

The Role of Media and Public Communication in Disseminating Non-Violent Ideas in the Singing Revolution of Baltic States

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ABSTRACT

The three Baltic nations, Estonia, Latvia and Estonia not only share the borders but also experience the same historical and cultural legacies. The all three nations helped each other in fighting against the Soviet Union in late 20th century during the freedom struggle that's known as the 'Singing Revolution'. The non-violent power of the unarmed masses stood up against the mighty empire of the time. Mahatma Gandhi's principles of non-violence and non-cooperation is said to have a great influence in defining the goals and strategies of Singing Revolution of Baltic states. The tools of public communication used by the Baltic leaders had been very effective in mobilizing the non-violent demonstrations and mass rallies. During the whole freedom movement the media emerged as an essential actor to raise the consciousness, and to disseminate the ideas of non-violence among the common people. The role of print and electronic media, throughout the public proceedings and mass demonstrations remained highly crucial and instrumental to keep the freedom movement peaceful. This paper argued that the environment in which Baltic masses start protesting against the Soviet Union had been highly influenced by the active participation of mass media that finally led to the demise of communism in Eastern Europe.

Key Words : Mass media, Public communication, Non-violence, Singing revolution, Civil resistance

INTRODUCTION

The Baltic states, three small nations Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia – are located in the north-central Europe on the eastern coast of the Baltic sea. The geopolitically significant location determined the destiny of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania not only to be the battle ground for adjoining powers and the site of rivalry, but also a pathway of interaction between East and West¹. These nations fought many battles of liberation from totalitarian and authoritarian forces. The non-violent freedom struggle that is also known as the 'Singing Revolution' waged by the common masses in the late 20th century against the totalitarian rule of the Soviet Union. The noticeable fact is that full care was taken to keep the Baltic freedom struggle a completely non-violent resistance. The non-violent power of the unarmed masses stood up against the mighty empire of the time. Mahatma Gandhi's principles of non-violence and non-cooperation is said to have a great influence in defining the goals and strategies of Singing Revolution of Baltic states. The role of media, throughout the public proceedings and mass

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demonstrations remained highly crucial and instrumental to keep the freedom movement peaceful. Activists and masses of three Baltic states were very much influenced with the Gandhian pragmatic non-violent approach *satyagraha* (a path of truth). The different mode of media (print media, electronic media) and public communication (mass rallies, non-violent instructors, underground meetings and speeches etc.) played a very crucial role in spreading and disseminating the Gandhian ideas and experiences among the Baltic masses.

Historically, the three Baltic countries forcefully occupied and re-occupied many times by the super powers of the region. The Soviet occupation in 1940 was based on the secret Molotov-Ribbentrop pact that “sealed the fate of the sovereign states of Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania, for the next 51 years. It was an unprovoked occupation, take-over and annexation of small neighbouring states by a major power breaching international treaties and agreements”². The occupier forces repressed and suppressed the native ethnic groups; exploitation, intimidation and manipulation were central themes to sustain the occupation. However, the people of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania expressed their resistance and dissatisfaction to liberate their land from the oppressive rule of the Soviet Union. The early phase of liberation movement witnessed the violent armed struggle in the form of guerrilla warfare fought by the dissident groups and patriotic forces against the Soviet red army³. The violent tactics could not succeed; the Soviet authorities used the repressive and suppressive means to crush it. Nevertheless, the partisans were active in 1948 but by 1956 it almost fully ended. This period witnessed a very limited public communication; “only the dissident groups and forest brothers were active to mobilize the patriotic feeling among the people who were against this forced annexation into Soviet Union”⁴. However, the people who were engaged in these activities brutally tortured and punished, number of them deported to the labour camps in Siberia while many got exiled. Moreover, these exiled writers and activist continued their efforts to create an environment for freedom in abroad.

Imposition of Communist Rule: Censorship on Press and Media :

To bring Baltic states under the control of central Soviet authority; the Soviet Union followed the policy of Sovietization: a process by means of which all institutions, cultural activity, politics, sport, education, religion and family life were subject to strict surveillance and monitored in accordance with Marxism-Leninism. The purpose of Russification of Baltic republics was to serve Moscow’s desired political and economic ends. This policy of Soviet Union became an instrument to establish hegemony in every sphere of Baltic population. Moreover, the Soviet authorities suspected ‘landowners, teachers, businessmen, members of the officer corps and intellectuals as enemies of state. Such people were arrested, in some cases shot immediately. Smith stated that “Censorship was routine and exceptionally very severe to imposed tight control over anti-Soviet activities. Civil society, in effect, ceased to exist and people were not allowed to take part in cultural events which were suspected to upsurge the feeling of nationalism”⁵. Only those artists and writers were allowed to present their works that glorified the Soviet system and support the communist ideology.

Naturally during the period of the Soviet Union, print media (newspapers, press and publication houses) were under the control of authoritarian state in the Baltic countries. Journalists experienced the “watchful eye of the authorities not just in editorial offices but in the context which they writing also. Soviet censorship was simultaneously preventive and repressive”⁶. During this period, for journalists it was very hard to disclose the brutalities and violation of individual rights of Baltic society by militia. All the publication of books and articles direct came under the control of state authorities, only those books being allowed in the stores and libraries that corresponding to the official communist ideology. “All forms of news media came immediately under the control of the occupiers, and all publications were subjected to censorship”⁷. The media was being used only for the purpose of state monopoly over news content and broadcasting of different programs. In the period of 1940-1986, “the medium of public communication as newspapers, magazines, television and

radio were under the control of state and not allowed to criticize the government's policy and programs"⁸. O'Connor very rightly observed that "the censorship that had more than 40 years rendered impossible any honest discussions of the past, present and future"⁹. During this period Mass communication was a large Soviet industry and an instructive tool, used to promote the government line. However, this censorship led to the development of the underground and hidden publication activities for opposing the Soviet policies. At the same time, despite the system of total control, "many underground publications of persistence value were published and a kind of semi participatory channel was born in the subdued Baltic countries, namely the cultural sphere"¹⁰. Due the very limited mediums of public communications; the Baltic people tried cultural and religious spaces to communicate their grievances under the communist rule. However, only some dissident and patriotic groups were active in the underground activities by the time of Gorbachev's reforms in 1985s.

Gorbachev's Reforms: Mass Media and Public Communication :

The reforms of Gorbachev introduced in 1985 brought the new hope for the emergence of nationalistic feelings among all masses of the three Baltic nations. As soon as, Gorbachev introduced the liberalized economic and social reforms to restore the Soviet economy, the three states Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia got an opportunity to express their will of sovereign states. Gorbachev's policy of glasnost lifted the severe restrictions on information; and provided a legitimate opportunity for Baltic people to express their disagreement with Soviet Union. Media censorship was relaxed, though not completely abolished; literature once banned in the USSR was now permitted. Richard Deats very rightly stated that "the reforms speeded up the stirrings for change across the U.S.S.R., as thousands of grassroots groups sprang up to deal with a whole spectrum of social, economic, political, environmental, and cultural issues"¹¹. In Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania the media emerged as a crucial actor to raise the consciousness among the people. Basically, media person realized that this was the right time to disclose the brutalities and atrocities of communist rule before the world community, active media persons started mobilizing the public opinion, initially on environmental and cultural issues but later on political issues.

The significant change of the way of mass rallies and public demonstration appeared was its non-violent and peaceful character¹². The Baltic leaders started search for the non-violent historical legacies of the past. The song festivals and other cultural activities appeared them an opportunity to mobilize the people for the national cause. Information and communication played a significant role in awakening the Baltic people toward the atrocities and illegal annexation of three Baltic states by soviet union. Virtually, Baltic press, TV channels and Radio stations all mass media resources became an integral partner of the singing revolution. Furthermore, Eglitis observed that "Even the activist and artists transformed the violent images and stories of historical heroes and kings into the non-violent one"¹³. The cultural sphere created a space to discuss the problems and to come over from them. The successes of non-violent demonstrations for the environment protection strengthen the belief of Baltic millennia in the adequacy of non-violent means to further expansion of national liberation movement.

The forgotten pages of soviet crimes over Baltic people printed in newspapers, and even radio and television channels started broadcasting very frequently about the atrocities of Red Army. The active media persons started collecting the facts and stories of crimes of communist regime and published them for the common masses¹⁴. During the peaceful demonstration, Baltic media very responsibly covered the events and imparted the ideas of non-violence among the large number of protesters. The message of Gandhian techniques non-violence and its success stories in India and in other part of world was being broadcasted and circulated by the Baltic media. The newsletters of popular fronts published the original copies of secret Molotov-Ribbentrop pact and disclosed about the illegality of the pact and forced annexation of Baltic states by soviet union. Interestingly, the Baltic

media got attention of international leaders about the reality of three Baltic states under the communist rule. Until, three states regained their freedom in 1991, media stand by the people and communicated the Gandhian philosophy of non-violence among the people and remain a very responsible partner of whole political events.

Gandhian Techniques of Public Communication :

The public communication which is a process to transfer the knowledge or any message to large number of individuals by using media, messaging, and an organized set of communication activities (mass rallies, public speech and publications, etc.) to mobilize or unit the opinion on any social, political phenomena in a specified period of time. The American Heritage Dictionary tells us that “communications is the art and technique of using words effectively to impart information or ideas for a strategic purpose”. The public communication is a very necessary to leading a mass movement successfully¹⁵. Throughout the freedom struggle of India Mahatma Gandhi also used the public communication techniques to mobilize the Indian masses against the unjust and immoral rule of British government. He was known very well that the success of non-violent methods depends on the social and political non-cooperation of people with government; this was the political strategy of Gandhiji to cut off all kind of political and social support to British Raj from India. In India, these were the mass rallies and Gandhiji’s charismatic unique communication approaches which gathered large number of masses to participate in the freedom struggle of India. To communicate and to teach the non-violence methods to common people he addresses various mass rallies, conducted special classes at *Sabarmati Ashram* and published several newsletters and magazines, and even he went door to door to communicate the message of non-violence. “Interpersonal media, folk art media and mass media were used to reach to the public which came to be known as Gandhian techniques of communication and became part of Indian public relation”¹⁶. He published and edited a number of newspapers and journals to heighten the understanding of non-violent methods, even very strongly, he criticized the British government’s policies to made awareness and patriotism among the India masses.

Young India and *Harijan* became powerful vehicles of his views on all subjects. He wrote simply and clearly but forcefully, with passion and burning indignation. However, British government attempted to control the press, persecutions against of large number of newspapers and their editors to suppress the press and many new laws were being enacted but Indian press in the leadership of many leaders continued underground for forging the nationalism among the Indian masses. When Gandhiji came on the scene of freedom struggle of India he employed the techniques of mass mobilization through non-violent hunger strikes and mass rallies to develop the non-violence resistance among Indian masses. As Gandhiji was a charismatic communicator and in the freedom struggle of India that is why he used mass communication as an instructive tool to teach and promote the values of non-violent methods to defeat the British government. In the ‘Young India’ of 2 July 1925, he wrote: “I have taken up journalism not for its sake but merely as an aid to what I have conceived to be my mission in life. My mission is to teach by example and present under severe restraint the use of the matchless weapon of *Satyagraha* which is a direct corollary of nonviolence.”¹⁷

These techniques of non-violent methods employed by Gandhiji got wide spread coverage into the press and mass media not only in India but at the international level. As political strategist of non-violence Gandhiji developed a basic strategy of non-violent resistance, which he called *Satyagraha* (the path of truth). He trained the disciplined volunteers and took the help of magazine, pamphlets and other means of communication to lead the mass marches, campaigns and dis-obedience of specific laws. In India the Gandhian non-violent strategy changed the face of political movement it got the popular support from all strata of Indian society to realized the dream of *swaraj* (the self-rule). Getting influenced by the non-violent movement led by Mahatma Gandhi many other leaders also followed

the same path to restore the human and civil rights in their respective countries. In Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania influenced of non-violent methods inspired the people to restore their lost freedom. Songs festivals and other artistic performances was being used as a platform for public communication, it was a unique wave of strong non-violent nationalism. The success stories of non-violent action of Gandhi and Martin Luther King remained deep seated in the heart and mind of Baltic people.

Public Communication during Singing Revolution :

In Baltic States before the period of *glasnost* and *perestroika* the public communications had very limited domain. Exploitive and suppressive policies of Soviet Union not allowed the mass communication openly. In 1987s, it was the period of starting of the singing revolution in three Baltic states when the forbidden national anthem and patriotic songs got popularity among the Baltic masses. Lauristin and Vihalemm expressed that a “very special role was played by the institution of national songfests, which was preserved by the Soviets as a demonstration of the multinational character of Soviet culture, but in reality served as a powerful expression of national identity and will for the cultural resistance”¹⁸. The culture folk music songs festivals in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania restated and provided a platform to express the will of people. These music and songs festivals also played a pivotal role in the public communication and emergence of non-violent nationalism. Thousands of people participated in these music consorts to strengthen the feeling of nationalism and to show the dissatisfaction with the Soviet rule. In mid-June of 1988, thousands of Latvians demonstrated in Riga, the capital of Latvia, to mark the anniversary of mass deportations from Latvia under Stalin. The Soviet press agency, *Tass*, reported the march and noted that a monument would be built to the deportees¹⁹. The leaders of independence movement were aware with the fact that the violent armed conflict with Soviet army would led to the more devastation in Baltic society, “the use of non-violent means was the only adequate weapon to restore their independence”²⁰.

These popular fronts and their non-violent philosophy to restore the independence got popular support from the awakened people of Baltic states. “The strategies and agenda of active non-violence communicated through various ways as pamphlets and newsletters of these popular fronts”²¹. The non-violent strategies and tactic mentioned in newsletters to impart the ideas of non-violence had been, “symbolic lights, singing, assemblies of protest and support, non-cooperation and non-violent interjection etc”²². Although in the beginning, Baltic media had been consistent with the style of the Soviet propaganda; for example as Vihalemm stated that “in the 1987 protests at Tallinn the media declared that the Estonian people did not support the meeting; it was labeled as a provocation inspired by the voice of America”²³. The structures of the public sphere that emerged in connection with the massive popular movements in 1988 and 1989 in the Baltic countries were created with the help of media and functioned through media. The open discussion in media over the crimes and illegitimacy of Soviet annexation into the Soviet Union based on the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact of 1939 inspired the masses to throughout the totalitarian and suppressive rule of Soviet Union. “Soviet crimes and accident reports were published with regularity and discussions followed. Special sections of newspapers were dedicated to the analysis and interpretation of the nation’s history”²⁴. Media had been so active that it covered every moment of demonstrations and broadcasted or published it into a very effective manner.

The people showed the strong faith in the non-violent methods as they were already aware about the success of these methods in various non-violent movements. In Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania mass rallies and peaceful demonstration developed a sense of national unity and coercive power of totalitarian government not feared the people. The success of active non-violent actions depends on the power of people to throw out the deep rooted mighty unjust empires²⁵. The mass media and political activists very successfully transformed the violent power of common people into non-violent one. To strengthen the active non-violence and civil resistance among the people media had been

very effective tool. For example “the movie “Gandhi” was being broadcasted frequently on the national television channels strengthening the nonviolent resistance of the people”²⁶. Moreover, civil resistance of people and coverage of media augmented the whole movement not only at the national level but it surprised the whole world.

Role of Print and Electronic Media :

Before the *glasnost* period, what was not allowed to be published officially was sometimes published underground. However, these publications remained very confined to the violent revolutionary groups in Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. “The publications of Lithuanian dissidents were the most active publishers of these *Samizdat* materials and were responsible for the chronicles of Lithuanian Catholic Church, which appeared from 1972 to 1988”²⁷. But the whole scenario “changed during the *glasnost* era in 1986, newspapers depicted the militia as not only brutal but ineffective also”²⁸. The print media and its influence broadened due to the policy of *glasnost*, as some extend media got the freedom to express their view. In a two-or three-month period from April to June 1988, “rapidly emerging liberation movements used the media for coverage of meetings, publication of manifestos and declarations, and disclosure of the atrocities committed by the Communist regime”²⁹. Many new national and regional/local newspapers were introduced. New magazines were also printed and circulated without having any fear or restriction from the state.

The news of the events of non-violent mass demonstrations throughout the Baltic states blowout worldwide and attracted the eyes of international media. The key events of 1987-88 are well known in the west, and need not to be described here as of nationalism in the Baltic states. The non-violent public communication enriched through interpretations of mass media. The disclosure of soviet crimes and atrocities augmented the widespread demand for the freedom. Balcytiene argued that “the recognition and protection of national languages and national identities has been an instrumental part in the national awakenings through several centuries of the Baltic region”³⁰. In this phase of national awakening also, Baltic people expressed their will through cultural and historical identities such as folk songs and preservation of historical heritages. The newsletters were widely discussing the strategy and programs of non-violent action to enhance this among the common masses.

The printing media became an alternative driving force for the mobilization of Baltic people and it help to develop an ability to remain calm during the mass protests, rallies and marches. The popular fronts and other social and political organizations expanded the alternative or parallel media to increase the awareness about the appropriateness and effectiveness of non-violent strategies. In order to explore the ideal and strategies of non-violence in 1988 and 1989, “Mohandas Gandhi and Martin Luther King were discussed in the Latvian National Independence Movement’s *Neatkarība* and the Latvian Popular Front’s *Atmoda* (weekly newsletter). The Front’s chairperson Dainis Īvāns cited these men as well as Thoreau and Tolstoy as influential”³¹.

The Baltic nations used their all available media resources to mobilize the people for the national awakening. The network of electronic media and technology help the people to communicate with each other and in the flow of information about the non-violent activities. The radio broadcasting changed in 1987, they broadcasted a wide diversity of speech and music content and see their role as contributing to the development of a plural and democratic culture. For example, the “golden era” for Radio Latvia, as far as many people are concerned, was the Latvian independence drive (*Atmoda*) in the late 1980s and early 1990s. During the days in “January 1991 when people set up barricades to protect key government buildings, the radio played a seminal role in helping to organize and manage non-violent resistance”³². People were glued to their radio sets for several days in a row. The airing of radio programs was very effective to disseminate the ideas of non-violence. Ironically, “the extreme security measures imposed in the centre of Riga”³³. The peaceful demonstrations get the live broadcasting on all TV channels and Radio stations of all the events that led to the upsurge of

thousands of Estonia, Latvian and Lithuania for the change of their destiny.

In 1989, across the three Baltic states, in a line stretching 430 miles, as many as three million persons demonstrated for freedom and long human chain broadcasted on the national television channels. The people's power and methods of social and political non-cooperation reached, even in the countryside of three Baltic republics. It was the best example of civilian based defence where common people participated extensively. In the 1990, the communist government realized that media activities would bring the upheaval in the USSR. The troops of red army attacked on the Lithuanian national TV tower in the capital Vilnius in January 1991. The people were so capable in holding the non-violent resistance that instead of surrendering or issuing a call to arms, Lithuania called on the citizenry to "hold to principles of nonviolent in subordinate resistance and political and social non-cooperation"³⁴. The unarmed people of Latvia stand non-violently and did not use the violence against the Red Army. The Latvians presented a strong resistance to the conscription by pretending not to speak Russian and by removing or replacing street signs, signposts, house numbers, and place name tablets to confuse the army. This was the implications of non-violent methods at the large scale. Although there was the use of violence and many people had to lose their life in Lithuania and Latvia but in Estonia the restoration of independence remained bloodless.

Conclusion :

Throughout the singing revolution, the effort by the Baltic people to restore the lost freedom through non-violent methods; media and public communication remained at the centre to discuss and to propagate the non-violent Gandhian values among the common people. Estonia Latvia and Lithuania regained their freedom in 1991 from the Soviet Union. Strive for the independence continued till 1991 and at last the power of non-violent action defeated the totalitarianism in Eastern Europe. Mass rallies, speeches and cultural symbols as well as the singing traditions of Baltic people enhanced the idea of Gandhian non-violence. It was the print and electronic media which popularize the ideas of non-violence among the people and lead the whole movement successfully. Through training, dialogue with the authorities in advance, and via the media, they had maintained for weeks that it was going to be a peaceful demonstration. The leaders in three countries were concern enough that the use of violence would be resulted in the bloodbath and the Baltic people do not want to confront with the Soviet army violently.

Media access is essential for the organization and mobilization of a mass movement; media have a special place in the Baltic tradition of nonviolence during the singing revolution. The environment in which Baltic masses start protesting had been very much helpful for the development of the new social service oriented media and dedicated to the dramatic change that led to the demise of communism in Eastern Europe. In the newsletters of national popular fronts of three Baltic states and their action plans employed all Gandhian techniques such as social and political non-cooperation, boycott of soviet goods, civil dis-obedience and *Satyagraha* etc. The national centre for the civilian based non-violence defence being set up even in local town to teach the Gandhian ideals. The media made this task very easy by broadcasting the program for strengthening the no-violence. The movie Gandhi was being shown nationwide television to introduce the Gandhian methods of non-violent for the common masses. The media coverage of singing revolution activities inspired the masses to participate for the national cause in order to throughout the mighty empire of Soviet Union.

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