither great nor small. What does the right to equality in dignity imply ?

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3) A prisoner is repeatedly tortured by prison officials to extract some information. Do you consider this as any violation of human rights ? Give reasons for your answer.

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4) Several citizens of a particular community are arrested and kept under detention. The reasons given by the authorities is that these individuals were indulging in anti national activities. This statement, however, is not supported by any proof. In what way are the citizens rights being curtailed ?

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- 5) We have the freedom to follow any religion of our choice. Is this human right classified under cultural rights or civil rights?

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4.4 HUMAN RIGHTS SCENARIO WORLD OVER

The mass influx of Bangladeshi refugees into India, a coercive state machinery in erstwhile USSR preventing its citizens from following any religion, the violent struggle against apartheid in the then South Africa, are just a few examples of the deterioration of the human rights situation in different parts of the world. And such conflict arises out of the dissatisfaction of the people regarding the restrictions on their human rights.



A society's outlook on its human rights is affected by the nature of government, among other things. In a communist country, the media would be owned or controlled by the state. Such a restriction on the media is in reality a tight hold on the freedom of speech and expression. This in turn results in curbing other human rights of citizens. It is only a free media that can campaign for the cause of rights and freedom of the people.

The state may not always be right. The arbitrary use of state power has time and again proved unpopular with the masses. It is entrusted with the responsibility of looking after the needs of the population and protecting their rights. This power may be misused by the administration. Therefore, voluntary agencies sometimes play the part of watchdog over the activities of the government. For their part the media report issues on human rights and examine the state policy and progress in the field of human rights.

Having read the above discussion, you might have assumed that under a liberal form of government, there would be few or no restrictions on the media. In reality, the media prefer to side with those in power, i.e., the administration. It is especially apparent in case of any conflict between the powerful and powerless sections of society, or between any two nations. This is because the media are agents of power. They help to maintain a status quo in society. They back the elite and powerful persons. Take for instance the U.S. bombardment of Iraq. The world's capitalist media never opposed the brutal show of power by America.

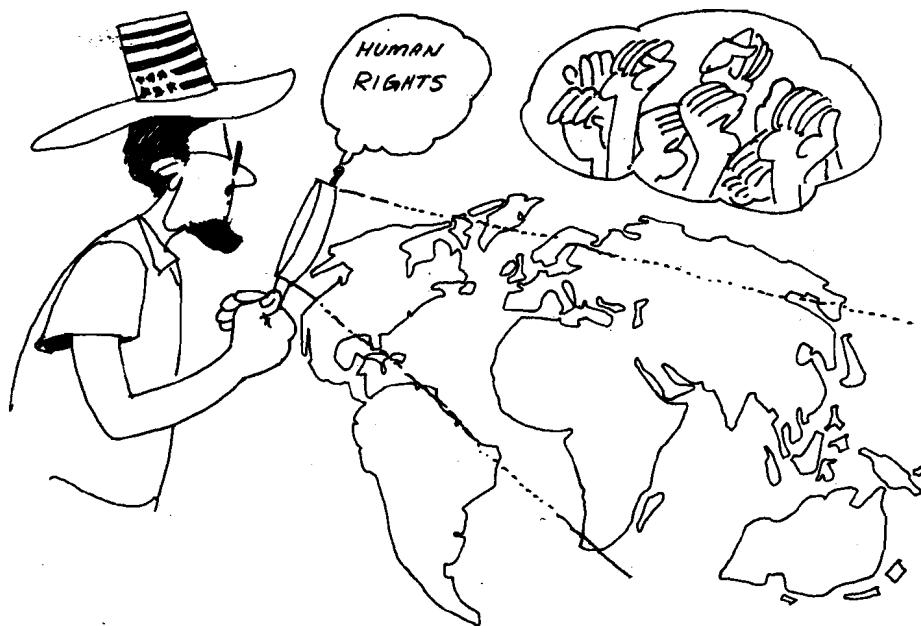


For that matter, the same section of people continue to live in poverty and starvation for generations together. This is possible only because the media have implicitly maintained the status quo. They have not posed any uncomfortable questions to the government, at least at a sustained level. You do not often hear of the media in India campaigning for the rights of people belonging to the scheduled castes and tribes. But you do hear of the media taking a stand on the issue of reservation of jobs for the scheduled castes and tribes. This stand, more often than not, is in favour of the elite castes and classes.

Activity 2

At the time of elections, among the first things that political parties promise their voters are better living conditions and more job opportunities. In effect, they are promising us our human rights. Collect the election manifestos of four major political parties, as released in the last elections. Make a list of all those promises which you think pertain to ensuring of human rights of the citizens.

4.5 HUMAN RIGHTS AND THE INDIAN CONTEXT



The right to a decent standard of living and the right to employment, are just two of the many rights granted by our constitution. Part IV of our constitution grants economic, social and cultural rights to every Indian citizen. However, they are non-justiciable. This means that a violation of these rights cannot be sorted out in any court of law. You will get more information about our fundamental rights from the unit on, Salient Features of the Indian Constitution, Unit 2, Block 5, Course 2.

It is to the credit of successive governments, at the centre and in the states, that elections have been duly held. Our fundamental rights have been suspended on one occasion only, i.e. during the Emergency of 1975-76. And, presently, the Prasar Bharati Bill is being finalised so as to make All India Radio and Doordarshan autonomous bodies. All these instances are proof of a working democratic set up, which favours the actual practice of human rights. It is hoped that freeing the media from government hold will help to create the right atmosphere for checking any violation of human rights.

Now and then, the government attempts to control the press. But all attempts by the party in power to muzzle the media have been negated.

There are various agencies to monitor the human rights situation in different ways. The government is answerable to the state legislatures and the Parliament. The presence of opposition parties is crucial to any healthy democracy. The opposition remains watchful and, when necessary, pulls up the government for its misdeeds or for the lack of initiative. Human rights organizations and institutions working in this area, ensure that all sections of society get their due rights. None is first among equals before the law. The mass media, coupled with these agencies and organizations, can ensure the implementation of the human rights enshrined in our constitution. The mass media can generate a strong public opinion about human rights issues. They can support the people and institutions working in this area. They can very well provide a strong network of communications to help propagate an informed opinion about human rights. The media can at once be mediator and leader, of the people by championing the cause of human rights. However, they must take precautionary steps in order not to be misled by some vested interests.

The role of the mass media in improving the human rights situation of a country shall be discussed in greater detail in the next section.

Check Your Progress 2

- Note :** i) Answer the following questions in two sentences each.
ii) Compare your answers with those at the end of this unit.

1) The story of a family of bonded labourers, working in a stone quarry, appears in the local newspaper and local news bulletins on radio and television. What is the significance of this news item ?

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2) Advertisements of government institutions announce a 'Special Drive for Recruitment of SCs/STs'. In your opinion, why has such a drive to be put into action ? What does this convey to a reader ?

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3) The news that even a man of non-Brahmin origin is eligible to become a temple priest, creates an uproar among the elite. Can you identify the reason for

the uproar ? Whose human right, according to you, was being violated—the Brahmin temple priest or the newly appointed non- Brahmin priest ?

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Activity 3

There are millions of people in our country who suffer from malnutrition and starvation. Although there are government schemes to provide better living conditions to the poor, women, unemployed youth and others, such funds simply do not reach them. Scan the newspapers of a week for information of such schemes and plans. Then, make list (at least 10) of these in the table below. The first one is filled in to help you along.

S.No.	Scheme/Plan	Year of launching
1)	The tendu leaf policy for the benefit of tribals	1989
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4.6 THE ROLE OF THE MASS MEDIA

In order to perform their role effectively, the media personnel need to be fully conversant with the various aspects of human rights issues. They should arm themselves with the necessary information and then present the facts and analyses before the public. All this will have to be done at a sustained level. It is never possible to bring about favourable changes with just one stroke of the pen, or an infrequent programme or two. The poor would continue to live in conditions of insufficient food, clothing and shelter and the rich would maintain a luxurious life style, even after this information were conveyed to them. Instead, what could be hoped for, is to make every citizen aware and conscious of their rights and to enable them to recognize a violation of human rights, when they come across such events in daily life. The news media can then bring about and maintain a healthy Human Rights Movement.

Traditional folk media like Tamasha and Burakatha, which communicate with their audiences at a more personal level, can inform and influence them. For this, the communicators themselves must be knowledgeable about human rights issues. They can narrate instances of violation of human rights and relate them to the daily lives of the masses.

Activity 4

Amnesty International (AI) is a world wide organization that monitors the human rights situation in different countries. A delegation representing AI visited the troubled state of Jammu and Kashmir, not so long ago. Their version of events differs much from the official stand on the subject of gross violation of human rights by Indian troops deployed there. Now, select three articles on the Kashmir problem from any three different newspapers or magazines. Read them and then tabulate your observations in the table below.

Article Headline	Pro-Indian Government stand	Pro-Kashmir People stand	Pro-Pakistan Government stand	Pro-Terrorist stand (Whichever faction)	Any other stand

4.6.1 The Electronic Media

The electronic media transcend the barriers of literacy and enjoy a widespread reach. However, these plus points are not taken advantage of, to the full extent possible. Government ownership and lopsided programming are their major drawbacks. Firstly, informative programmes need to be based on healthy debates and discussions and not on propaganda and image-building exercises of leaders, as is usually the case. Secondly, only sensitive personnel can put across a point clearly and in a wholesome perspective. Such sensitivity cannot be found in people who equate a career in communication to a mere 'job'. It needs more than a mechanical approach to sensitize the public to the egalitarian goals of equality, freedom and justice.

It is not in the fitness of things to project an image that "all is well with the world", when there are serious violations of human rights in different walks of life. The electronic media have the potential to act as information disseminators. To fulfil this role, they have to provide complete information to the audience. The piecemeal treatment of issues causes both confusion and harm. Neither is an informed public opinion generated by taking this approach.

In general, there is inadequate coverage of human rights issues and problems. These could be anything from deprivation to gender inequality; from the health hazards caused by environmental pollution to malfunctioning of the electoral process.

An occasional programme by a producer may expose the abuses of the electoral system or any other area. But such stories receive rare mention in the daily news bulletins. One cannot wish away problems of such magnitude as those pertaining to the neglect of human rights, by simply ignoring their presence.

4.6.2 The Print Media

Quite naturally, the print media have literate audiences. Big industrial houses have a monopoly over ownership of the press. This fact determines the nature of relations between the press and the government. Newspapers openly take sides for or against the policies of the government. For instance, the 'Indian Express' has a penchant for writing against the government in power.

The nexus between the print media and the government is strengthened by a sort of 'give and take' policy. The press receives government patronage in terms of supply of newsprint and advertisements in return for favourable write-ups about the government. In such a situation, violations of human rights by the state are unlikely to surface. The same is the case if the rights of workers in the press industry itself were to be violated.

Personal rapport with the government is limited to senior journalists. It does not extend to junior journalists at the grassroots level. In one such case, Gulam Rasool, a field reporter, was gunned down in a false encounter with the Andhra Pradesh police, while investigating the issue of corrupt land-dealings. He was apparently posing uncomfortable questions to those involved. This was reason enough for the authorities to "liquidate" him.

The regional language press obtains scarce attention in competition with major national dailies. Few individuals attempt to start a newspaper or magazine at a local level, because of the large amounts of investment and the technology involved. Consequently, the first casualties are the freedom of the press and the standard of journalism.

To its credit, investigative journalism has probed human rights issues like the working conditions provided to child labourers, the torture behind prison bars and illegal "encounter" deaths.

4.6.3 The Film Medium

Socially relevant and purposeful issues enrich the cinematic value of any film. Themes like the caste system, subjugation of women, rural poverty and the feudal system, all of which are concerned with the area of human rights, have been dealt with time and again. Let us trace some landmarks in Indian Cinema which have sought to solve the problems prevailing in society.

"Chandidas" (1932) by Debaki Bose under the banner of the New Theaters and "Acchyut Kanya" (1936) by the Bombay Talkies carried a crusade against untouchability. The film "Sawakari Pash" (The Indian Shylock or the trappings of a money-lender) made in 1925 by Baburao Painter of the Maharashtra Film Company, was a shocking exposure of the exploitation of the poor peasants by unscrupulous money lenders. 'Jiban Maran' (1939) also from the New Theatres, dwelt on the social rehabilitation of the patients of tuberculosis, considered an infectious and deadly disease in the thirties. The Prabhat Film Company made a number of socially purposeful films like "Duniya Na Mane" (1937) which voiced a strong protest against the marriage of young girls to old men. The film "Padosi" (1938) by V. Shantaram idealised Hindu Muslim brotherhood even in the days of mounting communal tension. "Dharti Ke Lal" (K.A. Abbas) and "Neecha Nagar" (Chetan Anand) in the late Forties struck a note of idealistic social consciousness. In fact, "Neecha Nagar" earned international acclaim and is probably the first film to bring to focus the problems of environmental pollution. The Fifties marked the origin of socially relevant films in rural setting like "Do Bigha Zameen" (Bimal Roy) and "Mother India" (Mehboob Khan). The Fifties also saw the emergence of Satyajit Ray, Ritwik Ghatak and Mrinal Sen. With the making of "Pather Panchali" (1955), the Indian film scene underwent a qualitative change.

But it was only after "Bhuban Shome" (1969) by Mrinal Sen that a New Wave or Parallel Cinema Movement, gathered momentum. Such realistic films as Basu Chatterjee's "Sara Akaash" (1979), Moni Kaul's "Uski Roti" (1969), Kumar Sahani's "Maya Darpan" (1972), Avtar Kaul's "27 Down" (1973), Girish Karnad's "Kadu" (the

forest, 1973) and M.S Sathyu's "Garam Hawa" (1973), were made on shoe-string budgets. A more traditional path was followed by Shyam Benegal whose films (Ankur, 1974, Nishant, 1975, Manthan, 1976) have been relatively realistic in form and deeply committed to socio-political themes.

By the Eighties, a new generation of film makers was setting a new trend. They began to use the medium to focus attention on grave socio-economic issues and raised questions against social injustice and atrocities, with passion and compassion. They have been described as "film activists", who treat cinema as a pulpit. The trend started with Anand Patwardhan, Tapan Bose and Suhashini Mulay (of Bhuban Shome fame). Patwardhan's "Hamara Sahar," a telling social commentary on the life in the slums of Bombay, offered a refreshing contrast to many commercial films dealing with the same theme. At great risk to his life and equipment, Tapan Bose made a shocking exposure about the Bhagalpur scandal—the blinding of prisoners by the police authorities. Bose also produced an outstanding film, "Beyond genocide", on the Bhopal gas tragedy and its aftermath. The "Voice of Baliapal" by Vasudha Joshi and Ranjan Palit articulated the mute expression and protests of evicted villagers in an Orissa village.

The film medium has the potential to portray the ills which all society, frequently in the narrative format. This is how films serve the cause of human rights and ensure their just implementation in society.

Check Your Progress 3

Note : i) Answer the following questions in two or three sentences.

ii) Compare your answers with those given at the end of this unit.

- 1) Recall the last film you saw. Did it question any kind of irregularity between people? List five kinds of inequalities existing in our society, which were portrayed on the big screen.

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- 2) What determines whether or not the mass media shall address human rights issues in their proper and wholesome perspective? Compare an Indian Newsreel documentary with one produced by a private agency.

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- 3) List three ways in which the media can improve our human rights situation.

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4.7 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we have studied the concept of human rights and seen their importance in the daily lives of the masses.

There are several agencies and groups, like the "Civil Liberties Group", which work in the area of human rights. They act as watchdogs of the government in its efforts to implement human rights and to improve the quality of life of the people. They seek to keep in check any kind of violation of human rights.

The electronic media are not particularly inclined to investigate human rights problems. This may be attributed to their being owned by the government.

Many films have been made on the theme of violation of human rights. They have portrayed sensitive issues in a symbolic, narrative or other format.

The media help to fulfil the need for nurturing an informed public opinion. They are indispensable for the correct implementation of human rights.

4.8 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS : MODEL ANSWERS

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) They are related to the basic human rights of all citizens. Here, specific reference is being made to social and cultural rights: the rights to health and education.
- 2) The human right which grants equality in dignity implies that all citizens have an equal right to a decent and dignified standard of living.
- 3) There definitely is a violation of the citizen's right to prohibition of torture. Everyone has the right to keep information secret so long as harm is not caused in not revealing this information.
- 4) The arrest and detention of these citizens amounts to arbitrary and illegal, police action. Adequate proof must be given to validate the police action. It has not been done here.
- 5) It is a civil right. The Right to Freedom of Thought, Conscience and Religion appears in the Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) It is very much a human rights issue, Slavery is illegal. The 'bonded' labourers are slaving away because they are unaware of their right to liberty. They are under the impression that their work will pay off the "loans" supposedly taken by their ancestors from the quarry owner.
- 2) One can gather that in token recognition of the oppression of SCs and STs for centuries by the so-called higher castes, the government is now making a nominal concession to these sections of the populace. Their human right to equality is being given a much needed fillip by the government. The authorities are trying to make amends for the injustice meted to the SCs and STs.
- 3) The traditional concept of the superiority of Brahmins has been shattered. For thousands of years, Dalits were not allowed to even enter the precincts of a temple. This sudden legal sanction, permitting a non-Brahmin to chant prayers before the deity is by way of implementing the "right to equality". Earlier, the non-Brahmin priest was never granted this particular right. Dalits were categorised as non-persons.

Check Your Progress 3

- 1) Discrimination on the basis of Caste and Class, Creed, Wealth, Education and Gender exist in Indian society.
- 2) The ownership of the media. If the medium is under the government, then atrocities committed by the state receive scant mention. Private ownership is a little better but, if an intimate relationship exists between the privately owned media and the government, then it is likely that a slanted view of the human rights situation will be presented.
- 3) The media can improve the present rights situation in certain ways.
 - i) Fearless, free and fair presentation of human rights topics be they political, economic or social in nature.
 - ii) Sustained reporting of issues and problems on the human rights front.
 - iii) Working in tandem with human rights organizations and groups in the area of human rights.