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**Journalism Caught in Narrow Nationalism:
The India-Pakistan Media War**

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Acknowledgments

In a profession marked by tight deadlines, breakneck speed, long hours, intense competition and pressure from both above and below, it is absolutely essential that one takes a break, rejuvenates the brain cells and finds out what's happening to journalism across the world.

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Introduction

The Study: What, Where and Why of a Bias

“I regret to say that the media in both countries remain entrapped in narrow nationalism and remain part of the problem rather than the solution...”

Najam Sethi, Editor, *Friday Times* (Pakistan)

Nowhere does the weight of history so dominate over journalism and its practitioners than when it comes to India and Pakistan reporting on each other. For years now, the media of both nations have been fighting a proxy war that is blurring out factual and unbiased coverage of events in the subcontinent. Overly nationalistic posturing and jingoism lie at the heart of this. Journalists, columnists, TV anchors and analysts of one country are busy exposing the ‘bias’ and ‘hypocrisy’ of the other, and in the process, adding insult to a 64-year-old injury.

While subsequent chapters will be strewn with examples and instances of this bias, here’s one for starters: several leading Pakistani newspapers on December 9, 2010 reproduced an elaborate internet hoax based on fake WikiLeaks cables from the US embassy in India that spoke of alleged rifts between top Indian army generals and a “Bosnia-like genocide” in Jammu & Kashmir. The story had qualified for the front page simply because it was anti-India. No attempt was made to verify its authenticity and a day later all Pakistani newspapers had to withdraw it.

From the other end of the pitch, a prominent English-language newspaper of India, *The Telegraph*, wrote of Ajmal Kasab, the lone terrorist captured during the Mumbai attacks of November 26, 2008: “Show him the gun he used to kill a police officer, and Ajmal Kasab doesn’t even try to look grim. In fact, the baby-faced assassin can’t stop laughing in court.” Imagine the impact of such words on an agitated, wounded public mind.

The Questions: Why is it that two well-developed media, using modern tools and methods and striving for objectivity in its coverage of anything from Twitter to Tunisia,

turn belligerent and subjective when it comes to reporting on each other's country? Is it a mindset problem compounded by lack of knowledge, lack of trust, limited access to each others' land and its people and an excessive dependence on stereotypes? Also, how much of a role does actual freedom (or lack of it) of the press to go against matters of "territorial integrity and national security" (read foreign policy) play in all this?

This paper attempts to analyse and deconstruct the bias and narrow nationalism that plague journalism in the subcontinent. It also tries to find ways how sensible, peaceful, objective journalism can erupt between the two nations and the impact it could have on bilateral relations. The key questions I am striving to address are as follows:

- 1) Where lies the root? Does it lie in the two distinct nationalisms and resulting nations which have nothing but feelings of bitterness, anger and mistrust between them?
- 2) How has the media been reflecting these negative emotions for decades? Case studies of events/periods are given when media wars broke out -- the Kargil conflict and the Mumbai massacre. The third case study, an exception which proves the rule, is the Agra peace summit, when the media of both nations wallowed in a short-lived peace.
- 3) What roles do mindsets, stereotyping of each other, lack of real knowledge of each other, lack of access, press freedom and market compulsions play?
- 4) Sixty-four years is enough! What can journalists and governments do to cure this ailment? What contribution can clean, objective journalism make in reducing tensions that exist in India-Pakistan relations?

Why this study? Internalisation of myths and mindsets in journalism of both countries is a tragedy in itself. As a citizen of India and a journalist I am aligned to the subject and party to the conflict. This is a delicate subject, but deconstructing it in a balanced manner might help journalists on both sides of the border see reason, change mental makeups and practice real journalism. Peace and better mutual understanding between the two nations will automatically follow.

The Roots: Rival Nationalisms, Antagonistic Nations

After six decades, three military conflicts, a protracted period of border skirmishes and an ECG-like graph of hate and peace, India and Pakistan stand where they started. This 'Enduring Conflict' -- a sustained rivalry between two nations that has lasted several decades, punctuated at irregular intervals by militarised conflagrations -- has its roots in the two rival concepts of nationhood and statehood.¹

The national identities and religious belief systems of India and Pakistan seem irreconcilable. On one hand there is a democratic polity and a secular identity, while on the other an authoritarian predilection and an Islamic belief system. TV Paul argues: "The India-Pakistan conflict is about state construction and two differing images of statehood. The Indian nationalist movement and post-Independence Constitution were based on secular and civic nationalism, while Pakistan was founded on the basis of religious and ethnic nationalism." ²

Pakistan's national identity had its origins in a sense of insecurity, but not vis-a-vis the imperial British Raj. Actually, the fight for freedom from foreign yolk was not of paramount importance to this identity. The insecurity emanated from the belief that in a unified India, a Hindu majority would swallow the ideals and aspirations of the Muslim people. This approach, however, was not sanctioned by Islamic faith, but by what emerged as the 'Muslim Identity' – something that leading Islamic intellectuals like Abul Kalam Azad or Zakir Hussein rejected. Vali Nasr argues: "The political predilections of Islamic identity were, therefore, not the same as those of Muslim identity. The former was reliant on Islamic values and saw no threat to those values from Indian nationalism." Muslim identity, however, "was not concerned with the protection of Islamic values..."

¹ Diehl and Goertz, *War and Peace in International Rivalry*, "A punctuated equilibrium model of enduring rivalries", University of Michigan Press, 2001

² TV Paul, *Security Studies*, "Why has the India-Pakistan Rivalry Been so Enduring?" Cambridge University Press, 2005

but with the upward mobility of Muslims in a society in which Muslims did not hold power.”³

The Muslim identity was sharpened and amplified by Mohammad Ali Jinnah, who went on to become the founder of Pakistan. In 1940, at the annual session of Muslim League at Lahore, he said: “India is not a nation, nor a country. It is a subcontinent of nationalities - - Hindus and Muslims being the two major nations. The Hindus and Muslims belong to two different religions, philosophies, social customs and literature. They neither intermarry nor inter-dine and they belong to two different civilizations which are based mainly on conflicting ideas and conceptions.”

During this time, certain acts of the politically-dominant Indian National Congress reinforced Jinnah’s belief that “we (Muslims) cannot accept a system of government in which non-Muslims, merely by numerical majority, would rule and dominate us as a nation”. First, the Congress suddenly increased the use of Hindu symbolisms -- like invoking the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* (both Hindu religious texts) at its sessions and mass rallies, holding meetings at temples and openly seeking support of Hindu religious leaders. Even the lifestyle and methods of Mahatma Gandhi began to be regarded as too “Hindu” by the Muslims. A stinging blow came when the Congress refused to form a coalition government with the Muslim League after the 1937 provincial elections, a landmark in the history of the freedom struggle.

Such were the circumstances when Muslims led by Jinnah made their first official demand for a separate state of Pakistan in 1940. The Muslim identity, therefore, prevailed over the Islamic identity.

India, unlike Pakistan, didn’t have to build the nation-state from scratch. British institutions and structures were already there. Also, protecting national identity was not as much a concern as building the nation since the only threat the former faced was from the British, who were leaving anyway. Therefore, India could channel its energies

³ Vali Nasr, *The Indian-Pakistan Conflict: An Enduring Rivalry*, “National Identities and the India-Pakistan Conflict”, Cambridge University Press, 2005

towards building the state based on principles of democracy, secularism, statism, socialism and non-alignment. Nevertheless, Independence and Partition brought with it problems that saw the gradual rise of 'Hindu Nationalism'.

In the 1940s, when Indian Muslims were talking more and more of separatism and their own identity, a hardening of stance was seen on the Hindu side too. Vinayak Savarkar, a freedom-fighter and ideologue for Hindu nationalism, endorsed the 'Two-Nation Theory' of Jinnah but declared that Pakistan could not be carved out of Indian territory.

The Indian Independence Act of 1947 promulgated partition of British India on the basis of religious demographics. What followed was a huge population exchange (14.5 million people crossed borders) accompanied by massive violence and slaughter on both sides of the border. Rival nationalism and statehood finally erupted in bloodshed and what was till then suspicion about the motives of each other, changed into hatred.

The Hindu Mahasabha, a hardline politico-religious body, assailed Gandhi's "appeasement" policy towards Muslims – allowing Pakistan to happen at the cost of so much "Hindu blood."⁴ On January 30, 1948 the 'Father of the Nation' was gunned down by a Hindu hardliner who could not approve of Partition. So, two nations --- carved out of one, with the same people and a shared history – became enemies from birth.

Then there was Kashmir. The Indian Independence Act gave the 562 princely states that constituted British India the choice of either joining India or Pakistan. Jammu and Kashmir, with a Hindu ruler (Maharaja Hari Singh) and a predominantly Muslim population, found it difficult to choose between the two. The trigger was pressed when in October 1947 Muslim peasants in the Poonch area, quite close to the border, refused to pay taxes to their Hindu landlords.⁵ When the landlords retaliated with bullets, these peasants ran across the border and sought the help of tribal Pathans. Hundreds of Pathans, aided by Pakistani army regulars, entered India with the intention of taking over Kashmir.

⁴ Ian Talbot, *India and Pakistan: Inventing the Nation*, Oxford University Press, 2000

⁵ Stanley Wolpert, *India and Pakistan: Continued Conflict or Cooperation?* University of California Press, 2010

A nervous Hari Singh asked the Indian government for help, which in return made him sign the Instrument of Accession (to the Indian Union).

What followed was the first India-Pakistan war, which lasted till the end of 1948. The Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru approached the United Nations, under whose auspices a ceasefire agreement was reached between both sides on January 1, 1949. As per the agreement, Pakistan was “to secure the withdrawal from the State of Jammu and Kashmir of tribesmen and Pakistani nationals not normally resident therein who have entered the State for the purposes of fighting, and to prevent any intrusion into the State of such elements and any furnishing of material aid to those fighting in the State.”⁶

In July 1949 India and Pakistan signed the Karachi Agreement establishing a ceasefire line that was to be monitored by an UN military observer group. This line, in time, came to be known as the Line of Control and has been actively manned by forces of both countries. It has been the theatre of two major wars (1965 and 1971) and a minor war, Kargil (1999) and is in the words of former US president Bill Clinton, “the most dangerous place in the world.”

⁶ “Resolution 47” of the UN Security Council

2. A 'Mean' Media

The Media of India and Pakistan: A Brief Overview

In both Pakistan and India, the media are strong, influential and have always come out stronger after censorships and crackdowns. In general, the coverage of domestic and international news is objective and mature. The only exception is the journalism that happens in covering the other's country. Here's a bird's eye-view of the Pakistani and the Indian media:

The Media in Pakistan: The genesis of the media in Pakistan lies in the pre-Partition, pre-Independence newspapers launched mainly to pursue the Partition agenda and act as a shield against anti-Muslim propaganda. *The Dawn* was founded by Mohammad Ali Jinnah to propagate his politics and its objective – the creation of an independent Pakistan.⁷ The emphasis on Islam as a major pillar of national identity had led to an alliance between the religious leaders and the military, the civil bureaucracy and the intelligence services. This nexus of these national guardians has had a huge influence on the Pakistani media as they tried to use or control it to defend their interests and the national identity.

The trampling of the media started in a structured manner under Field Marshal Ayub Khan, who promulgated the Press and Publication Ordinance (PPO) in 1962. Under this law, the government could confiscate newspapers, close down news providers and arrest journalists at will. Ayub then went on to nationalise large parts of the press. In the 1980s, under General Zia-ul-Haq, the draconian became 'dragon-ian'. Newspapers were scrutinized and anything that was not to the liking of the dictatorial regime was wiped out. There was only one television channel, Pakistan TV, which was a government mouthpiece.

⁷ *Between Radicalisation and Democratisation in an Unfolding Conflict: Media in Pakistan*, report by International Media Support, July 2009

The media landscape of Pakistan changed completely in 2002 when General Pervez Musharraf established an electronic regulatory body called PEMRA (Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority) with a mandate of issuing licenses to private firms for operating in the media market. Why a military dictator would champion free media has two explanations. At an interaction with students in Oxford on March 11, 2011, eminent Pakistani editor Najam Sethi, said: “Musharraf was pleasantly surprised when he received massive media support during his coup against the democratically-elected Nawaz Sharif. The media loved Musharraf and vice-versa. The general thought that he could use the media to entrench himself in power, and so he let it multiply.” He added: “Little did he know that the same media would plot his downfall six years later.”

The second reason was India.⁸ The military’s motivation for liberalising media licensing was based on an assumption that Pakistani media could be used to strengthen national security and counter the threat from India. What prompted this shift was the military’s experience during the Kargil War and the hijacking of an Indian passenger aircraft (IC-814) by Pakistan-based militants on December 24, 1999. In both these instances, the Pakistani military felt that it had lost the media war to India.

In 2007, stung by harsh criticism for the suspension of Chief Justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry, Musharraf muzzled the media by taking some private channels off the air and issuing a fresh code of conduct for journalists. “News has become a contraband item,” said Imran Aslam, president of Geo TV, Pakistan’s largest TV station, which was blacked out for drawing international attention to the demonstrations against the government. Today, the Pakistani media is outspoken, vibrant and quite powerful.⁹ “Since the advent of the current democratic dispensation following the general election of 2008, it has been perceived as trying to set the national agenda in almost every sphere of life, and even to be asserting itself as a vigorous power broker,” says M Ziauddin, chief editor of *The Express Tribune*, in an article written for the *Diplomat* magazine. However, there exists a clear divide between the English and the Urdu press -- the former is more liberal and

⁸ Ibid

⁹ “Pakistani Media: Still Learning”, *Diplomat*, Feb 26, 2011

restricted to a fewer but very influential people. The latter is deeply conservative, has a sharp tongue, is vociferously anti-West and anti-India and often propagates radical religious ideas.

The Indian Media: The Indian media pre-dates the Independence of the nation by more than 150 years. In 1780, James Augustan Hicky started the first newspaper, the *Bengal Gazette*. By 1950 (three years after Independence) there were already 214 daily newspapers, of which 44 were fully in English. By the 1990s the total number of daily newspapers stood at 398, with a combined circulation of 7,774,000.

While the nationalist movement was active, most of the newspapers became weapons in the fight against the British imperial rule -- strong in language and sharp with propaganda. This ideological orientation vanished rapidly post Independence and the media, as a whole, became more commercial and competitive in approach. This change for the 'material' was largely due to the ownership structure of the Indian Press. Families or individuals own most of Indian newspaper conglomerates. With no particular laws and norms against cross-media ownership, most of the above have also entered the electronic media market.¹⁰ Tremendous growth of the media business has forced these groups to float shares in the public market or accept FDI (Foreign Direct Investment), in order to survive in the market. Consequently, the privately owned media structure is reshaping itself into a corporatized structure.

The last two decades have seen an explosion in the Indian media scene -- in terms of revenue and magnitude -- brought about by the forces of globalisation and privatisation.¹¹ The media and entertainment industry logged an 11-per cent growth in 2010 to touch \$14.5 billion and is projected to expand at a higher rate of 13 per cent in 2011 this year, says the KPMG report. The liberalisation of the economy in the 1990 too had a cascading effect on the media: in June 2002, the government of India approved 26 per cent of

¹⁰ Riaz ul Hassan, "Corporatization of Indian Media", *Viewpoint* online magazine

¹¹ Report prepared by consultancy KPMG, commissioned by the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI), 2010

Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in the case of news and current affairs and 74 per cent of FDI in the case of non-news and non-current affairs (medical and technical journals).

For such a revenue-generating machine, freedom came quite easy. In other words, although Freedom of the Press is not specifically mentioned in the chapter on Fundamental Rights in the Indian Constitution, it is implicit in the guarantee of Freedom of Speech and Expression.¹² It was made clear by the framers of the Constitution as well as by subsequent court rulings and opinions that freedom of the press, like any other Fundamental Right, cannot be curtailed by executive orders or administrative instructions which lack the sanction of law.

The biggest blot on the history of this free media was the imposition of censorship on the Press in 1975, as part of the wider clampdown on the nation and its people in form of the Emergency. During this period, lasting about two years, no line critical of the government was allowed to be printed, senior journalists who refused to bow before the authorities were arrested, and news that covered the activities of the political opposition was blacked out. The objective was not just to withhold news, but also to manipulate news so as to justify the Emergency.

Keeping aside this shameful period in the country's history, the media in India has been relatively free. Newspapers, TV, and radio act as watchdogs and are often severely critical of the powers-that-be. The level or extent of this freedom is debated in India almost every day.

¹² Article 19(1)(a), Constitution of India

3. 'Jarhead' Journalism

“When the nation is at war, reporting becomes an extension of that war”

– Max Hastings, correspondent, Falklands War

Two landmark incidents in India-Pakistan relations illustrate how nationalist and jingoistic the media can get when reporting on an enemy country. I call it Jarhead Journalism (no offence is meant to the US Marines) as it is a straitjacket and rests on stereotypes. The war in Kargil (May-July 1999) coincided with an explosion in the electronic media in India, making it the first televised war of South Asia. During this time, while the media became a weapon in the hands of the Indian government, they became a liability for the Pakistani government. The case study that follows will explain why and how.

Second, by the time the Mumbai terror attacks (Nov 26, 2008) took place, Pakistan had learnt from its earlier mistakes and understood the many ‘uses’ of the media. What ensued was an all-out media war, with calls for missile strikes and nuclear attacks.

The third case study is the Agra Summit of June 15-16, 2001 which shows a completely different picture – the Indian and the Pakistani media speaking the same language and ushering in a wave of goodwill. The impact of such a rare event was felt immediately. It is another matter that the joy was short-lived – making the media behaviour during the summit an exception rather than the rule.

Case Study I: The Kargil War of May 1999

What Happened: Almost during the time when the then Indian prime minister AB Vajpayee boarded a ‘peace bus’ and crossed the border amid an unprecedented media frenzy, the Pakistani army was sending forces to occupy key forward posts on the Indian side of the Line of Control (the military control line between the Indian and Pakistani-controlled parts of Jammu and Kashmir, which is a de facto border) in the Kargil district of Kashmir.

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Initially these incursions were not detected or given much importance by the Indian army and government - a failure which they rue till this day. By May 1999, Pakistani troops backed by Kashmiri guerrillas and Afghan mercenaries had seized about 130-200 square kilometers of Indian territory.

The government of India then launched 'Operation Vijay', mobilising 200,000 troops. For two months the world waited with bated breath as two nuclear powers fought a conventional high-altitude war, their second direct ground war after developing nuclear weapons.

With the Indian military escalating the warfare, Pakistan sought the help of the US to do some firefighting. Following the Washington Accord on July 4 brokered by US President Bill Clinton, where Sharif agreed to withdraw Pakistani troops, most of the fighting came to a gradual halt. The Indian army launched its final attacks in the last week of July and finally hostilities ceased on July 26. By this time, India had taken back most of its lost territories.

Kargil and the Indian Media: Unlike in the main theatre of war, where it was found unawares and struggling in the initial days, the accompanying media war saw India winning against Pakistan from Day 1. The reason behind this was simple -- Kargil coincided with a revolution in India's electronic media. In 1992, the Indian government started a series of economic reforms including the liberalization of the broadcasting industry, opening it up to cable television. This saw the entry of many foreign players like Rupert Murdoch's Star TV Network, MTV, and CNN. Soon after came Zee TV, the first privately-owned Indian channel to broadcast over cable. Its news arm Zee News was launched in 1995 and in 1998 the Murdoch-owned Star TV beamed its exclusively 24-hour news channel Star News. The National Readership Survey of 1997 put television viewership at 68.8%, with people watching TV at least 4.6 days a week. So by the time Kargil happened, the Indian electronic media were well entrenched and eager not just to report but also play a role in the big story that was unfolding.

The coverage created a national awareness of the kind India did not have earlier (of how conflicts are fought, and what soldiers and their families have to go through). Death was

no longer a statistic, but 'bravehearts-in-bodybags' coming back home. This was accompanied by a sense of national unity and nationalism with TV sets, newspapers and radio becoming the glue.¹³ "Kargil was a watershed mark in the militarization of the Indian mind," commented Maroof Raza, strategic affairs expert for leading Indian English language TV channel TimesNow.¹⁴ The media blitz included reports covering a plethora of possible angles of the conflict. There were human interest profiles of families of martyrs and the plight of villagers in border areas, poignant reports of letters from home and STD calls home and little spot stories on tailors stitching shrouds for the dead soldiers, the food Indians feed their soldiers, corporate responses to Kargil and views of celebrities on the conflict. The anti-Pakistan barrage was woven into all the above.

Curiously, during this time the World Cup cricket was on. A new front opened in the war when the India-Pakistan match came up. Newspapers and TV called the match a "battle." When India won the match, *The Asian Age*, an Indian English-language daily, screamed across eight columns: 'Reborn India Kill Pak'. In general, reportage was subjective and often without any attribution. It did not seem from the coverage that access to frontlines for the media was barred for most of the war.¹⁵ "The Pakis were a mean, hawk-eyed lot who slept during the day and kept vigil at night" -- this priceless line in an Indian newspaper was published without any attribution to anyone. When the reporter could not have got within seeing distance of the 'Pakis', how could this piece of fiction rear its head in a serious newspaper report? Siddharth Varadarajan, a senior editor with the Indian newspaper *The Hindu*, puts it in perspective: "The mass media is such an intrinsic part of the ideological superstructure of the modern nation-state that it is difficult for it to be truly detached and professional during times of war..."¹⁶

¹³ Ajai K. Raj, *The Kargil Conflict and the Role of the Indian Media*, IDSA, April 2009

¹⁴ Geeta Seshu, "Media and Kargil: Information Blitz with Dummy Missiles", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 34, No. 41 (Oct 9-15, 1999)

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Siddharth Varadarajan, "War and the Dharma of a Journalist", *Times of India*, August 7, (1999)

Here are a few ways by which the Indian government unabashedly used the media as a weapon of war during the Kargil conflict:

a) **Fanning Nationalist Fervour:** The patriotic consolidation of India was complete during the Kargil war thanks to private TV channels and newspapers. Pictures of soldiers' bodies being brought home to their wailing kith and kin accompanied by a charged-up commentary inflamed passions. Newspapers like the *Times of India* taunted the peaceniks who were counseling restraint: "It is like advocating restraint equally to the rapist and rape victim". Some media organisations announced donations for the families of army personnel; others arranged for satellite telephones for soldiers from border bunkers to call their families. Former Asia editor of BBC World News Rita Payne says: "Kargil was a real watershed. Suddenly Indian journalists turned gung-ho, a stark contrast to the BBC during the Falklands war."

b) **Image Building/Destroying:** On one hand India portrayed itself as a secular nation whose borders were being encroached upon by mercenaries. Keeping in mind the post 9/11 American paranoia, members of the Indian government and the media were keen to "exploit the image of the Islamic mujahedin—the bearded zealots with Stinger missiles on their shoulders—engaged in state-sponsored terrorism."¹⁷ In a televised press conference, the government released recordings of intercepted messages between the Pakistan army chief and his deputy, which seemed to prove Pakistan's complicity in guerrilla activities. The *Times of India* editorialized that Pakistan is "dominated by mullahs and generals steeped in drug-trafficking, money-laundering and international terrorism."

c) **Manipulating World Media:** Tony Clifton of *Newsweek* had reported the 1971 war between India and Pakistan from both sides. He remembers the wall-like secretiveness of the Indian army at the time. But all that changed dramatically this time round. "I'm very much struck by the regular Indian briefings, admitting casualties, pictures of coffins coming home - somewhere along the line the public relations of the Indian army has been

¹⁷ Daya Thussu, "Managing the Media in an Era of Round-the-Clock News: Notes from India's First Tele-War", Journalism Studies

turned around 180 degrees,” he says.¹⁸ The Indian government also managed to secure slots on BBC World and CNN to put forward its views. Senior ministers appeared on influential programmes like the BBC’s *Hardtalk*.

d) **Tear-Jerking:** As purveyors of information, the media soon got caught up in an “infowar”. Two weeks into the conflict, newspapers and TV channels carried horrifying reports that bodies of six Indian soldiers had been returned by Pakistan. The bodies, media outlets declared, were severely mutilated and bore marks of sustained inhuman torture. The nation was shocked. Subsequently, the story died down when an official briefing by the Indian foreign minister did not confirm such atrocities. But by that time the story had made its rounds and made its impact.

e) **Saturation Coverage:** The Indian Institute of Mass Communication (IIMC) has done a 10-week (mid-May to end July 1999) print media study on the coverage of the Kargil conflict. It looked at 301 issues of 17 Indian newspapers, both English and vernacular ones. As for the total number of stories, the *Indian Express* had 468, followed by the *Times of India*, 370. The *Tribune* had the highest number of editorials, 13, followed by the *Asian Age*, 11.

Kargil and the Pakistani Media: Years of repression prevented the Pakistani media from becoming a mature, well-oiled machinery by the time Kargil erupted. While criticizing the government of the day could have still been possible, when it came to the all-powerful military, the media became utterly helpless and obedient. So during this period, both the electronic and the print media supported the official versions instead of adopting a more independent or investigative approach.

Two factors severely constrained the Pakistani media from using the Kargil war the way the Indian media used it – to consolidate the nation and breed nationalistic fervor. First, the government took the hypocritical stand that those fighting in the Kargil sector were not Pakistani army regulars but mujahideens who had the blessings of the establishment. So even as scores of bodies of the Northern Light Infantry personnel arrived from the war

¹⁸ The *Hindu* on 22/10/1999

theatre, the Pakistani journalists had to look the other way. (Frustratingly for them, nationalist jingoism over bodybags from the same war was uniting the rival on the other side). Second, the government had restricted press access to the northern areas to keep the mujahedeen story alive. So, while the Indian TV channels were showing reporters crouching with soldiers and commenting on how the shelling went that day, Pakistani television was showing press briefing rooms. It was, therefore, a lose-lose situation for the Pakistani media.

Senior Pakistani columnist Anees Jillani said, “Kargil was not looked upon as a war in Pakistan at all. It was only the Indian media which converted it into a war.”¹⁹

Case Study II: The Agra Summit of June 2001

What happened: On July 14 a chartered Pakistan International Airlines Boeing 737-700 plane touched down in the technical area of Delhi airport, creating history and ballooning hope in the minds of millions of people in India and Pakistan. The aircraft was carrying Pakistani president Pervez Musharraf, his wife Shehba and a 19-member delegation, invited to India by then prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee. The objective of the ground-breaking trip to India, as defined by the general in his arrival statement, was: “In my talks with the Indian leaders, I will be looking forward to a meaningful, frank and substantial discussion urging them to join hands with us in resolving this (the Kashmir) dispute in accordance with the wishes of the Kashmiri people.”

The Agra summit between Musharraf and Vajpayee was held over the next two days in the city of the Taj Mahal. While Musharraf clung to what he called the “core issue” of Kashmir, Vajpayee would have none of it and focused on other outstanding matters. So, after two days of the rumour mills working overtime, the world media running from pillar-to-post, officials from both sides giving contradictory accounts of what was happening behind closed doors, hours of arduous one-on-one and delegation-level talks

¹⁹) Rasheeda Bhagat, *Frontline*, Volume 16, Issue 19, Sept 11-24, 1999

between the two nations, the summit finally collapsed. The government of India spokesperson Nirupama Rao said, “I am disappointed to inform you that although the commencement of a process and the beginning of a journey has taken place, the destination of an agreed joint statement has not been reached.”

Years later, while on a lecture tour in New York in 2009, Musharraf²⁰ said he had actually wanted to “walk out” of the Agra summit but was dissuaded from doing so by a senior aide. His frustration, he said, stemmed from the fact that then Indian prime minister had twice refused to include a reference to Kashmir in the elusive joint declaration.

The Media and Agra: It is now said that the media hyped up the Agra Summit to such an extent that it was bound to collapse under the weight of expectations. The round-the-clock coverage by the media of India and Pakistan as well as the rest of the world created a bubble that burst with Musharraf leaving for the airport in a huff, cutting short his “landmark” visit.²¹ “Some of them (TV channels) have also come out with special deals for the advertisers. As a build-up to Agra summit, channels are already churning out stories, interviews, programmes surrounding the event. Zee TV aired an interview with president Musharraf... Star News is flying down analysts from Pakistan and setting up a glass studio at Agra with the Taj Mahal in the backdrop.”

G Krishnan, executive director, TV Today network, and a promoter of leading Hindi news channel Aaj Tak, told *The Times of India*: “This is a must-cover media event which has lot of emotional involvement for the man on the street and we will focus more on our coverage than on getting advertisements. Most channels are also looking at the event as a brand building exercise and a spate of tune-in ads is to hit newspapers, periodicals, television and radio over the next one week.”²²

²⁰ *The News*, edition dated Oct 20, 2009

²¹ Sudipto Dey, Times Internet, July 8, 2001

²² TOI edition dated July 8, 2001

The initial coverage of the summit shows that it was one of those rare instances when the Indian and the Pakistani media spoke the same language. The following are a compilation of quotes from editorials in both Indian and Pakistani newspapers:

The News (Pakistan), July 16: *“Regardless of what the result is, the summit in itself will be considered a defining moment in the relations between the two neighbours. For General Musharraf, success -- in the way he sees it – is necessary to strengthen his position on the uneasy seat he occupies... For premier Vajpayee, success will be a crowning achievement after a life spent too long in the Opposition politics. But it can be hoped that even if the summit is not to be entirely successful, it will at least not entirely fail.”*

The Times of India, July 14: *“Despite the differences in their age and background, prime minister Vajpayee and Pakistan's military dictator general Pervez Musharraf share a common desire: to re-write the history of South Asia... but on their own terms. On Sunday, when they sit across each other at the negotiating table in Agra, the two will unfold their vision of history...”*

The Dawn (Pakistan): *“President Musharraf... conceding the relevance of points raised by Mr Vajpayee on Friday concerning burying the past, building a new relationship of trust and the need to discuss a whole range of subjects which could dispel suspicion and contribute to peace.”*

The Hindu (India): *“The first round of consultations between the Indian leaders and General Musharraf... helped clear the air. While a political breakthrough in bilateral relations may remain elusive at Agra, the prospect for a productive summit appears to have improved.”*

This bonhomie disappeared and the atmosphere started turning sour after the telecast of General Musharraf's breakfast meeting with prominent Indian editors where he revealed his formula for resolving the Kashmir issue. The problem was that he did this even before he unveiled it to the Indian prime minister. The then Indian external affairs minister Jaswant Singh said later: “This grandstanding fever had induced General Musharraf into a great deal of unrestrained comment in front of a select gathering of editors. Perhaps he

had been mesmerised by the media...When, therefore, such an assembly began to applaud the visiting general, and all in anticipation, he then refused to accept the presence of terrorism as an issue, continued to emphasise only the centrality of Jammu and Kashmir... This was getting too heavy a load for any conference to carry on.” He added: “In Agra, the critical point was this breakfast meeting that the visiting general had with the Indian editors.”²³

The centrality of the media’s role in the Agra summit had an irony in it: the peace balloon was burst by the very media that had pumped in so much hot air into it. After the unedited version of the breakfast meeting was broadcast, the mood in India changed and the government was not left with any mandate to negotiate with the general of Pakistan.

Case Study III: The Mumbai Terror Attacks of Nov 2008

“The Mumbai nightmare has plunged the media in India and Pakistan into the dangerous, old trap in which nationalism trumps responsible reporting. This is not a new phenomenon, nor is it restricted to India and Pakistan,”

- Beena Sarwar, Pakistan-based journalist.

What Happened: 26/11 was India’s 9/11. About a dozen coordinated shooting and bombings terrorised Mumbai between November 26-29, 2008, during which 164 people were killed and 308 injured. A burning Taj Mahal Hotel, which saw the worst of massacres, continues to be etched in public memory all across the world. Ajmal Kasab, the only attacker who was captured alive by the Indian security forces, disclosed that the Lashkar-e-Toiba – considered to be a terror organization by US, UK and the United Nations – was behind the attacks. Three years after 26/11, Pakistan officially accepted that “parts of” the conspiracy was hatched in its own soil.

26/11 and the Media: Mainstream Indian media called the attacks a “war against India.” The *Times of India* headline said: “It’s war on Mumbai.” Under a banner headline calling

²³ Jaswant Singh, *In Service of Emergent India: A Call to Honor*, Indiana University Press, 2007

it a *fidayeen* attack, the *Pioneer* stated: "...this time the attackers did not remain in hiding: they wanted the world to see them." The *Indian Express* headlined: "Mumbai attack was attack on the world." Pursuing the same line, the *Times of India* alleged that the real problem lies with Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan – "their (read extremists) commitment to the establishment of an altered world order... not only destabilises the region but also puts the entire world at grievous risk..." It went on further to assert: "whenever Pakistani agencies have thought of delivering a massive strike against India, they have tended to use Lashkar and Jaish operatives." The *Indian Express* published contents of mobile phone conversations between the terrorists and their "handlers" based in Karachi, Pakistan. It added that most of the grenades used in the attacks were manufactured at Pakistan Ordnance Factories in Pakistan's Punjab province. The *Hindu* reported that internet phone accounts used by the terrorists were paid for in Pakistan.

Facing a massive assault from the world media in general and the Indian media in particular, the Pakistani media went on the offensive too. On News One channel, a Pakistani security expert said that 26/11 was actually a plan hatched by "Hindu Zionists" and "Western Zionists", including the Mossad. "They look like Hindus. No Pakistani speaks the language they chatted in," said Zaid Hamid on the show *Mujhe Ikhtilaf Hai* (I Differ). The influential *Dawn* added a sort of 'legitimacy' to this charge, when it editorialised: "The Mumbai attacks, while new and horrifying in their method, come on the heels of a string of attacks across India this year. Those implicated in the previous attacks are home-grown Muslim militants. In addition, Hindu militants have been linked to attacks targeting Muslims and Christians in India. What this all clearly adds up to is that India has a massive problem of domestic terrorism..."²⁴

The word "war" was also being used liberally. The *Pakistan Observer* mooted removal of forces from the strife-torn western border (with Afghanistan). "When the country's facing serious threat on the eastern border, there is no reason to continue operation in FATA and Swat, which is a cause of internal polarisation. The government needs to provide the

²⁴ *Dawn* 'Fighting terror jointly', Nov 29, 2008

necessary lead while 160 million people of Pakistan are fully determined and prepared to defend the country. We would remind New Delhi that Pakistan is not Afghanistan and India is not the US and will receive a stunning reply to any misadventure,” said the editorial.

The *Frontier Post* claimed that India’s stance is part of “sinister designs against Pakistan to exact concessions on Kashmir and trade.” It warned India against war. “Indian leadership is under the wrong impression that Pakistan will take it lying down, as Pakistan has not downed any drone despite warnings. But India is not a superpower and certainly not a partner in war on terror. Nor Pakistan is Iraq or Afghanistan that any country can do the carpet-bombing,” said the editorial.

Taking a direct shot at the Indian media, the *Dawn* said: “...the Indo-Pakistan peace process has received a serious blow. For this New Delhi and the Indian media must shoulder most of the blame. Within hours of the attack and without giving concrete evidence, New Delhi was announcing a Pakistani link... What cannot be condoned is the behaviour of the Indian media, that taking its cue from the politicians — and from a culture of nationalism that is especially apparent where Islamabad is concerned — came down hard on Pakistan, often conjuring up fantastical descriptions of the way the siege of Mumbai was laid.”²⁵

There were no smoking guns or bodies littered, but the media war that followed the terror attacks on Mumbai added insult to injury on both sides of the border. Eminent Indian commentator and editor R. Jagannathan says, “This was proved when Times Now (a prime English news channel operated by the Times of India Group) decided to play the nationalist card, and ran a Spanish inquisition type of haranguing operation after 26/11. It played the role of prosecutor, taking on itself the mantle of defending the nation against its enemies. While no one is fooled by his aggressive rhetoric, there is no doubt that it (the channel) has grabbed the eyeballs.”²⁶ Dramatising events, introducing blame-game ticker tapes, spicing up commentaries with words like ‘war’, ‘nuclear’, ‘Hindu-Muslim’

²⁵ *The Dawn* ‘Times of Terror’, Dec 2, 2008

²⁶ Interviewed on April 9, 2011

and parroting the lines offered by the foreign office – that was journalism on both sides of the border during 26/11.

4. Causes and Conclusions

India and Pakistan are no longer two nascent states trying to find a foothold in world affairs. Today they are two nuclear powers, with the capability of bringing about a holocaust in South Asia. Hence, when the influential mass media of both nations talk in terms of the war, missile attacks and “ending the problem once and for all” – it sends jitters across the world. Internally, in both these countries a vicious circle emerges: the media’s war talk agitates the masses and the agitated masses, in turn, pressure the media to continue with the aggressive tone.

“India, formally, has a free and independent Press. Pakistan never had a free Press. Yet they behave the same way when it comes to reporting on each other. One would have thought that more than 60 years after Independence, there would be no need for jingoistic journalism,” says Dr Deepak Tripathi, historian and former BBC journalist²⁷. In the same vein, Jagannathan says: “Each TV channel is trying to outdo the other in the shortest possible time, and jingoism is the easy way out. Just like the Fox channel in the US, which takes a hard right neo-con stance, media persons also seem to think that a strong slant helps tie in viewers.” Rita Payne blames external factors like foreign policy for media belligerence. “Positions are hardening because Pakistan feels intimidated by India’s role in Afghanistan and Baluchistan,” she says.

While enemies for more than six decades no longer need reasons to be aggressive and abusive towards each other, my studies have pinned down a few factors that have led to the toxification of journalism in the subcontinent.

i) **Fixed mindsets and myths:**

“The First Law of Journalism: To confirm existing prejudice, rather than contradict it”

- Alexander Cockburn. American journalist and editor of *CounterPunch*

Pakistan sees India as an arrogant Hindu nation where minority Muslims are made to

²⁷ Interview with Dr Deepak Tripathi, Jan 30, 2011

suffer. India sees Pakistan through the tunnel-vision of Muslim fundamentalism nursing Islamic terrorism. Unfortunately, journalists on both sides wear the same glasses too.

“It’s the way Pakistan has been trained to look at India. India is not taught in colleges and schools. We look at India as Hindus who threw out Muslims. We are told from childhood that when Pakistan came into being, India tried to finish it off. Anybody who talks of friendship with India is called unpatriotic,” says Aamir Ghauri, former director of news at the Pakistani TV channel Duniya TV.²⁸

In her essay *The New ‘Ethnic Wars’ and the Media*, Jean Seaton writes: “The process of elaborating and allocating characteristics to groups of people defined as the enemy, and disseminating a view of them, is critical in the internal mobilization of opinion that is required to move populations towards wars with each other. Rhetorics of national and cultural identity are revived and invented in order to stimulate feelings of homogeneity within groups, and identify the enemies as excluded... the role of the media in inciting these feelings is part of 20th century warfare.”²⁹

Author Mohammad Hanif lists “some common assumptions about Pakistan and its citizens that I have come across in the Indian media...”³⁰ He mentions the assumption that the Pakistan government controls and runs jihadis. “It’s the tail that wags the dog... the Pakistani army has lost more soldiers at the hands of jihadis than it ever did fighting India.” Another myth, Hanif says, is that all Pakistanis hate India. “Three out of four provinces in Pakistan -- Sindh, Baluchistan, NWFP -- have never had any popular anti-India sentiment ever. Punjabis who did impose India as enemy-in-chief on Pakistan are now more interested in selling potatoes to India than destroying it.”

Now, we turn to the view from the other side. In a June 2011 poll, the Pew Center measured public opinion in Pakistan. Among the most surprising results is the degree to which Pakistani views of India have deteriorated over the last several years: “Pakistani

²⁸ Interviewed on Feb 7, 2011

²⁹ Tim Allen & Jean Seaton (ed) *The Media of Conflict*, Zed Books 1999

³⁰ The Times of India, Jan 4, 2009

views of traditional rival India have grown increasingly negative in recent years. Three-in-four express an unfavorable opinion of India, up from 50% five years ago. When asked which is the biggest threat to their country -- India, the Taliban or al Qaeda -- a majority of Pakistanis (57%) said India.”³¹ The Pakistan power establishment also believes that India is fomenting unrest and instability in Balochistan – of which there is no credible evidence so far. In an interview with *Time* magazine’s Aryn Baker, former Pakistani president Pervez Musharraf said he is convinced that New Delhi is responsible for providing Baluchi insurgents with weapons. “The Afghans have nothing,” he said, “so it must be the Indians.”

ii) **Lack of access:** On March 5, 1946 Winston Churchill famously said, “From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic, an iron curtain has descended across the Continent.” That ‘Iron Curtain’ is no longer now in Europe, but it very much exists in the Indian subcontinent. And it gets thicker when it comes to the media.

Indian-Pakistani reciprocal protocol only allows two journalists from the other country to live and work in their capital cities, Islamabad and New Delhi. If they step out of either New Delhi or Islamabad, they require special permission to do so. Amit Baruah, a journalist with the *Hindu*, was posted in Pakistan between 1997-2000.³² According to him, an Indian journalist is always treated with suspicion in Pakistan and cannot move around independently. Any rise in tension between the two nations would lead to trouble for these journalists. Baruah regrets not being allowed to attend the funeral, in 1998, of John Joseph, the bishop of Faisalabad who committed suicide in protest against Pakistan’s ‘blasphemy’ laws; being forbidden to view the wreckage of an Indian Air Force plane shot down during the Kargil conflict of 1999; and being prevented from entering Afghanistan from Pakistan to report on the Kandahar hijacking later that year. The author writes in his book that he was always being followed by “people employed by the Pakistani government”.

³¹ Face-to-face interviews were conducted with 2,000 adults in Pakistan April 13 to 28, 2010.

³² Amit Baruah, *Dateline Islamabad*, Penguin Books, January 2007

The 'Iron Curtain' is impenetrable even for tourists. Despite the shared culture, food, music and Bollywood, India and Pakistan do not even have a system of giving tourist visas to each other's citizens. When visas are granted, they are city-specific, single entry visas limited to a fortnight or a month. Moreover, visitors must report to the local police within 24 hours of arrival and departure. The cumulative result of all this is absolute ignorance and lack of knowledge about their neighbours. Fair and informed journalism, as a result, becomes the first casualty.

iii) **Actual Freedom (or the lack of it) of the Press:** The level of freedom the Press in India and Pakistan enjoy greatly determines the tone and tenor of one's coverage of the other. The rider "in the interests of national security and territorial integrity" – found in the statutes of both nations – is wide and deep enough to swallow any kind of journalism that takes a contrarian tone. The Booker prize-winning novelist and human rights campaigner Arundhati Roy faces the threat of arrest for claiming that Kashmir was not necessarily an integral part of India. Even harsher punishment would await anyone in Pakistan if she/he talks of Kashmir in a way that doesn't fit the official line.

The Constitution of India does not provide any specific guarantees for freedom of the Press. The Press is called "free" primarily because of the existence of Article 19(1)(a) – Right to Freedom of Speech and Expression. The broadcast media and the Internet are, however, treated differently because they have been traditionally owned by the government (unlike newspapers, which are largely privately-owned).³³ "The perspective of the courts on broadcast media is: While the right to broadcast is part of the freedom of speech and expression, the airwaves and frequencies are public property, and because they are limited they are needed to be used in the best interests of society, and, therefore, require some sort of regulation." This regulation can be found in the very next provision of the Constitution, Article 19(2)(a)(1) which permits the state to pass laws on matters that affect "public morality, or undermines the security of, or tends to overthrow, the State."

³³ Manoj Joshi, "September 11 and After: Pressure for regulation and self-regulation in the Indian media", *Media, War and Terrorism*, Routledge, 2004

The sole statutory, quasi-judicial body set up for media regulation in India is the Press Council of India, established in 1966 to preserve the freedom of the press and to maintain and improve the standards of newspapers and news agencies in the country.³⁴ However, PN Vasanti, director of the Centre for Media Studies (New Delhi) says, “The watchdog has been rendered largely toothless as it only has the power to inquire into complaints against newspapers and journalists, and has no way of imposing punishments on those who err.”

The electronic media in India underwent a revolution with the mushrooming of private cable and satellite channels in the 1990s. The Cable Television Networks (Amendment) Rules 2000 regulates or prohibits the transmission of any programme or channel if it is necessary to do so in the interest of the “sovereignty or integrity of India or security of India or friendly relations of Indian with any foreign state or public order, decency or morality”. Central and state government authorities can seize equipment or prohibit any programme or channel if it is not in conformity with the prescribed programme and advertising codes.

The legalese aside, how free are the Indian media in reality? P. Sainath, the rural affairs editor of the *Hindu*, says that the Indian media is “politically free, but imprisoned by profit.”³⁵ While the media has from time to time uncovered political corruption, investigative stories have been rare and often short-lived. Meanwhile, it’s unusual for the Indian media to criticize the government’s foreign policy or to seriously question the actions of its leaders, and it frequently shies away from publishing anything that might upset corporate advertisers, even if there’s evidence of serious lawbreaking. For instance, scarce coverage was given to the winning of the Nobel Peace Prize by Chinese dissident Liu Xiaobo. In this case the media clearly followed the government’s advice of not provoking China.³⁶

³⁴ PN Vasanti, “Media regulation needs teeth”, *Mint*, May 27, 2010

³⁵ Abraham George, “India’s Free Press Illusion”, *The Diplomat*, Oct 26, 2010

³⁶ Anil Thakkar, “Not worth a quarrel with China”, *The Times of India*, Dec 9, 2010

There is also a strong school of opinion which says that during the Kargil conflict of 1999, the Indian media was pressured by the government to exaggerate successes and suspend all critical comment. *Indian Express* editor Shekhar Gupta, commenting on the media and Kargil, said, “Stories were sanitized if not censored in the interest of the nation. These pertained to the frustration of the soldiers, their being ill-equipped and unreasonable orders received by them from their seniors.”

Freedom House, in its 2010 country report, says of India: “The predominantly private media are vigorous and diverse, and their investigations and scrutiny of politicians form an important component of India’s democracy. Nevertheless, journalists continue to face a number of constraints. The constitution protects freedom of speech and expression but does not explicitly mention media freedom. The government occasionally uses its power under the Official Secrets Act to censor security-related articles.”³⁷

The Press in Pakistan has been moving from frying pan to fire with every successive military regime that has ruled the country. Ironically, the media flourished, was decontrolled and private TV channels took birth not under a democratic regime, but under the military dictatorship of General Pervez Musharraf. The honeymoon, however, ended when the media turned its guns towards the general and his administration.

One media think tank says: “Pakistan’s media has been critical of the government with regards to domestic politics and their relationship with the US. ... Nonetheless, the media has rarely faulted, let alone questioned the government and the military with regards to ties with Delhi. More often than not, both liberal and conservative media carry stories and editorials which depict India in a negative light.”³⁸ The think tank goes on to say that the Press is often used by politicians, the military, religious leaders and Intelligence agencies to not only voice their opinion, but more importantly, reach out to the masses and create a wave of anti-India hysteria, which often diverts attention from the more vital domestic issues of a weak economy and deteriorating law and order.

³⁷ www.freedomhouse.org

³⁸ Policy Research Group, www.poreg.org, March 17, 2020

Structurally, the print media in Pakistan is monitored and controlled by the ministry of information and broadcasting. The primary news agency, the Associated Press of Pakistan (AAP) was taken over by the government in 1961 and made into a corporation. The electronic media is regulated by the all-powerful Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA), established in 2002. The rule book of PEMRA states that publication or broadcast of “anything which defames or brings into ridicule the head of state, or members of the armed forces, or executive, legislative or judicial organs of the state,” as well as any broadcasts deemed to be “false or baseless” can bring jail terms, fines and license cancellation.

Freedom House ranked Pakistan 134th out of 196 countries in its 2010 Freedom of the Press Survey. Pakistan’s score was 61 on a scale from 1 (most free) to 100 (least free), which earned a status of “not free.” Reporters Without Borders put Pakistan 151st out of the 178 countries ranked in its 2010 Press Freedom Index and named Pakistan as one of “ten countries where it is not good to be a journalist”.

iv) Pressures and Fears: It cannot be denied that “the press and broadcasting have another life – as businesses. Contemporary news is processed in what are really multinational news factories, and is as subject to the rationalizations of the market as any other commodity.... How news of wars is constructed and sold is, more than ever, subject to the constraints of a ferociously competitive market.”³⁹

Consider this: During the Mumbai massacre, terrible events were taking place across Mumbai. These were, naturally, being reported. Seeing these on TV, reading about these acts of terrorism, the nation’s temperature rose. Anger engulfed everyone, public mood turned fiery. Under such circumstances, every media house in India, in varying degrees, ran reports that upheld public sentiments. None could afford taking the risk of saying anything ‘out-of-line’ -- even if it meant being rational and logical. It seemed that it was not producers, but news consumers who were running the show.

³⁹ Jean Seaton, *The New ‘Ethnic’ Wars and the Media*, Zed Books 1999

Aamir Ghauri, the former head of news and current affairs of the popular Pakistani TV channel Geo TV, says: “Pakistan is still run by the military. Anybody who talks of friendship with India is called unpatriotic. If we do not see India through the establishment’s lens, we might be picked up as agents and spies.”⁴⁰ He went on to say that media is owned by none but the “friends” of the establishment. “Editors who travel in the prime minister’s planes do not have the courage to say whatever they want to,” he admitted. Beena Sarwar, a Pakistani freelance journalist and filmmaker, said she is often called “unpatriotic or an Indian agent” when she talks about peace or dialogue with India.⁴¹

The following two incidents, in India and Pakistan respectively, exemplify state-sponsored harassment of the media. On June 9, 2002, the Indian police arrested Delhi-based journalist Iftikhar Gilani, who was working for the Jammu and Srinagar based newspaper *Kashmir Times*. His reports on the Gujarat riots and violence in Kashmir were the ostensible reasons for his arrest. “The arrest was in reality aimed at harassing the family of Syed Ali Shah Geelani, Iftikhar’s father-in-law, who happens to be a Jamaat-e-Islami Kashmir leader, a vociferous advocate of the merger of Jammu and Kashmir with Pakistan...,” wrote Indian journalist Manoj Joshi.⁴²

In a similar incident in Pakistan, journalists Rab Nawaz Joya and Javed Chanwal Chandor were detained and tortured by police in the Okara district of the north-eastern province of Punjab. Although they were arrested on charges of theft and fraud, it has been alleged that the true reason behind their arrests was linked to their efforts to gather more information on Ajmal Kasab, the only surviving terrorist in the November 2008 attacks in Mumbai.

The International Media Support, in a paper, reported: “The Pakistani media’s coverage of foreign affairs is limited, superficial and, at times, misleading. Commercial interests,

⁴⁰ Interview with Aamir Ghauri, Feb 2, 2011

⁴¹ Rama Lakshmi, Washington Post Foreign Service, April 16, 2009

⁴² Manoj Joshi, *Media, War and Terrorism*, Routledge, 2004

hidden political agendas, and attempts to coerce the media are often the motivations behind airing biased information in newspaper and TV reports, interviews and talk shows. But journalists have so far not been able to unite and raise their concerns about the lack of objective, balanced journalism with the powerful media owners.”⁴³ Almost echoing the same sentiments from the other side of the border, well-known Indian editor Vir Sanghvi says: “The Indian media use very different standards for reporting on issues that relate to our foreign policy from those that they apply to other issues. I am told that jingoistic reporting on foreign policy issues usually results in higher TRPs. So not only do the media aggravate conflicts, they often actively promote them.”⁴⁴

In my studies and conversations with journalists and media observers on both sides of the border, several other factors came up that sustain and fuel the India-Pakistan media war. All of these, however, had their roots in any or every one of the above. A change in long-held mindsets, greater opportunities to travel and live in each other’s country, keeping the foreign office from breathing down journalists’ necks and a course-correction by media houses so as not to bend before uninformed public opinion – could help to bring peace and mutual understanding between two nuclear-armed nations.

⁴³ The International Media Support, “Democratisation in an unfolding conflict: Media in Pakistan”, July 2009

⁴⁴ Interview via email Feb 8, 2011

5. Future Sense

Rukhsana Aslam, a media educator from Pakistan and Asian Journalism Fellow at the Pacific Media Centre, says that journalism can act as a catalyst for conflict resolution “If... you approach a conflict without trying to romanticise it, glamorise or dehumanise it -- it (then) automatically become peace journalism.”⁴⁵ Aslam, who has set up media departments in three universities in Pakistan, has a formula for this -- an extension of the 5 W’s maxim that journalists use in information gathering; what, who, where, when, why. “So who is involved, who initiated the conflict, who is going to benefit, which is the weaker side, what are the stakes. By answering these questions you get beyond reporting on how many people died, or what kind of aircraft was used,” she says.

There is a growing realization on both sides of the border that journalism, if practiced sensibly -- combining knowledge with compassion -- can actually help improve relations between India and Pakistan. Andrew Whitehead of BBC World Service says, “It is necessary for both the countries to know each other and not castigate each other.”⁴⁶ The former BBC’s South Asia Correspondent (1993-1997) adds: “The media of every country are rooted in that country’s political culture and context. But that should not overwhelm journalists, make them lose their calm and professionalism. A dramatic story does not need a further addition of drama.”

The Desire for Peace

With the above in mind, two leading media houses of India and Pakistan – the Times of India Group and the Jang Group – initiated a campaign on January 1, 2010, aimed at building peace and bridges between both nations.

In a joint statement, the editors of the two houses said: “The media in India and Pakistan... can help in writing a final chapter, adding a happy twist to a story that seemed headed for tragedy. It can do so by shaping the discourse and steering it away from

⁴⁵ Nga Reo Tangata: Media and Diversity Network , a newsletter published in May , 2011

⁴⁶ Interviewed at Bush House in April, 2011

rancour and divisiveness... It can offer solutions and nudge the leadership towards a sustained peace process. It can create an enabling environment where new ideas can germinate and bold initiatives can sprout... where a plurality of views and opinions are not drowned out by shrill voices.” The objective of this campaign was stated to be “a social compact based on a simple yet powerful impulse -- *Aman ki Asha* -- A Desire for Peace.”

A Prescription

As a part of this programme, a two-day meeting of prominent journalists and television anchors from India and Pakistan was held in Karachi on April 6-7, 2010. There had been interactions between journalists of both nations in the past, but what made the Karachi conference stand out was that it was organized by media houses and not by any governmental or non-governmental entity. After two days of deliberations, editors and anchors of both nations underlined the following points which should be the bedrock of sensible journalism in South Asia:

- 1) **The need to create more empathy for each other’s country and for more cross-border information:** Imran Aslam, the president of Geo Television, said, “It is important to look at things from a learning approach, rather than a perspective to score points against each other.”
- 2) **Ensuring more reportage of economic, infrastructural and cultural issues.**
- 3) **The need to reinforce journalism’s best practices:** avoiding single-source reports, or questioning reports originating from government agencies.
- 4) **Easing visa restrictions and restrictions on each other’s media:** Allowing journalists easier access, and ending the bar on cellphone roaming between Pakistan and India (a restriction unique to these two countries).
- 5) **Training workshops for reporters on specific issues like Kashmir, water resources and terrorism:** This would help raise the level of reporting in general, and on India-Pakistan issues specifically.
- 6) **Monitoring TV talk shows:** To analyse how often hawkish voices are invited on air compared to more nuanced, complex views.
- 7) **Develop a code of ethics** on issues of mutual concern or guidelines between Indian

and Pakistani media practitioners.

8) **A website** to allow editors and media practitioners to engage with each other across the border and help defuse tensions.

It is too early to predict whether the two media entities will be able to succeed in their enterprise.⁴⁷ Public opinion which they want to shape has always been prone to emotions and the memories of 26/11 terrorist attacks still remain fresh among Indians. This raises a question mark on whether the media would be able to sustain their campaign. Even if they are successful in shifting public opinion for peace talks, a terrorist attack could undermine all their efforts. A day after the launch of the Aman ki Asha campaign, the right-wing *Nawa-e-Waqt* newspaper of Pakistan, in its editorial trashed the “common culture” argument, saying: “They should not forget that it was on the issue of culture and economy, the two nation theory came into being and became the basis for the division of India.”⁴⁸ Another Urdu daily *Ausaf* commented: “Isn’t it strange that on the one hand India is preparing a military doctrine but on the other hand two media groups are hoping for ‘Aman ki Asha’... India’s efforts to destabilize Pakistan especially in Balochistan will lead to peace?”

Eminent Indian editor and columnist MJ Akbar counters these arguments, saying: “It is axiomatic that both countries will have to compromise on some elements of deeply-held positions to create the ‘give’ that will get the solution.” Putting a part of the onus also on the media of both nations, he adds: “The initiative taken by the media groups also means that they must create a new culture of reporting in which honesty is not undermined by hysteria.”⁴⁹

The debate on the media’s role in acting as a weapon of war versus a purveyor of peace will continue. But what is clear from the ailments and prescriptions put forward in this

⁴⁷Shamshad A. Khan, “Media’s Constructivism and the India-Pakistan Peace Process”, Institute for Defence Studies and Analysis, Feb 2, 2010

⁴⁸*Nawa-e-Waqt*, editorial, January 2, 2010

⁴⁹<http://mjakbarblog.blogspot.com/2010/01/peace-is-where-media-is.html>

study is that this is certainly not an incurable or incorrigible state of affairs. Before we journalists start writing our next piece on India or Pakistan, let us rewind in our minds a vision spelled out by a head of government in the subcontinent: “I dream of a day, while retaining our respective national identities, one can have breakfast in Amritsar, lunch in Lahore and dinner in Kabul. That is how my forefathers lived. That is how I want our grandchildren to live.”⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Quoted from statement by Dr Manmohan Singh, prime minister of India, Jan 8, 2007

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