



## **The role of media and social activists: The new stars on board**

Parvin Sultana

### **Abstract:**

Stardom and celebrity status is intrinsically related to the kind of space media provides to the concerned individuals. The coverage of media has become a parameter of measuring stardom. But over time, stardom is no longer limited only to beautiful film stars and dashing male athletes. Intellect is the new glam quotient. Social activists taking up the cause of the downtrodden is getting a lot of space in media. Glamour has given way to asceticism and simplicity. However, while picking up stories, media has its own concern about which issue to highlight and which to override. This paper tries to understand the role of media in creating stars and promoting stardom of unconventional individuals by taking up coverage of two political movements of contemporary times. Media's treatment for these two social activists - Anna Hazare and Irom Sharmila Chanu have been different to such an extent that while one became headlines, the other continued to be a mere footnote in the media.

**Keywords:** Mass media, Anna Hazare, Stardom, Irom Sharmila, celebrity status.

### **Introduction**

Stardom and celebrity status is intrinsically related to the kind of space media provides to the concerned individual. The coverage of media has become a parameter of measuring stardom. But over the time, stardom is no more limited only to beautiful film stars and dashing male athletes. Intellect is the new glam quotient however, while picking up stories, media has its own concern about which issue to highlight and which to override. Media has the potential to create stars and promoting stardom of unconventional individuals through agenda setting and framing. More and more social activists taking up the cause of the downtrodden is getting a lot of space in media. Media can glamorize asceticism and

simplicity. This study explains how media's treatment of two social activists—Anna Hazare and Irom Sharmila Chanu has been different to such an extent that while one became headlines, the other continued to be a mere footnote in media.

### **Stardom in India**

In India, stardom and celebrity status have often been dominated by the Bollywood film industry. Regional cinema has also been able to throw stars with larger than life images. The stardom of film stars has been accentuated by the fact that they often cross over to take up a more public role through active participation in politics. While Indian films have tried to break barriers in order to reach out to newly emerging global markets—Diaspora is an apt example, there have been certain boundaries set within which Bollywood functions.

This becomes clearer when the star in question is a female one. For example, Mazumdar (2009) acknowledges the role of gossip in shaping a star's image. In the early times of Bollywood, information about stars was very professional in nature. But with the rise of Bollywood, there was a shifting demand in how the private lives of the stars were portrayed in the media which led to an interest about star gossip.

### **Changing notions of stardom and celebrity status**

For a long time, stardom and celebrity status tended to be the sphere of Bollywood actors. Later, they had to give a wider berth to sportsmen of popular sports like Cricket. Recently, there has been a change in how stardom is thought of and who the new stars are. With the politicization

of middle class, a newer kind of stardom has come to the center stage. While stars have often crossed over to public domain, their engagement is always social in nature; be it a charitable functions or activities aimed at movie promotions. However at present, with private news channels coming into the fray for TRP rates, there is a glamour quotient added to political meetings and political rallies. The latest celebrity is the public intellectual and the social activist. Rallies and sit-ins (*dharnas*) giving expression to the political aspirations of middle class actually got a lot of attention from the civil society. This has been proven by the kind of coverage media gave to such activities.

The status of celebrity is no more the prerogative of a film star; rather the people's hero is now those who give voice to their demands. The use of spectacles by such new stars is similar to what film stars did. Political movements are also very performative in nature. It is very much about how the media picks such activities and portrays it. A classic example is the movement led by Anna Hazare. Stardom is no more bounded by a very mainstream idea of beauty and aesthetics, other elements have also come to play crucial role.

### **Stardom and Media**

Stars can become legendary or unpopular owing entirely to the media. Portrayal of stars and celebrities by the media has undergone a change, keeping in pace with the changing socio-political conditions. The new star is no longer only a good looking, usually young film star or an athlete, but at times a social and political activist. The latest stars are uncanny. One can mention the glamorous campaign that the Prime Minister Narendra Modi carried out in his run up to the election. Apart

from his political agenda, he also came to be viewed by many as a style icon. His facial hair, hair style, his accessories became the talk of the town. He was portrayed as a tech savvy, well-dressed man, whose company women would appreciate. He was discussed as an eligible bachelor by film actresses hoping for some space in media.

Media and television news in particular can make someone a celebrity overnight. In some cases, it goes viral, multiplying the air time and column of news print at the rate of geometric progression. This creates an aura of super stardom. Few are able to decipher the phenomena for what it is a frenzy fed by mutual needs. Hunger for new icons in case of the media and the power that being seen on TV and remaining in news circulation bestows on the person concerned, leads to the constant churning out of such new stars. However, such celebrity status is often short-lived. Many politicians, film stars, activists had such short-lived fame. At one point in time, everything Lalu Prasad did became news. Whether it was his theatrics, showmanship or sheer buffoonery, viewers appeared to love him and news channels could never have had enough. This gave Lalu a national super stardom. But too soon the cameras and microphones moved to his arch rival Nitish Kumar.

2011 also saw the rise of uncanny superstars like Baba Ramdev. Ramdev, a yoga guru who always had a following, reinvented himself as a social crusader. His campaign and fast in Delhi's 'Ramlilamaidan' to bring back black money stashed in Swiss banks became a huge media event. The ill-considered police action added to the drama and made it a chart buster event. However, his image as a baba possessing extra-

ordinary powers took a beating because he tried to escape the ground (maiden) in a woman's attire. He was also unable to carry on the fast.

### **Anna – the new Avatar**

The biggest star of 2011 was Anna Hazare. A Gandhian, who lives an ascetic life, took the nation by storm. He gave voice to the aspirations of middle class, who have been notoriously apolitical for long. He brought millions of people to protest, who were cribbing for a long time, but not doing anything about their complaints. Along with his persona and his mode of protest, that is: fasting, even his choice of the issue of corruption, contributed a lot to his stardom. Corruption has affected all levels of society. It is a broad issue which found resonance in almost everyone. Everybody and especially the middle class could relate to the victimhood caused by corruption. Anna was successful in making corruption the top issue for people, parliamentarians and media. Corruption became the number one issue for coverage and debate on TV channels. Lokpal became one of the most searched words on Google. Anna himself and his team never lost an opportunity to stress the support of media.

Anna, a dhoti clad Gandhian, ushered in new hopes in the political scenario. While political corruption seemed rampant, he spoke an unsullied apolitical language against corruption. Anna spoke the language of common people who could relate very easily to the issues he raised. While many found it very easy to associate with Anna's movement, it also enjoyed positive media coverage. His hunger strike found extensive coverage in every news media. This set the ball rolling and very soon everybody started talking about it. Anna Hazare became a

prominent name in day to day conversations. It was the news coverage that set Anna's fast as the agenda of discussion. Anna Hazare movement succeeded in taking in its fold both the classes; the elite as well as the common people. A non-violent movement shook the entire nation and the media's coverage actually increased its impact manifold.

Acknowledging the endorsement of media that this movement enjoyed, many were wary of such blanket support. One rarely came across a critical analysis of the Jan Lokpal Bill. Rather everybody joined in the frenzy. Veteran Journalist Shashi Kumar writing in Outlook points out in the current scenario where everything is market-driven, truth which should be at the heart of journalism might become vulnerable to the dictates of the market. This phenomenon was already visible in the fact that there is gradual dumbing down and tabloidization of news. To put it more crudely, there is a thin line dividing news channels from entertainment channels. Loud, dramatized delivery of news has become the order of the day. In case of the Anna Movement, those critical of Anna's style of brinkmanship, were given very less space in media. Even stories about acute deprivation did not find mention as prime time slots were booked for covering the movement. This was worsened by the fact that in terms of TRPs, news from rural and semi-urban areas suffers from a negative bias. It has also proven financially beneficial for news channels. As pointed by Esha News Service, it was a money spinner. Criticisms labeled against Hazare's Lokpal which had a high tendency of turning authoritarian also did not find much space in mainstream media. Criticisms were brushed under the carpet.

**Irom – the other fasting Gandhian**

Far from the glare of the media, another social crusader carried her fight against an issue which has impacted the lives of a large number of common people. On 2 November, 2000, Assam Rifles gunned down at close range 10 people at a bus stop in the village Malom near Imphal. Among the victims, who were killed in the incident, there were a 62-year-old woman and an 18-year-old boy. This incident is known as the Malom Massacre. The site of this incident became later “Ten Innocents Park”. The massacre outraged 28-year-old Irom Sharmila Chanu. And on 4<sup>th</sup> November, Irom started her indefinite fast against an inhuman law called Armed Forces Special Power Act (AFSPA). Thus, began the world’s longest hunger strike. She had been extremely vocal about the need to repeal the draconian act.

The state had not yet reached out to Irom. But the Hobbesian state could not let Irom die and become a martyr. So, she was arrested on charges of trying to commit suicide and force fed thrice a day with a rubber tube. She was kept in a ward of the Jawaharlal Nehru Hospital in Imphal. This law allows confinement for 364 days. So, just a day before a year of Sharmila’s imprisonment was over, she was released. However, she was released just for a day and rearrested again for the same crime. This has been going on for the last 14 years.

While, Irom continues her fast, her pleas and protest falls on deaf ears. It is sad that how her 13 yearlong protest for a genuine cause has failed to find enough space in media. Middle class Indians have also been lukewarm to her demands. It was only when Anna Hazare’s fast came to focus that she found some space in the fringes. The ‘Prisoner of

Conscience' has failed to speak to the conscience of the state. While she found vocal support from many corners – be it Human Rights Activists, Nobel laureates, civil society organizations, it's the state apparatus which continues to be oblivious to her demands.

### **Anna the Star – Irom the 'Other'**

While Anna took the center stage, Irom continued to languish in the fringes of the media. This biased attitude reinforced the negligence that people of the region have felt. The region is both physically and psychologically far from the mainland. The region and issues continue to be absent from the mind and heart of the rest of the nation. This absence is conspicuous in the national media as well. As a result, the people in the mainland are completely isolated from whatever happens in the region. Due to this conspicuous absence of the region from the mainstream discourse, people could hardly relate to the movement in the Northeast and Irom's struggle never became the struggle of others.

Media usually remembers Irom Sharmila, on March every year, when she is ceremoniously released from judicial custody and then rearrested after 24 hours on charges of attempting suicide. Irom found mention in mainstream media when she was invited by Team Anna to join them in their fast. While responding, Irom requested them to reach out to concerned legislators to set her free and join their crusade. She further invited them to Manipur which in her words is the most corruption-affected region in the world. The invitation was, however, critiqued by many. As Manipur's Sangai Express stated comparing the two social activists: "One is a former driver in the Indian Army, an anointed Gandhian, a man who has managed to grab the attention of the

country, send the political establishment into a huddle whenever he announces his intention to stop eating and he has been on a fast for the last seven days. The other is a poet, anointed Iron Lady by her fellow people and someone who has largely existed on the periphery of the country's consciousness and she has been on a fast since November, 2000 without creating so much of a flutter in the corridors of power. Anna Hazare is news, Sharmila is non entity".

Media unabashedly ignored Irom Sharmila's fast. It has been in the fringe of Indian media as well as social network. But such discrimination is not specific only to Irom. When baba Ramdev got similar attention from media, Swami Nigamananda who has been fasting for more than a 100 days to stop illegal mining in Jharkhand died. He too failed to get any attention for his cause from the media or the government.

Many in the state felt that such an invitation was an insult. Irom's aura has been generated not by any media coverage, nor by support or solidarity to her cause but by her sheer will and determination. The invitation has also been dismissed as a publicity stunt. The region and its concerns continue to be excluded from the nation's psyche. However, riding on the Anna wave, Irom has managed to garner support from netizens on her struggle. Many people used facebook and twitter to support Irom and her cause.

Sadly, the intense coverage on one fast has exposed media's apathy towards another one, a fast which talked about issues much more important than corruption. Irom seems to be on the wrong side of the digital divide. While social and private media rallied behind Anna and

his movement and took the government by surprise, their response to a similar movement of Sharmila, which questioned grave human rights violations was pretty lukewarm. Sharmila languished as a footnote in the media coverage. This, points to a grim reality about the divide the urban middle class and rural poor in terms of political leverage that they enjoy. Anna's movement by far was a more middle class, urban movement than a national movement. While, these issues found massive support, many equally important issues like caste discrimination, development induced displacement failed to ensure such mobilization. These issues, that dominantly affect the poor, are absent in the virtual world.

The similarity between Irom and Anna ends at the fact that both have chosen the same mode of protest, that is the Gandhian method of fast unto death for something they believe to be right. Irom started her movement against the draconian AFSPA in a quiet hilly state of Manipur. It hardly made the breaking news of a news channel. However, the local people found resonance in her sacrificial unique protest. They lovingly christened her 'Menghaobi' or the 'Fair One'. It reflected her conviction to stand up for what is right. Sharmila has also staged protests in Jantar Mantar in the national capital. But her movement failed to capture the imagination of people from mainland India. Those who rallied behind Anna could identify with being victims of corruption, but failed to stand by people suffering from the blatant abuse of democracy in the fairest state of Manipur.

Anna's movement was like a gala event for the media. The event found an extensive coverage in the media. His movement also enjoyed

wide scale endorsement by celebrities from different walks of life – film stars, sport stars etc. While the media’s coverage ensured that the central government found itself cornered on the issue of anti-corruption, the same media failed to initiate a discourse on the ill effects of the draconian law AFSPA. The long heard complaints of state apathy of people with Mongoloid feature from a different cultural and racial stock seemed to be ringing true if Anna and Irom’s movements are pitted against each other

The responses continue to be different all across the board. The government while giving in to Anna’s demands turned a deaf ear to Irom’s protests. Such an attitude of the government that left a section of its population to languish under an anti-democratic law, re-entrenched the core-periphery understanding of the Northeast. The government would never ignore a populist movement ahead crucial parliamentary elections. But the geo-political importance of north east or the lack of it pushed Irom’s movement and demands to the back burner.

## **Conclusion**

Media makes and unmakes stars. Based on TRP rates, the media chooses its latest sweethearts. But what such coverage does is that it tends to promote direct democracy and undermines the fundamental principle of liberal democracy, holding that governance isn’t just about placating the most vocal sections of society. The media, which is supposed to be the watchdog of democracy, should not undermine democratic institutions. Why media finds it easier or profitable to project someone needs to be studied. Anna Hazare, a male from Maharashtra took up an issue like corruption which everybody supported. Ironically the middle class only

saw one kind of misuse of financial resources as corruption while overlooking issues like donation, bribery which they themselves at times indulge in. The vague, all-encompassing nature of the issue made it easier to rally behind it and target government which is the punching bag for all.

On the other hand, Irom, a woman from Manipur with visibly Mongoloid features whose 'Indianness' is often under doubt has spoken against a specific law, the AFSPA. Scrapping the law would put into scrutiny the state's activities under the garb of such a law. As a result, her nonviolent Gandhian act also seems to be so subversive that she has been jailed for so long. Even initiating a dialogue with her seemed as tantamount to questioning the *raison d'être* of the draconian law AFSPA and hence the state which passed it. Coming from the land of Meira Paibis or strong women social activists, Irom questions the patriarchal notions in her own ways. She raises a human rights issue rather than women's issue. By doing this, she problematizes the public morality which seeps in patriarchy. Putting aside her life of marriage, family and kids, Irom chose the life of a crusader. All this places Irom in a peculiar location, while Anna has never subverted the Indian value system. Hence while media made Anna a celebrity, they continue to be wary of Irom Sharmila. Unlike Anna, Irom continues to be an aberration. Anna wanted to re-entrench democracy while Irom questioned the Indian democracy which is hailed by all. As a result, while it is easier to portray Anna as the next Gandhi taking up the cause of all, Irom continues to be seen as someone removed geographically and psychologically from the minds of mainland Indians nursing the cause of human rights' violation

of few who rarely are the concern of Indians from regions other than the Northeast.

The Indian Army continues to epitomize nationalism and patriotism. Irom's movement targets the accesses of Indian Army behind the veil of impunity provided by AFSPA. This is another fact that ensured lesser support for Irom's movement. Be the average Indian or the news media, Indian Army continues to be the hero for many. This is proven by the largely romanticized coverage of Army doing relief work during natural disasters. Doing their duty, they are portrayed as larger than life heroes. Even emulating the most popular leader Gandhi was not enough. Anna could share the stage with RSS which was involved in Gandhi's murder. Many observers have pointed out that Anna's movement has a strong backing of right wing elements that were targeting the Congress government. As a result, the "India Against Corruption" movement always ran the risk of being hijacked by communal elements. Unlike Anna, Irom stayed away from such political permutations and combinations.

Government's responses to the two fasts have been diagonally opposite. Irom was slapped again and again with IPC 309 and force-fed under imprisonment. On the other hand, Anna's movement brought the Parliament to a standstill. The media accentuated the impact by fanning the angst that people felt towards a government already riling under multiple scams and corruption charges. While Anna fast forced the government to take cognizance of the need of a strong anti-graft bill, Irom have been arrested again and again for sustained fasting. However, one cannot dismiss the achievements of her movement. Although away

from the limelight, as a result of her consistent effort, the criticism of AFSPA became an integral part of the discourse on the act. Talks of having a more humane law in place of AFSPA are also a direct result of her protest. However, compared to Anna the attention that her movement could manage is minuscule. The neglect and apathy for the region continues and Irom's movement is often glossed over. The region continues to be a borderland which is essentially seen through the prism of National Security.

However, one cannot put the blame of disproportionate coverage only on media. It seems that coverage is proportionate to the importance given by the government to a particular issue. Anna's movement posed a direct challenge to the government authority and hence the government responded with utmost priority. But, the same cannot be said about the anti-AFSPA struggle. Government's response being lukewarm, media also did not prioritize the issue. The apathy and neglect is shared by the civil society and media, hence, there is a collective failure in holding government responsible for human rights violations in the region.

The AFSPA is not an ordinary act. It was specially constituted in 1958 for disturbed areas, where insurgency and militancy are widespread. It is operational in Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura, Manipur and Jammu and Kashmir. While, other states have been declared low intensity conflict areas, Manipur continues to simmer with multiple militant related problems.

Manipur has been a troubled area from the security perspective. Because of its troubled borders with neighboring states and internecine

tribal rivalries, it has been a theatre of conflicts. To rein in the militancy problem, AFSPA was implemented in the state. But this act, which gives excessive powers to the Army, has constrained the democratic rights of the citizens. They have often complained of being treated as subjects and captives rather than citizens. The army is least bothered about the systematic abuse of the democratic rights of the Manipuris. Rather, Army, behind the shield of this Act, is also indulged in atrocities against the citizens. The Act gives a military officer the right to use force on the basis of mere suspicion even if it causes death. It allows arrests without a warrant and searching of premises without a search warrant. Under the impunity of this Act, army officials have committed heinous crimes like rape, sexual harassment and murder. The rape and murder of Thangjam Manorama is a cruel reminder to this fact.

While, in the face of blatant abuse, the government has been forced to rethink the need of such a draconian act, the army has been strictly against the removal of the Act. The Army believes that maintenance of law and order in the region will be impossible without this act. The presence of such a law puts a question on the competence of democratically elected governments. Such army operations under the control of central government undermine the local governments. The continued use of such laws promotes the idea that the region's requirement is secondary to the issue of national security. The region continues to be treated as a land frontier.

Irom Sharmila's protests raise these pertinent issues. Her hunger strike puts the government in a tight fix. They don't want to respond to her. However, they cannot afford to let her die also as that would make her a martyr. Unlike Anna, who asks the right questions within the

acceptable parameters, Irom is way more subversive and questions the very existence of State. Anna is a manageable rebel, while Irom is a subversive rebel.

The government's dismissal of Irom's protests and absence of any initiatives at a dialogue shows its tilt towards status quo. In the light of the current situation, one cannot see an end to the draconian law despite widespread protests and demands from civil society organizations. This clearly indicates that civil liberty will always be sacrificed at the altar of national security. Similar has been the suppression of Naxalites and Maoists, who challenged the nation's state. While Anna did not challenge the state, he did challenge the government. However, the overwhelming support for Anna forced the government to act with some restraint.

While healthy protests are an effective way of keeping a government accountable in a democracy, protests come to be classified as legally and legitimately based on how media portrays it and how far it does not subvert the vested interests of the government of the day. While, corporate media epitomized Anna as the second Gandhi, it was not very kind to Irom who remained practically invisible. While, Anna and his supporters are seen as patriots and nationalists, the activists who bravely stood by Irom are often hounded as anti-national by right wing groups. This is the situation in the contemporary India that the ruling class determines what form of protest merits attention and what does not. While Irom's long fast inspires awe, the main issue of her protest fails to garner much needed support.

Certain trends are observed regarding media's coverage after a closer look at the two movements and the two personas. Anna Hazare's demands despite being ambiguous found a stronger support base and did not problematize nationalism. Rather, it demanded that the government has moved away from text book patriotism and should revert back to it. While on the other hand, Irom's demands put human rights over the questions of nation's security as perceived by the central government. Hence, despite having specific demand and being backed by multiple cases of human rights abuse, Sharmila's war continues to be something the nation and the media is uncomfortable to rally behind. This is just another chapter to the systemic exclusion of the region northeast and the issues related to it since ages. Media with its selective highlighting of issues, has failed to hold the state accountable for these mishaps in the region. Rather it is the TRPs that has been the deciding factor about who is the activist of the 'right hue' meriting support and hence, the coverage.

**References:**

- Dhavalikar, Sulabha. "Media, Mass Communication Theories and Anna Hazare Movement".[www.hubpages.com](http://www.hubpages.com). Web. 1<sup>st</sup> Sept, 2014.
- Dyer, Richard. *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society*. New York: Routedledge, 1987. Googlebooks.Web.
- Jha, Shailendra. "The Curious Case of TV Stardom".*India Today*. 30 Dec, 2011. Web. 25<sup>th</sup> Aug, 2014.

Kumar, Sanjay. "The Media and Anna Hazare". *The Diplomat*. 29 Aug, 2011. Web. 30<sup>th</sup> Aug, 2014.

Mazumdar, Neepa. *Wanted Cultured Ladies Only: Female Stardom and Cinema in India, 1930s- 1950s*. Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2009. Googlebooks.Web.

Mehrotra, DeeptiPriya. *Burning Bright: IromSharmila and the struggle for Peace in Manipur*. New Delhi: Penguin India, 2009. Print.

Redmond, Sean and Su Holmes (ed.). *Stardom and Celebrity: A Reader*. New Delhi: Sage, 2007. Googlebooks.Web.

Rehman, Teresa. "Gaga over Anna, mute over IromSharmila". *The Hoot*. 25 Aug, 2011. Web. 28<sup>th</sup> Aug, 2014.

Sen, Meheli and AnustupBasu (ed.). *Figurations in Indian Film*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. Googlebooks.Web.

"Digital Divide: Why IromSharmila can't do an Anna". *Firstpost*. 25 Aug, 2011. Web. 1<sup>st</sup> Sept, 2014.

"Media ignores IromSharmila, focuses on Anna". *The Hindustan Times*. 21 Aug, 2011. Web. 31<sup>st</sup> Aug, 2014.

"Why TV channels love Anna Hazare?" *The Hoot*. 19 Aug, 2011. Web. 31<sup>st</sup> Aug, 2014.

Chatterjee, Rituparna, "Spot the Difference: Hazare versus IromSharmila", *IBN Live*. 10 Sep, 2011, available at

<http://ibnlive.in.com/news/spot-the-difference-hazare-vs-irom-sharmila/149755-3.html>. Web. 27<sup>th</sup> Feb, 2015.

Alam, Mahtab, "Tale of Two Gandhians: Anna Hazare and IromSharmila", 22 April, 2011, available at <http://www.countercurrents.org/alam220411.htm>. Web. 1st March, 2015.

Sarkar, Urvashi, "IromSharmila's Right to Protest", *The Alternative.in*. 14 March, 2013 available at <http://www.thealternative.in/society/irom-sharmilas-right-to-protest/>. Web. 2<sup>nd</sup> March, 2015.