

**T**ELEVISION news is playing an increasingly important part in all our lives. Much as we might dislike the aggressive and obsessive nature of the 24-hour news channels, it is clear that they are setting the news agenda. They have also become the principal channels of information for millions of the viewing public on all manner of issues from sport to crime and politics.

Take the recent anti-reservation agitation led by medical students in Delhi. Without the kind of attention the electronic media bestowed on it, one wonders if it would have been considered more than just one of many such agitations that are a regular component of our democracy. Yet, because the agitating students were "people like us", the media was largely sympathetic and gave them substantial time on the airwaves. By way of contrast, barring passing shots of other demonstrations — say of domestic workers in Mumbai demanding fair wages and work conditions — there are literally scores of issues that the media fails to cover.

### One-sided coverage

But coming back to the anti-reservation agitation, how much did people learn about the different sides of the debate from watching television? My guess is that for the upper castes, the coverage reinforced their beliefs without giving them the benefit of viewing the controversy from another angle and thereby inserting in their minds even a tiny sliver of doubt. Some dissenting voices were heard, but they were mostly token, drowned out by the more vocal and articulate anti-reservation voices.

At the end of this rather one-sided depiction of an important national issue, viewers were asked to send text messages to agree or disagree with simplistic questions posed by the channels. These "surveys" were apparently meant to reflect popular thinking. No one bothered to question the caste composition of the people watching English language channels with cell phones and therefore how representative of "popular" opinion were such spot surveys.

In India, we are proud of our freedom of speech and of our vibrant media. But there is something that our neighbour, Pakistan, can teach us about how to conduct debates on important issues that inform people rather than just raising tempers and reinforcing prejudices. The independent television channel Geo has launched an interesting series titled *Zara Sochিয়ে! Or Just Think*. And the first issue they have sought to tackle is the thorny one of the Hudood Ordinances.

These Ordinances, five of them, were brought into force in 1979 when General Zia ul Haq headed Pakistan. They have always been controversial. The stated aim of the Hudood Ordinances was to bring existing laws in line with the teachings of the Quran and the Sunnah. But human rights activists and even some religious scholars criticised them on various grounds. However, before they could be challenged or changed, the Eighth Amendment to the Constitution was passed in 1985. This meant that the law could only be changed by a two-thirds majority in Parliament.

### Controversial case

A case that drew attention to the unfair aspects of the law was that of a 13-year-old blind girl, Safia Bibi, who was raped by her employer and his son in 1983. Under one of the Hudood Ordinances, the offence of Zina, Safia Bibi was charged with adultery and jailed because she could not prove rape according to the criteria laid down under the Hudood laws. The rapists were set free. Only after a huge uproar both within Pakistan and pressure from outside was



**UNEVEN COVERAGE:** The anti-reservationists got substantial air time.

PHOTO: PTI

the case reopened in the Federal Shariat Court and Safia Bibi was released from prison.

After all these years, the Hudood Ordinances are still in place in Pakistan despite demands that they be repealed by women's groups, human rights groups, several jurists and by the permanent National Commission on the Status of Women.

Mir Ibrahim Rahman, who heads Geo TV, has taken a personal interest in this issue and said that after over two decades of controversy, it was important to bring the issue into the public realm again. To do so, the channel asked 26 men, all experts on religion, the following question: "The Hudood Laws are presented as divine laws, which cannot be touched. Do you agree?" The unanimous response to this question was that the laws are man-made and can be changed.

### Variety of perspectives

Of course, these men — predictably there were no women — had subtle differences in the way they answered the question. But by posing the question and publicising their responses, the channel gave to its viewers a wide range of perspectives while also creating a public record of the opinions of these experts. In another section on their site ([www.geo.tv/zs](http://www.geo.tv/zs)), the channel presents "Both sides of the story". This is particularly interesting as it goes through the issues raised in relation to the Hudood Ordinance and then gives arguments in favour and against. The presentation is such that it allows the readers/viewers to make an informed choice at the end of the debate.

In India we have innumerable questions of this nature that require mature debate. And there is no better channel for conducting such a debate than the electronic media. Unfortunately, the level of the discussions and the manner in which they are organised at the moment, tend to generate more heat rather than shedding some light on the issue. These channels need to pause and Just Think (*Zara Sochিয়ে!*) and draw lessons on how debates can be conducted from Geo TV.

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