

Media-state relations in South Asia: A general overview with particular reference to India

- Narayani Ganesh

The nature of the media-state relationship in South Asia:

The media in South Asia was, till very recently, dominated by a problem peculiar to this region. By and large, the media here tended to be an extension or reflection of the state and its ceremonial activities. Look at the events that hogged prime space in the print media or prime time on state-owned television news channels. They were so predictable. The arrival or departure of the head of state to or from a foreign trip; rote speeches delivered at state functions; press releases issued by government departments and reports of the annual statements of public sector undertakings and the five-year plans were what the readers and viewers were inflicted with. Even newspaper editorials read like speeches from the pulpit, doling out advice directed almost exclusively at the government.

Today, particularly in India, the question often raised in journalism classrooms is: Let's say you were a reporter covering the prime minister's speech and the *bandobust* (security) for him disrupted normal life. Would your report deal in large part with this disruption of everyday life or would it focus on the prime minister's speech that was full of platitudes? Those journalists who are intrepid or candid enough to say they would focus on the disruption are in the new mould that is gradually emerging as more responsible and professional reflectors of ground realities.

The engine of this change is the social and economic middle class that has preoccupations with issues relating to civic life as distinct from political life or life of the state. It is this middle class – of which most have neither clear-cut political preferences nor even interest in politics -- which forms the main constituency of a free media. Issues such as emancipation of women, education, health, consumer protection and environmental

impacts are gradually overtaking the emphasis given to statements of political leaders. With this change comes a change in perspective that the media has with the state for a healthier, more dynamic relationship between the two.

Wherever the media in South Asia is either browbeaten or compromised to disseminate information that is largely an elaboration of state-related activity, there is need for soul-searching and introspection – both by the media and the state. With the exception of India and maybe Sri Lanka -- the two South Asian countries where parliamentary democracy has survived the worst possible threats to it both from within and without -- the media in the region needs to move away from placing undue emphasis on statements of political leaders. Instead, more space and attention should be given to the people-centric issues mentioned above. In fact, the media should go farther and also highlight issues that impact us not just directly but also indirectly. We need to take the theory of the butterfly effect seriously, that anything that happens anywhere in the world can affect anything anywhere in the world.

The relationship between the media and the state should be a healthy, dynamic one; they should see themselves as neither adversaries nor buddies. This is possible only if both parties play the roles they are meant to play. The media should reflect the success or failure of the state in serving the people rather than serve as the state's mouthpiece. For, the state's sole reason for existence is not its self-glorification; rather, it is to serve as an instrument of governance, carrying out its responsibilities as facilitator in assuring safety and security and executing the day-to-day administration of the country.

Why sometimes the media compromises its role as reflector of reality:

When the state muzzles the media: Governments often go to the extreme of muzzling the media in order to garner support for themselves; to present a sanitized version of the goings-on in the country to the citizens of that country and to the international community. However, this can only be a temporary tactic as neither force nor information-suppression can be sustained for long.

On June 26, 1975, following the Allahabad high court judgment that declared the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's election invalid, Mrs. Gandhi declared a state of internal emergency under Article 352 of the Constitution. The media was forbidden from criticizing the government, as it was seen as being subversive and unpatriotic and this went on for 19 months till the Emergency was lifted. Today, all those who believe in freedom of expression have discredited both the Emergency and the journalists who wholeheartedly supported it.

What should a responsible journalist do in instances where the state has been accused of human rights violations in certain areas? In the interest of national security, should there be self-censorship by the media in such circumstances? This might have made sense at one time but today, in the era of satellite television, the Internet and global information networks, such self-censorship – or indeed, state-induced censorship – becomes utterly meaningless. The foreign media that is as accessible as the local media today will make what we might try to hide from readers or viewers available to them.

Besides reportage of human rights violations, even efforts to play down incidents of violence that are either sought to be concealed for a while or under-reported for fear of sparking widespread panic and violence, are not possible today. For instance, in the Indian context, the tragic and violent killing -- of both former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and later, her son Rajiv Gandhi -- were first reported by the foreign media before the regional media reported on them. Even the extent of the casualties and human suffering following a natural calamity like the Gujarat earthquake of 2001 or the state-abetted post-Godhra riots in 2002, were all reported first by the foreign media and only then followed by regional media reports. So, clearly, any delay in information dissemination locally is no guarantee that things will remain under wraps till the situation is under control. In fact, it will work to the contrary, as blanking out of information can cause more harm than good, creating crises of confidence leading to more panic.

The Indian media, however, has shown exemplary courage and spirit in unearthing the truth about the Chittisinghpura controversy. The media exposed the killing of five

innocent civilians by security forces in Jammu and Kashmir. The security forces had claimed that the five were foreign militants who in fact were responsible for the massacre of 35 Sikhs in the region in 2000. The recent turmoil in Manipur in north-eastern India has received extensive media coverage by way of special reports, opinion articles and editorials, generating a huge debate about the necessity or otherwise of continuing with the Special Armed Forces Act in the region. Post-Godhra Gujarat coverage delved into every little detail, raising important questions and exposing the way the state had overstepped its limits. The Indian media has gone about its business in a fearless manner, even at the risk of offending the state.

In Kathmandu, a curious thing happened. Maoists killed Tekendra Raj Thapa, correspondent of Radio Nepal and human rights activist, two months after they had kidnapped him, on August 17, 2004¹. The local media reacted by blanking out all news of Maoist activity. Was the media right in blocking from public view what was happening on the ground? And by doing so, how would it help in resolving the conflict? And why is the life of a journalist more precious than that of the nearly 10,000 people who died in Nepal over the last ten years since the Maoist movement gained momentum?

Compulsions of misplaced patriotism during times of war/terrorist attacks:

What is the responsibility of the media during times of war or terrorist attacks? Isn't it the patriotic duty of the media, you would ask, to wholeheartedly support the government in times of such national emergencies?

During the 1999 Kargil conflict, the bodies of some Indian soldiers were sent to Delhi from the front. Many sections of the Indian media reported that the enemy had mutilated the bodies of the soldiers. However, there were other journalists who claimed that this was mere propaganda aimed at stirring up patriotic emotions.² The few journalists – more the exception than the rule – were accused by many of their colleagues, friends and relatives of being less than patriotic. The ethical point that arose was: To whom did the

¹ *The Hindu*, August 18, 2004.

² “*War and Dharma of a Journalist*” by Siddharth Varadarajan, *The Times of India*, August 7, 1999.

professional journalist owe primary loyalty, to the profession that earned him his livelihood, or to the state? If the journalist failed to do his duty – in this case, in the name of the state – could not the same state require this of the journalist at some later date to suit its own purpose?

In 1998, following the nuclear tests carried out by India in Pokhran, anyone who questioned the legitimacy or ethics of the tests was dubbed anti-national by the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The media therefore is constantly walking a tightrope – between facing the danger of being branded unpatriotic/anti-national and that of sanctifying anything in the name of nationalism and patriotism. Post-9/11, this is what happened even in the United States, where the media was emotionally blackmailed into tempering down reports for fear of being seen to be unpatriotic. Similarly, in the case of the Iraq invasion, pacifists and anti-war activists were accused of being insensitive to the plight of the young US soldiers who were operating in punishing conditions.

That's why media-state relations should transcend the here and now to take stock of larger long-term issues in order to bring the right perspective into reporting and governance. A debate that should involve policy makers, people and media only ends up degenerating into specifics of time and place, personalities and geographical boundaries. With globalization and communication networks shrinking the world into one geographical entity and one big community, isolated arguments on security, terrorism or even globalized businesses are completely irrelevant. Macro perspectives are crucial to formulating micro policy.

It is governments that go to war, not people:

Recently, a colleague, Amrith Lal, visited Jammu in the state of Jammu and Kashmir, to do a story on the plight of the refugees there. These refugees are not the Kashmiri Pandits who fled the Kashmir valley in the wake of the militancy that flared in 1989. They are from villages close to the Line of Control (LOC) separating Azad Kashmir from the Jammu region. With constant shelling from either side damaging their homes and their agricultural land rendered dangerous with landmines, these villagers were forced to leave

their homes much against their will, seeking refuge in camps in the township of Jammu. Amrith Lal heard them out and brought back this poignant story. Earlier, when their fields were not sown with landmines, the villagers would lie low when crossfire across the border carried on for many days, both the Indian and Pakistani armies taking aim at each other. After a point, villagers from both sides of the LOC would stride up to their respective armies posted there and throwing up their hands, would declare firmly: “*Bus, bahut ho gaya hai, ab hame apna kaam karne do.*” (We’ve had enough of this nonsense; stop this right away and let us get on with the business of life.) And there would be a cease-fire, while villagers resumed their daily tasks and visited each other across the border, with neither official documents nor passports to proclaim their ‘national’ identity. Many families in the villages on either side were related to one another either through marriage or birth.

When the media highlights this kind of people-to-people contact stories, it not only makes for interesting reading – it also reaffirms our faith in the Third Estate³ and drives home the point that it is not people who go to war but governments.

The media’s access to information and the freedom to publicize it:

The dichotomy of maintaining the freedom of the media and preserving state security has led, in many instances, to stricter controls. How much information is good for public consumption and how much should a secret be preserved by the state?

The media in India enjoys much greater liberty and has access to more information than does the media in other South Asian countries. But it is closely followed by the media in Sri Lanka, and then in lesser degrees in Bangladesh and Nepal. Despite the overtly undemocratic nature of government in Pakistan, the media here has shown great resilience and initiative. An interview Najam Sethi, editor of *Friday Times*, gave to the BBC so enraged the Nawaz Sharief government that he was arrested and jailed.⁴ He

³ In today’s context, the I, II & III estates would correspond to the ruling political class, the other privileged classes and the rest of the population. In the 19th century, the three estates referred to the clergy, nobility and peasantry.

⁴ <http://web.amnesty.org/library>, news service 089/99

wasn't the only one; some others too who wrote exposes on corrupt government officials met with similar fate. Very little information is available on Bhutan and the Maldives. The Indian media has access to and publishes details of the defence budget, for instance, whereas the media in Pakistan has access to barely a fraction of the entire defence report of Pakistan. So they can effectively only say whether Pakistan's defence budget has gone up or down but would have no details of what defence equipment is being purchased.

In India, the problem in the relationship between the media and the state is not that there is state control over information; rather, it is of the state's apathy to what the media reports. The media in India is free to report on any issue where information is freely available. The point to be pondered over is what is the extent of its impact on the way that the state functions?

After the 1999 Kargil conflict, a committee was set up under the chairmanship of defence analyst, journalist and former bureaucrat Mr. K Subrahmanyam. The Kargil Review Committee Report⁵ was put on the table of the Lower House of Parliament (the Lok Sabha) on February 23, 2000. But till date, the House has not ventured to discuss its findings despite the media analyzing the findings threadbare. So a free media in a free country has still to grapple with the indifference of the state and in many instances, even of the people.

Take the case of the kind of investigative reporting carried out by Tehelka in India. The 2001 Tehelka expose saw several corrupt politicians getting caught red-handed by investigating reporters. But the result was the reporters and the media group had cases slapped on them by a vindictive government. A conscientious journalist, in these circumstances, often suffers from existential angst. He might ask himself: Why bother to gather information and report it when the chances are loaded against such reports initiating positive action?

⁵ <http://nuclearweaponarchive.org/india/KargilRCC.html>

On the other hand, you do have many instances of how extensive media coverage and constant replay of crucial events and information spur governments and people into action. Take the case of the Iraqi hostage crisis where armed militants have threatened to kill three Indian truck drivers and others if their demands are not met. The 24X7 telecasting of the hostages, the hostage takers, the family of the hostages and community reaction, have definitely affected the quality and manner of negotiations.

Even in a country like the United States, where the First Amendment confers unlimited freedom on the media, the media faced immense problems, post-9/11. The media was browbeaten into maintaining a very pro-government line, all in the name of patriotism and a united front against terrorism.

How we deal with contentious issues:

Often, the South Asian media and states find themselves dealing with contentious issues – related to terrorism, strained bilateral relations and globalization – in a manner that suggests these are independent of one another. Often, armed conflicts, whether internal or external, are dealt with in isolation from all the other issues mentioned above, and so end up obscuring the larger picture. All these also involve issues of security.

Highlighting the prevailing security threat to the South Asian region after the nuclear tests conducted by India and Pakistan in 1998, Rashed Rahman -- chairman of the board of governors of the Journalists Resource Centre in Pakistan – made a significant statement. He said that the arms race in the subcontinent had shifted the priorities of both the governments from peaceful development to war. He pointed out that without drastic economic reforms in agrarian and industrial sectors along with keen emphasis on human development, the lot of the people would never get better.⁶

The media in South Asia, where all seven countries are still grappling with basic issues of development, can play the role of a catalyst by regularly highlighting life-affirming

⁶ Speech delivered by Rashed Rahman, Chairman, JRC, at South Asian Dialogue on Media, Peace & Development, May 22-24, 1999, Pakistan.

stories of individual and community-led efforts at bringing about improvements in local development. In the Indian context, there are several striking examples of how, by reporting these kind of stories, the media helped disseminate positive information that led to greater awareness and development, often turning an inflammable situation that would have compromised security of the region into one that fermented cooperation and progress.

In 1985, social worker Rajendar Singh and his organization, Tarun Bharat Sangh, convinced the villagers in drought-prone Alwar district in Rajasthan, to revive traditional methods of water harvesting and storage. They began by repairing and restoring the old check-dams or *johads*, the traditional way of harvesting rainwater. Today, Alwar district alone has 500 such functional *johads*. The water table has gone up and the land has become fertile, supporting the needs of the village. The experiment spread to other parts of water-starved Rajasthan, as well as to other states, a perfect example of how self-initiated development work at the grassroots level – even with little or no state involvement – can help transform a society from deprivation to prosperity.⁷

So what is the connection between this story and the larger security issues in the South Asian region? There are two kinds of security threats – external and internal. If we take the examples of Nepal, north-eastern parts of India, or even Kashmir or Jaffna and surrounding areas in Sri Lanka, it becomes clear that internal unrest and rebellion is usually born out of conditions of extreme deprivation. When basic needs like food, shelter, healthcare and education facilities are either absent or scarce, unemployment and frustration drives people to take up force and rebellion as a means of survival. The state is given the heave-ho, and everything, including dispensation of justice, is taken over by rebel groups who set up parallel “governments” of their own, however crude or violent it is in form and content. When such rebellion swells, the security threat snowballs to affect all aspects of civilian life and compromises national security as well.

⁷ Rajendar Singh was given the Ramon Magsaysay award in 2001 for his pioneering work in water management.

That is why the media has a very important role to play in helping to defuse tension and in spurring development activity. In the case of Alwar district elaborated above, the media achieved something stupendous by turning the spotlight on the success of the villagers' efforts to revive water bodies. It showed how what could have become a hotbed of discontent and rebellion against the state and prosperous communities got transformed into action for self-recovery, progress and prosperity. Media reports in fact 'incited' people of other villages to plunge into development activity rather than take to arms.

Role of a responsive and responsible media in the context of globalization:

The answer to many of the doubts professional journalists face in the South Asian region might lie in the marketing term 'glocal', an amalgam of the words 'global' and 'local'. By having a global perspective – by being sensitive to local sensibilities – the indigenous media can score over the international informational mega corps. Here again, the ability of the media to project aspirations and reflect society's needs is important.

Amartya Sen, the Nobel-prize-winning economist, famously pointed out that “in the terrible history of famines in the world, no substantial famine has ever occurred in any independent and democratic country with a relatively free press.” Human rights campaigners took this to heart and they assert that the best way to prevent famine is to secure the right to free expression.⁸ A free media could be one of the reasons why India has one of the lowest incidences of famine in the developing world. When hunger deaths take place in remote areas, the government is forced to take action because the media blitz has a great impact on people. To take this a step further, the elected representatives in government cannot really afford to ignore public opinion that – however remotely – affects voting patterns.

The media must get over its self-perception that it is somehow special by itself. If at all it is special, it is only because of the trust reposed in it by its constituency of readers, viewers and listeners. So the media's ultimate loyalty should be to this constituency – the

⁸ *The Economist* Global Agenda August 16, 2001: “Righting Wrongs”

forum of well-formed public opinion – that in a democracy has the ultimate potential to empower or disempower the media.

India’s Prime Minister Manmohan Singh said: “Everyday when I open the newspapers or when I tune into a channel, I am often disturbed by the messages we are transmitting. Have we no larger mission at hand? Of nation-building, of caring for the underprivileged...The challenge for a democracy like ours is to strike a balance between the possibilities of technology, the compulsions of the market, the passions of the audience and the interests of society and the nation.”⁹

The prime minister’s remarks are relevant to those in the media who continue to project the state as the most important newsworthy element, at the cost of neglecting issues on the ground. But there are those of us in the media who choose to give front-page coverage to what Infosys chairman Narayana Murthy had to say about the future of information technology or employment options over government releases.

This kind of change in perspective comes when we realize the importance of highlighting development and private initiative, individual excellence and innovation, and stories of achievements in science and technology, environment and health rather than confine ourselves to being mouthpieces of the state. Reports on natural and manmade calamities, terrorism, conflict and economic ills are being increasingly juxtaposed with stories of how local initiative helped the underprivileged in some areas overcome their problems.

Need for code of conduct for the media:

Any kind of media – whether print, electronic, online or radio – should evolve for itself a code of conduct that is predicated on the needs of its constituency guided by a spirit of enlightened self-interest.

⁹ Prime Minister Manmohan Singh’s message on the occasion of the birth centenary celebrations of Ramnath Goenka, Indian Express, New Delhi, August 28, 2004

In India, there was a time when many journalists allowed themselves to become permanent guests of the government by opting to live in houses given to them by the state on token rents. This was symptomatic of a culture of living off state handouts and junkets, despite our being a free and fair press -- the unassailable Fourth Estate that somehow props up the other three estates. Newspaper proprietors can play an important role here by facilitating not just housing and travel for motivated journalists, but also make available options that include in-house training, earned sabbaticals and fellowships.

Over time, the media in India has evolved – from being a hoary instrument of the freedom struggle to national conscience-keeper. Worldwide, the media has tended to be a faithful recorder of events and accidents. But there is a need to present trends and processes, too. From dispenser of ideology to investigative journalism to becoming a friendly dispenser of news and views that include socio-economic issues and lifestyle changes, the media has indeed come a long way. But there is plenty of room for improvement.

It is in the media's interest to engage the state both during peaceful and troubled times, to be able to bridge the divide between the administration and the administered. A vibrant and free media that can continue to engage the state without getting compromised in the process is vital for evolving and creating a climate of comprehensive security in South Asia.