

Media and Co-operatives: Some Issues

Sanjay Kumar Verma Jr

Image building has become the top most priority of the co-operative sector these days. This strategic shift in the focus is indeed a welcome indicator as far as the growth and internal dynamics of the co-operative sector is concerned. Media is one of the important tools for image building. The co-operative sector is fast realising that it must cultivate strong ties with the media. Accordingly, media issues in co-operatives have become quite significant and are a subject of rich and stimulating debate. The co-operative sector wants media to project a strong image of the sector. On the other hand, it is expected that the co-operative sector should have a professional orientation in approaching the media for coverage of its activities. Between these varying poles are the questions that throw up pertinent issues of debate.

The co-operative sector generally feels that the media takes a negative view of the sector and the cases of corruptions, scams, mismanagement, etc are blown out of proportion. It is seen that only the success stories concerning big co-operative institutions like IFFCO, KRIBHCO, Amul, etc are highlighted despite the fact that the co-operative sector has numerous success stories at micro level which hardly find national coverage. Besides, the co-operative sector feels that the general co-operative coverage in newspapers is marginal as compared to the developments in other sectors. Expressing opinion with regards to the negative view of the co-operative sector as highlighted by the press, B P Sanjay, Director, Indian Institution of Mass Communication feels that if there are inherent aberrations or irregularities these can not be masked off because after all the co-operative movement is a people's movement. O P Verma, Delhi Bureau Chief, *Deccan Herald*, endorses this view,

Co-operatives have become political oriented these days.

Incidents of scam occur because though co-operatives are people's movement people are not involved at all.

Sandeep Bamzai, Business Editor, *Hindustan Times* in the case of Madhavpura Co-operative Bank scam feels,

If a bank is failure, it will be highlighted by the media. Why co-operative banks? Even banks not related to the co-operative sector like Standard City Bank and Bank of Karad have been highlighted by the media if these are failures.

When drawing attention to the fact that despite the failures, the media should highlight such stories in a constructive manner, Bamzai makes a point,

Re-engineering efforts in the case of other banks were highlighted by the media, but this did not happen in the case of Madhavpura Co-operative Bank. Lack of institutionalisation is prevalent in the co-operative sector in this regard.

Regarding low coverage of co-operatives, Bamzai feels space is the constraint in mainstream newspapers as they do not have space for rural areas, K S S Murthy, Delhi Bureau Chief, *The Week* feels,

In newspapers there is demand of spot news which takes a bulk of media coverage.

In fact when one considers that agriculture is the way of life in rural areas with more than 68 per cent of population dependent on agriculture, negligible media coverage of the rural sector in both the national and regional media is incomprehensible. It is generally felt that the media highlights the stories of co-operatives that have political overtones. A glance at the news items in the mainstream press clearly indicates this phenomenon. Alam Srinivas, Business Editor, *The Outlook* has a point,

Media by its nature covers issues where there is conflict or confrontation or clash of interests.

This implies that the other issues may be neglected. In fact development itself is insignificantly highlighted in the media. However at a time when media is becoming highly commercial, the social issues cannot become the focal point

of media attention. The consumerist aspect of media, which is a stark reality, cannot be brushed aside. Alam Srinivas points to the fact that mainstream media is writing for the middle class which consumes products of the private multi media companies. The co-operatives it is well known have their wider reach in the rural areas only. According to Bamzai, the co-operatives should go in for consumer products. In this regard it is well known that Amul brands have their strong reach within the consumers. Is this not the reason why Amul's stories are regularly covered in the mainstream newspapers? But one must say that Amul is not a representative of the entire sector. Projection of success stories concerning co-operatives in the media may be a powerful medium of co-operative advocacy. This may not be an anachronism as media's obsession with successful stories or celebrities is well known and the success stories capturing the dynamism of co-operative institutions and persons involved with it can be really appealing. But is this a reality? Alam Srinivas in this regard opines that the media can highlight those stories which show signs of graduating from local to national level. He feels that the success should be in the form of a movement acquiring national dimensions. When his attention is drawn towards the success stories of Warana Bazar or Sewa which may have been utilised by the media for extensive coverage, Srinivas feels that these movements are localised. He however argues that magazines like *The Week* highlights the efforts of groups or individuals in the field of development. K S S Murthy points out that *The Week* Men of Year awards have featured co-operatives, though in this case many other newspapers and magazines follow this trend though in an insignificant manner.

Whatever may be the constraints, media needs to be approached in a professional manner for better projection of the co-operative sector. After all in this era of cut-throat competition amongst the various sectors of development to attract media attention, if the media strategies are properly conceived, developed and implemented taking into account every situation, then the situation can be favourable for the co-operative sector. O P Verma says,

The media interaction should be more and there should be interactive programmes and workshops organised from

time to time.

P N Vasanthi says,

Ways have to be thought over so that low interaction with the media can be effectively tackled.

"The co-operative sector should know how, media operates", says O P Verma. Alam Srinivas points out that formal and informal links have to be established with the media. He says that the co-operative sector does not have media strategies and it should understand media psychology in this regard. He cites the example of NGOs who have established good links with the media and they know how to disseminate their information through various tools of publicity and the co-operative sector should take a leaf from the pages of NGOs. In this instance, he cites the example of effective publicity campaign of NDDDB and its newsletter which has not only established a good reputation but also set an example for others. Srinivas suggests that NDDDB should take initiative by forming a group to strengthen the publicity plank of the co-operatives in general. B P Sanjay feels that co-operatives should initiate a unified campaign strategy when they feel that they are getting adverse publicity and in this respect financially strong co-operatives should take the lead. He talks about the need for co-operatives coming together for image building, holding of conferences and seminars on a regular basis, visualisation of ways to facilitate easy information to media persons, etc.

P N Vasanthi says that some of the leading newspapers, magazines have their focus on specialised products like fertilisers. She points out

The co-operative organisations should project their activities and achievements in these magazines and newspapers by working out a common strategy.

K S S Murthy says

Co-operatives do not give importance to communication and the media relations are unsatisfactory.

Meanwhile, the co-operative sector itself should explore all options to strengthen its own internal media plank and devise strong policy parameters. B P Sanjay says,

If your constituency is rural and there is traditional media which can religiously incorporate all messages then any other form of media will not have acceptance.

No doubt co-operatives should utilise their strengths in the rural areas by understanding the worth of traditional media as an important medium of communication in rural areas. Puppetry, folk theatre, folk music and street plays strike an instant chord with the psyche of the rural people. However, B P Sanjay cautions in this regard,

We can not romanticise about traditional media. We have to make assessment of traditional media practices and evaluate strengths and weaknesses of each.

P N Vasanthi says

Traditional media can be used to project a positive image of the sector. Rural or traditional media can not counter the negative image of the sector which the co-operative sector feels has been propounded by the mainstream media due to negative stories.

She says that rural media and mass media do not merge because mass media is business oriented. "You have to create strong media policies at the centre and local levels", she feels.

Co-operative journals if brought out in a professional manner can not only emerge as a strong communication plank for projecting the vibrancy of the sector, but also establish strong networking with the non-co-operative constituency and mainstream media. B P Sanjay, Director of the Institute of mass Communication, feels that the co-operative journals must reach out to the people for whom they are meant and they must spread awareness about the co-operative concept. In this regard he advocates the need for internal content analysis, undertaking communication audit, involving professional agencies, training the editorial

and public relations staff, etc. When drawn attention to the fact that the Indian Institute of Mass Communication should start a course in co-operative journalism, he says that the course may be started but there should be a certainty of job opportunities. He however opines that the Institute can organise a week long programme of improving editorial content of co-operative journals.

Sanjay Kumar Verma Jr is Editor, National Co-operative Union of India