

What ails media?



Comments 2



Rajiv Roy 8 April 2014 27010 views

The first “victim” of Majithia Wage Board is here. The closure of a vernacular daily, simultaneously published from Guwahati and Shillong, is a clear indication of the “survival of the fittest” in today’s competitive era. The closure of the daily on April 1st went viral all over the country in the public domain as its jobless employees with their mouths tied-up with black scarf at Guwahati Press Club in protest against the decision of the management and flashing of their photographs is the sordid tale of a loss making entity – reasoned by its management. But what is comparatively relieving is that the management has compensated the affected employees with two months emoluments, although the demand was for more months, which was otherwise not provided by the Sarada Group to its employees when the group’s vernacular daily *Sakalbela* and English daily *Seven Sisters’ Post* were closed down following its collapse. But allegations by the affected employees remains unanswered in the recent case that less than a week time was given to close down this vernacular daily and the employees to look for alternative avenues.

However, the moot reason behind this saga is the recent verdict pronounced by the Supreme Court of India regarding implementation of Majithia Wage Board in print media houses, which is giving sleepless nights to their managements. The implementation of wage board will render many more jobless in days and months to come since a majority of the media houses in the state and region are not in any position to shelve out three times salaries that their employees are bagging now. Therefore the smaller players, will face the heat more than the affluent ones. But the going is not that easy. While discussing the wage board and its after-effects on print media houses this author was told by a media house baron from the region that despite the flow of advertisements it would be a huge task to maintain business. The owner also said that sustainability will be crucial while hinting employee strength has to be bare minimum. So, all those who have recently joined or those who are not enjoying any pay-scale benefits might face the axe though the regular permanent ones too may not take things for granted, is the warning coming forward.

There are few print media organizations in this region which are generating good revenues without much effort because they enjoy the advantage of starting first. There aren't any sound competitors who can challenge their existence and so their managements do not worry much because of the "monopoly". But this vision has changed immediately after the Supreme Court of India verdict as they now see that even this monopoly may not be of much help in the long run with the future costs involved. Having said this does not mean in any way that the journalists and non-journalists should not get their rightful dues. The scene is such that managements who were unwilling to pay their employees well are today literally forced to do so.

The recent closure episode also raises certain pertinent questions. It is a known fact that media houses in the northeast region are not good paymasters. That is the reason why a scribe is seen reporting for a number of dailies at a time. Well if you pay peanuts then it will fetch hoppers. The meagre stipends cannot maintain exclusivity as scribes are forced to hunt multiple dailies to maintain their livelihood. They keep changing from one organization to another and stops where the buck is comparatively better. Such hopping from one organization to another, as seen here, is otherwise not seen in the national print media houses, as this author have come to know in his interaction with many. A South India based journalist working in a local daily there said that the local dailies operating in that region pay their workforce handsomely according to the present day industry standards.

Lack of good pay is also preventing media graduates taking up media jobs in Meghalaya and region. Non-media graduates join for a certain period of time and shifts immediately when they get better opportunities elsewhere. The “inability” or “reluctance” of the management to pay well is also contributing to this mess whereas journalism is affecting dearly on the other hand. The mediocre journalism here cannot be uplifted with peanuts and “housewife bosses” creating “domestic extensions”. This is the reason why we don’t get to see any sting operations or investigative journalism. But the scene is not that hopeless as there are media houses in the region, which pay their employees well and according to the wage board but then their number is, as the Americans say, “skin of a peanut”. Their professional way of functioning sets precedence for their counterparts to imbibe. Though good pay is a prerequisite for any organization to survive with the right set of people, it is also imperative that the management have a professional role only in the functioning of the organization. In this context, one can see how South India based Malayala Manorama – the largest media house in the country – is functioning. Given its size and might, if one follows the way this organization has reached the pinnacle is because the management had always maintained minimum professional say in the functioning of the organization.

On the impact of the wage board, it is speculated that it will have a collateral damage on the capacity of the media houses to pay their employees here. They fear that their incapacity to pay their employees as per the recommendation of the board will drive them out of business. As a result there will be very few competitors and monopoly will take over. The vernacular daily in question has cited reasons for the closure as “due to reasons beyond its control”. Well what is intriguing is that the daily was started not for money-making venture but as a social service for its targeted readers whereas the reason put forth according to various media reports is that the management showing acute financial crisis, while calling for social media audit by media employees’ federation in Assam. So, rhetoric like not-for-money-making actually goes well with NGOs and not a vibrant organization like media. Just going by the etymological meaning of the term can be really dangerous and like “taking the words of politicians at face value”. There are also discussions that the Supreme Court of India verdict will serve as a deterrent to the ploys adopted by printed media houses to run various offshoots out of the parent edition to deceive tax authorities. This, they say, will now stop for good since poor employees are often at the receiving end in closure cases such as the present one.

What is rather alarming is that there has been not a word of condemnation from the media fraternity, their associations and bodies that are in existence for their welfare here in Meghalaya. Is it because the media house in question is a Bengali daily or are their stoic silence is an indication that they have started looking at a media entity by their vernacularism? Not condemning a serious issue where many rendered jobless is indeed condemnable and perhaps it is time that the media fraternity from Meghalaya take a lesson or two from their Assam counterpart where they don't react on the basis of the language of a daily but truly on the basis of it collectively being the fourth pillar of democracy. Will the media fraternity here have resorted to the same silence had the affected daily been English, Khasi, Garo or other regional languages in the northeast? When crime journalist Jyotirmoy Dey was murdered in broad daylight in Mumbai few years back from now the brutal killing was equally condemned here in Shillong whereas a local vernacular daily closed down its shop and there is not even a murmur. Well, certainly as an educationist after hearing the news of the closure of this daily here said that she has never heard about "silent journalism" in media. Media critics point out that the media fraternity and associations / bodies should have sent the right signal by raising their concern on this issue if not for the affected employees rather for themselves – who too are associated with some media houses – because there is no guarantee that this will not befall upon them in the near future with the unfolding of events now. This, they say, will also send a strong signal to the unilateral decisions taken by management towards closure of dailies.

However, is there a way out despite the Supreme Court verdict? Well media analysts are of the opinion that a union government constituted wage board for privately owned print media houses sounds anachronistic and it could also be an attempt to muzzle the press that often hits headlines. It would be no surprise if another daily tomorrow meets the same fate because given the plethora of competitors in this region it is going to be as I have said “survival of the fittest”.

Rajiv Roy

Shillong

BY RAJIV ROY

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