Churnalism+

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Writing something with a title comprising of the portmanteau of ‘churn’ and ‘journalism’ can be misleading; my article is hardly an exercise in linguistics or morphology. The word ‘churnalism’ was coined by Karin Wahl-Jorgensen in 'The Handbook of Journalism Studies', as mentioned in Wikipedia, with its ‘omniscience’ limited to the strength of its crowd-sourcing. As the origins of the portmanteau suggest, Churnalism is the kind of journalism that bears a lot of resemblance to stock churning: as in the latter, the former involves excessive back-and-forth ‘trading’ of the sensibilities of the consumers to strike up a ‘healthy’ rating in the public domain; the more themasala, the more the chutnification, the better. Churnalism is a term that describes a number of ill practices in journalism today, be it plagiarism or pre-packaged news-bites.

The reason I have titled this article as Churnalism+ instead of just Churnalism is because the original definition of the term is defined as the practice of fishing out news reports on the basis of press-releases and wire-reports. As is wont of the generation, it is my theoretical construct—a practice seen in certain cases—that a journalist today would rather 'manufacture' some news than take the trouble of going through the PR roll. Unravel the 'pre-packaged breaking news' that you packaged initially to a gaping audience. Word-play? Hardly. This is what I call Churnalism of GenY or Churnalism+.

The recent case of ‘real-time coverage for capturing the culprits live’ of a molestation case in Guwahati and the subsequent hungama by the firebrand peasant-leader-turned-moral-messiah Akhil Gogoi may be an example of Churnalism+. It was probably because this particular case had two things going for it: the prime accused Amarjyoti Kalita’s upstart nature that led him to carry out the heinous task AND upload the video, and the national news channels’ quickness in catching the scent in time, that it came out as a serious crime against womanhood. Although the gravity of the crime was highlighted, the aftermath of the case was mostly embroiled in the protest marches by Gogoi against News Live, a front-runner among the news channels of the Assamese media and incidentally owned by the spouse of Himanta Biswa Sarma, State Minister with the portfolios of Health and Family Welfare, Education and Implementation of Assam Accord (Source: Official Website of The Govt. of Assam) and a man with a political clout probably next to only that of the CM Shri Tarun Gogoi. Though it is yet to be proven, the very idea of Churnalism+ being practiced in Indian media is not ill-founded.

Churnalism+ is a dangerous tool in the hands of a media hungry for kudos even at the expense of morality and ethics. If there is even an iota of truth in the allegations that Akhil Gogoi is levelling against News Live, then the whole idea of media-liberty and unhindered freedom of expression stands as a flawed practice that needs censure. It is like the fake-encounters that certain police-personnel carry out for petty gratification. Such incidents only project a crude cut in the gem that our forebears envisioned the media as, in our country.

Paid news has been a major issue plaguing the Indian media. The Radia-tapes incident brought to the fore the appreciable amount of influence that lobbyists have on the Indian media. Something that had dimensions relating to rural India was the case of GM Bt. Cotton crops in India. The furore over the rosy picture that a certain nation daily had sketched of the ground reality received national attention. This was a blatant and condemnable attempt by certain media-persons to project a crude cut in the gem that our forebears envisioned the media as, in our country.

Gone are the days when Doordarshan and AIR were the iconic elements of Indian media. Gone are the days when ideals were sacrosanct for the scribes. Churnalism+ is a reality of the day and needs to be fought against in the same spirit as we are all fighting for a potent Lok-Pal.

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