

# **TV NEWS SPECTACLE IS A DANGEROUS DISTRACTION**

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**New Indian Express, 17 September 2020**

No, I am neither going to attack nor defend Rhea Chakraborty or Kangana Ranaut. The very fact that they are hogging prime time is repugnant to those who look forward to news for information. For entertainment, there are endless frothy soap operas and many love to see merciless boxing and wrestling matches as proxies for their suppressed rage. But when news television subsumes these genres, it cheats and misleads a nation.

This is certainly not the first time that a real life thriller has gripped India's attention. We have had scandals in the past and newspapers sizzled long before the republic of television squatted over most of media space. Old timers recall the Haridas Mundhra scam of 1958, using which Feroze Gandhi compelled Pandit Nehru to drop his powerful finance minister, TTK. Sons in law embarrassed the dynasty even then and Feroze did more than just lend his name to a lineage. There was also the Nagarwala scandal and many others, all the way through Bofors, 2G and Westland. When television arrived in this country, it was the government's megaphone and Doordarshan could obviously not vilify its master. But as soon as private television reached adolescence, around the turn of the millennium, it went hammer and tongs at the establishment, attacking the immunity that its scions flaunted. Newspapers and television, more so the latter, whipped up a synchronised public demand for Manu Sharma's severe punishment for murdering Jessica La. This is when western cultural motifs like candlelight processions and heaping floral wreaths sneaked quietly into our culture. In 1999, another outrage, the notorious BMW hit-and-run case, also angered people as print media and the silver screen exposed how Sanjeev Nanda was unrepentant even after killing of six innocent humans. A dedicated television churned public indignation at the privileged class invariably manipulating the highly malleable system to get culprits off the hook. But then, it still took six years to convict Manu Sharma and thirteen years to fix Sanjeev Nanda.

The point is that while the media went doggedly on its mission, the nation was never so mesmerised by infallible television oracles, as it appears now — when three certainly more critical issues are crying for people's attention. These are, obviously, the unstoppable gallop of Covid infections that hit a whooping one lakh people every day; the damaged economy that reels under an almost 40 percent fall in GDP (that includes the estimates of the informal sector) and the Chinese menace at the border that threatens us with a completely unaffordable war. The major difference with earlier trials on television and the current obsession with Rhea or Kangana is that in the past so many millions never neglected graver issues for titillation on TV. There were also no such fierce, blood pressure-bursting television anchors, who have

already decided the Sushant Singh Rajput case far better than more qualified legal luminaries. It doesn't matter now if it is really dirty centre-state politics or staged with an eye to the Bihar elections.

Kangana Ranawat entered the arena to settle her personal and experience-based scores with Bollywood, Mumbai and Maharashtra. Storm-troopers of the local ruling party stepped in immediately with ham-handed and intemperate actions — that reminded us that these were, indeed, the party's trademark tactics ages ago. This lamentable side-story notwithstanding, the main Sushant case has steadily degenerated from an understandable insistence on justice into a deeply troubling television-inspired blood-thirsty 'revenge'. Do we need the Narcotics Control Bureau to catch a just a few grams of a widely-abused drug?

To trace the roots of how TV could rock regimes, we need to zoom to September 2010, when Commonwealth Games scandals led steadily to the first television-led demand for the head of a politician, Suresh Kalmadi. This high-profile campaign revealed that television had surely graduated from chasing spoilt rich brats to hunting big game. Pressure kept mounting until Kalmadi was finally arrested in April 2011. Television had tasted blood and trial by media emerged as a weapon more potent than mere scam-busting. Then, Nirbhaya's brutal rape galvanised the nation and the wide coverage and support that Anna Hazare's moral movement received reflected people's collective disgust. The-then CAG added dollops of fat to the crackling fire, as he rattled out eye-popping figures of deliberate losses made by government. Not all numbers could later be confirmed, but facts really do not matter. Rapes continue unabated long after poor Nirbhaya. Anna's agitation abated but two rather-clever bureaucrats grabbed a chief minister's chair and a governor's throne. The ex CAG was, of course, rewarded quite handsomely by those who benefitted. TV channels earned a lot from rocketing TRPs from melodrama they doled out, with unmistakable showmanship.

Rajput's case is tricky but what a good team of detectives could perhaps solve has now been entrusted to three powerful central agencies, and a hysterical media sensationalises every step. Maybe because 'causes' have disappeared ever since the government itself went on 'mission mode against corruption', bottled up negative energies required an outlet that TV provided. But the endless hissing whistles of the pressure cooker may also indicate something more dangerous, for regimes and for society.

Even courts appear fed up and unless they intervene, or the IPL deflects public attention, it may be difficult to rescue many from obsessive neurosis.