

IT WAS an occasion for introspection for the select group of media people invited to interact with Sathguru Jaggi Vasudev recently in the city, on the coverage of religion, spirituality and culture in the print and electronic media. If the yardstick that media mirrors society is applied to current reportage of events, a significant percentage of space must be devoted to stories on religion and spirituality in a country like India, which is not the case. An observation about this anomaly by the Chairman of *The Times* Group, Indu Jain to the Editor of *The Hindu*, N.Ravi during a casual conversation, made them convene an interactive session between a spiritual leader, who has been in the forefront advocating spirituality for social harmony and development, and representatives of the media.

Foremost was the question as to whether the media provided enough coverage of religious and spiritual activities, which preoccupied a significant part of people's time. The other question was: "Is the media fair and balanced in its coverage as well as portrayal of religion and religious figures?" This necessitated a consideration of the culture and operation of the media and religious institutions.

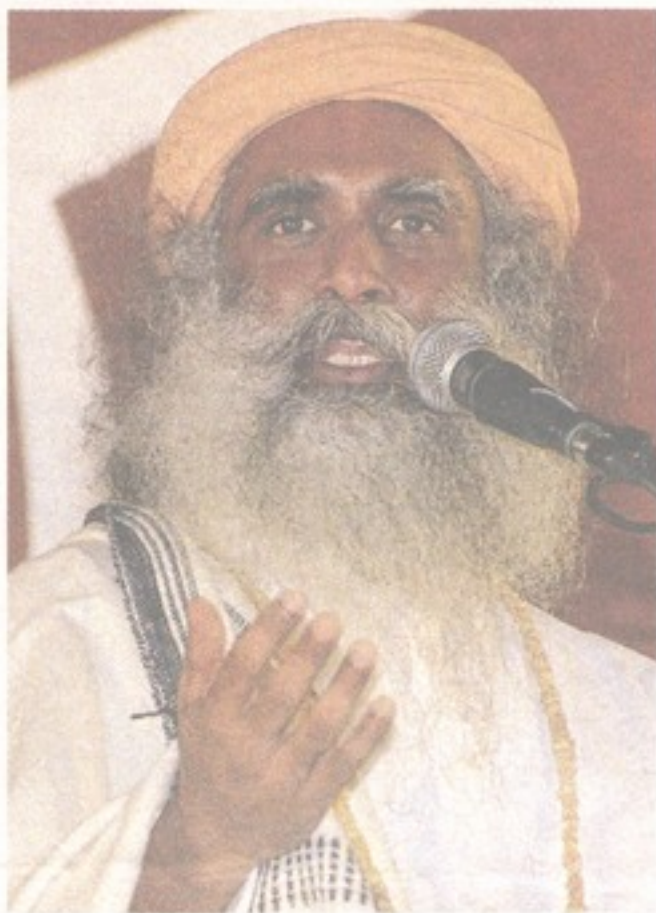
The media has to maintain a certain distance from organisations and leaders to retain its credibility. In contrast, the culture of a religious group is close identification and affinity. The media is often irreverent in keeping with its democratic spirit while religious groups expect a certain measure of respect and reverence. Critical examination is inevitable in news reporting but religious organisations expect faithful acceptance of their beliefs. Some religious groups may be wary of the spotlight and consider media attention intrusive as the media expects transparency.

The complaints often heard from religious and spiritual leaders are: the media often ignored their activities; coverage more often than not was negative, the focus was on scandal or dissident activities within organisations; foreign religious leaders often got more positive coverage than local religious groups; focus was more on fraud and deceit in society rather than acts of charity and good deeds and that extremist and disruptive groups gained media attention disproportionate to their importance.

The media countered such criticism with the fact that some religious groups were started for personal gain and exploited the gullibility of the public. The internal working of religious groups was mostly autocratic and, differing and corrective voices were often muffled; religious leaders and groups did not take a categorical stand against extremists of their own faith; some of

Media and social harmony

Coverage of religion, spirituality and culture by the electronic and print media was the theme of an interactive session between Sathguru Jaggi Vasudev and representatives of the media recently in the city. A report.



Pic. by K.V.Srinivasan

them were media-shy to the point of secrecy; they were not used to dealing with an independent media and expected the media and journalists to be sympathetic to their faith.

In her introductory address, Ms. Jain noted that she had firsthand knowledge of the good work done by spiritual leaders, NGOs and corporate houses, and expressed concern that the media did not highlight it adequately.

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