

Canadian media's insensitivity towards visible minorities

Ron Banerjee

Journalistic ethics and media integrity is a critical component of democratic society. In a multicultural nation like Canada, mainstream media outlets must ensure that their coverage of events is fair and even handed, especially when dealing with issues related to visible minorities. This does not mean that valid issues, such as security and terrorism, should be swept under the carpet for fear of offending or demonizing specific groups. Rather, media has an obligation to strike the correct balance between presenting the truth and promoting fairness.

In general, the Western media has focused on the poverty and negative aspects of India and its people while ignoring the country's great accomplishments. In Canada, the mainstream media has frequently demonstrated offensive insensitivity towards visible minorities. The National Post is one mainstream newspaper that recently broke this negative trend with its series on India (May 6th-20th, 2005) which highlighted the country's emergence as an economic and technological superpower.

Unfortunately, not all mainstream media in Canada have embraced this positive stance. In 2003, the Toronto Star published a shockingly inappropriate naked picture of Hindu Goddess Durga, which outraged the Canadian Hindu community. This led to massive protest marches in front of the headquarters of the Star. After weeks of obstinacy, the Star published an obscure half-hearted apology. Again on May 21 of 2005, the Toronto Star displayed poor judgment and outraged the Hindu community: a Toronto obstetrician named Dr Vaidyanathan had his picture published on the front page of the Toronto Star with the title 'Dangerous Medicine'. The long article repeated patient allegations of shoddy treatment, and yet did not once mention Dr Vaidyanathan's side of the story. Further, it failed to highlight the point that the doctor's case is still under review by the College of Physicians and Surgeons and that a ruling has not yet been issued. The publication of such a one-sided story on the front page of the Star could easily influence the outcome of the review, thus constituting 'trial by media'. Statistics are available which show the rate of complications for surgeons in similar specialties at the same hospital; responsible and credible journalism would have entailed the publication of such figures for comparison. It seems that in this instance, the mainstream media was more interested in publicly crucifying a minority professional than in providing credible and factual information.

A group of concerned citizens have launched an online petition and are demanding that the Star publish a more balanced article regarding the subject. Further, numerous letters of protest have been sent to the newspaper by many Hindus across the GTA.

Media outlets also have a responsibility to promote positive values in society. The Hindu community is peaceful and democratic in nature; as a result, Canadian media has often taken this community for granted and has taken liberties with Hindus that they would not dare with other communities. The mere rumor of Koranic desecration sparked violent global riots by Muslims; as a result, the Western press is very careful not to offend Islam. Should we conclude that the

peaceful and tolerant nature of Hinduism makes the community an easy target?

Alarming, other Canadian organizations appear to be following the media's lead and often resort to callous insensitivity to Hindus. This is not surprising: the general public form impressions based on powerful media images. Recently, the AIDS Committee of Toronto organized the Fashion Cares show, and used various models to depict Hindu deities. Bizarre pornographic images were used in the show, and near-naked transsexual 'drag queens' paraded about, mocking Hindu culture with impunity. The outraged Hindu community has protested in unison, and several temples are planning protest marches.

Responsible media is one of the foundations of stable democratic society, and ethnic communities should attempt to recognize and differentiate between good journalism and cheap sensationalism aimed at perpetuating false stereotypes. Biased media coverage influences society's views and poisons relations between communities.

[Ron Banerjee is a graduate of Dalhousie University in Canada, and has been employed as a telecommunications consultant for Fortune 500 companies. As a co-founder and Director of the non-profit Hindu Conference of Canada (www.hccanada.com), his mandate is to engage political leadership and media publications to foster a positive image of Hindu interests and correct misperceptions about Hinduism. He can be contacted at info@hccanada.com.