

# 3. Value of local journalism

*Ashok Ramsarup*

*“I have fought against white domination, and I have fought against black domination. I have cherished the idea of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities.” - Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela, 11 February 1990.*

This marked the poignant moment in South Africa’s history when Nelson Mandela walked out a free man after serving 27 years in prison. The world waited with bated breath for Mandela to deliver that incredibly famous speech in Cape Town. His profound words still linger on.

Journalists from the various media platforms played a pivotal role from 1990 when the first steps towards democracy were being taken. Mandela had negotiated with the former head of state FW de Klerk for a peaceful transition to a free country. Later, Mandela was sworn in as South Africa’s first black president ending decades of the struggle against the atrocious architecture of apartheid. He was the champion in the quest for democracy. At the International Press Institute conference in 2013, Mandela said, “Only a free press can be the vigilant watchdog of the public interest against the temptation on the part of those who wield it to abuse that power.” He was described as the towering icon of the global movement for equality and an eloquent defender of press freedom.

The advent of democracy had seen the end of prohibitions, harassments, beatings, torture and jailing of journalists who stood their ground and eloquently spoke out against apartheid and human rights abuses.

**“local journalism stimulates discussion and debate that improves the quality of life”**

I first met Mandela in 1990 at the Durban Exhibition Centre. It was a meeting of a lifetime. His memory amazed me as he remembered my work at the public service radio which I joined in 1984. I will never forget his words, “I know about your work. Keep it up.” I was fortunate to again see Mandela in 1994 when he visited the train disaster site at Mariannridge near Pinetown, Durban that claimed dozens of lives. I managed to secure an exclusive interview as we walked on the railway track at the spot

where the train derailed.

My strand of memory takes me back almost 55 years when the notorious Group Areas Act was proving to be at its most destructive. Many people of Indian descent lived at Magazine Barracks, established around 1880 and located few kilometres from the Indian Ocean. The picturesque Durban Hindu Temple (popularly known as the Somtseu Road Temple) brought a symbol of hope during the dark days. It was a pillar of strength as a place of worship. My mother Dasodhia Ramsarup could not read or write, but was fluent in the vernacular and isiZulu. She was steeped in her culture and tradition that provided solace. Hundreds of families were forced to vacate their homes in what has been described as “mass removals”. The apartheid storm had begun to pelt the area. Sadly, all the families were herded onto dirty trucks and offloaded in Chatsworth, a burgeoning residential area south of Durban. This form of draconian displacement was incredibly devastating.



*Durban Hindu Temple*

It’s against this background that my penchant for telling local stories was shaped. I realised at an early stage in my life that these are the stories that needed to be covered. Local news matters in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as a number of democracies face an uphill battle in countering challenges. Media must be at the forefront and be the pulse of the people. Local journalists are close to their communities and have easy access to issues as they unfold. Journalism is referred to as the “first draft of history”, and journalists have an advantage of reporting credible local news because of trusted news sources. During my exchange programme in India, one of the focus areas was Development Journalism. Today, leaders can learn from journalists who continually write about the unsatisfactory conditions in developing countries. Development journalism tends to bring to light issues that are overlooked, and investigative journalists

then have the task to unravel any abuse of power.

It is my firm belief that *Radiocracy*, encapsulating radio, democracy and development and which Advocate Robin Sewlal has been championing for close on two decades, is key in transforming the news agenda and encouraging young journalists to bring local stories to the doorstep of every home. In a fast-changing media landscape, the provision of local news becomes even more important. Buoyed by the fourth industrial revolution, it is incumbent on local news outlets to embrace digital tools so as to keep audiences abreast of democracy and development. News is an important source of communication that keeps society informed of changing events. The aim is to ensure citizens make informed choices and decisions from the news about their lives, communities and government. Local journalism serves to stimulate discussion and debate that leads to the improvement in the quality of life in communities. Further, it helps society to not only foster unity, but to also respect diversity. The cardinal

principles of journalism must reign supreme: getting the facts right, and reporting truthfully and transparently. Journalists must be fair, accountable and impartial in the performance of their watchdog role.

As an illustration, it is my belief that government needs to devise a plan of action to alleviate long queues at provincial hospitals. Many people travel long distances and wait for several hours at such places to seek medical attention. A viable solution is to take services to the people through mobile units and having well-resourced clinics. Affordability of health care also cannot be a pipedream. This local story needs to be constantly reported upon until officialdom deliver on its mandate of serving the public interest. Soon after my retirement, I was honoured with the Health Justice Lifetime Achievement Award 2016, in recognition for highlighting the plight of health services in South Africa as well as in India.

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