



INFOCHANGE

agenda

ISSUE 14 2009

Reporting conflict

Are accuracy and objectivity enough in covering conflict situations?
Or should the media frame contemporary debates in a way that
also builds dialogue and peace?

FOR PRIVATE CIRCULATION

RECENT BACK ISSUES



Social exclusion



Migration and displacement



Battles over land



HIV/AIDS: The big questions

© InfoChange News & Features, Centre for Communication and Development Studies, 2009

InfoChange Agenda is a quarterly journal published by the Centre for Communication and Development Studies, a social change resource centre focusing on the research and communication of information for change

To order copies, write to:

Centre for Communication and Development Studies

301, Kanchanjunga Building, Kanchan Lane, Off Law College Road, Pune 411 004

Suggested contribution: Rs 60 (1 issue); Rs 240 (4 issues); Rs 480 (8 issues)

DDs/cheques to be made out to 'Centre for Communication and Development Studies'

InfoChange Agenda content may be cited, reproduced and reprinted for purposes of education and public dissemination with due credit to the authors, the journal and the publishers

Introduction: Sensitivity and professionalism:	
The twin mantras for conflict reporting <i>by Kalpana Sharma</i>	2
Amplifying chaos, sowing discord <i>by Sukumar Muralidharan</i>	4
The ethics of conflict coverage <i>by Sevanti Ninan</i>	11
Manipur: The tussle and the compromise <i>by Thingnam Anjulika Samom</i>	13
Media perceptions vs law enforcement in Kashmir <i>by Muzamil Jaleel</i>	18
'The stress is on conflict, not its resolution': Chindu Sreedharan <i>by Aditi Bhaduri</i>	21
Reporting communal conflict <i>by Jyoti Punwani</i>	24
The art of not writing <i>by Shubhranshu Choudhary</i>	29
Who is Ima Gyaneswari? <i>by Teresa Rehman</i>	32
Sensation and sympathy <i>by S Anand</i>	34
A skewed definition of balance <i>by Nityanand Jayaraman</i>	36
Is it really tiger vs tribal? <i>by Pankaj Sekhsaria</i>	40
War, peace, and journalism <i>by Dilip D'Souza</i>	42
To give peace a chance, make peace the story <i>by Aditi Bhaduri</i>	46
Terror on TV, or by TV? <i>by Rashme Sehgal</i>	51
'We need to handle painful stories with great care': Peter Horrocks, BBC	55
Some hard questions: DUJ report	56
NBA guidelines	62

This issue has been guest-edited by Kalpana Sharma

Cover photograph of journalists covering the Mumbai terror attacks of November 2008, by Sudharak Olwe

Editors: Hutokshi Doctor, John Samuel
Editorial board: Sandhya Srinivasan, Ashish Kothari, Mari Marcel Thekaekara
Production and layout: Gita Vasudevan, Sameer Karmarkar
InfoChange team: Anosh Malekar, K C Dwarkanath, Philip Varghese, Rakesh Ganguli, Renu Iyer, Vijay Narvekar

Sensitivity and professionalism: The twin mantras for conflict reporting

SHOULD THE INDIAN media — print and electronic — discuss norms that govern the way conflict is covered? This question has taken on increasing urgency since the terror attacks in Mumbai on November 26, 2008. The protracted gun battle between 10 terrorists and hundreds of National Security Guards, Mumbai police, members of the Rapid Action Force, commandos from the navy, and army personnel, that began at the Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus (CST) and turned into a siege at two of south Mumbai's best-known luxury hotels, the Taj Mahal Palace hotel and the Oberoi-Trident hotel as well as the little-known Jewish Centre at Nariman House in Colaba, received unprecedented continuous live coverage over three nights and two days.

Once the crisis ended, the media's role became the focus of considerable criticism and discussion. Was it too much? Did the media obstruct the work of the security forces? Were the cameras and journalists too intrusive and insensitive in the face of such a human tragedy? Was there too much unsubstantiated and incorrect information conveyed on live television, causing panic? Was the tone of the reporters such that it added to the tension and the panic?

Behind these questions lies a demand that the media, as a principal source of information in disaster and conflict situations, remain accurate, professional, sensitive and responsible. These qualities should apply to the media at all times, but become particularly relevant during times of crisis as November 26 demonstrated.

The need for higher levels of professionalism that embody these qualities is further accentuated in an age that veteran BBC reporter Martin Bell termed the "decade of the dish", when 24-hour news channels can instantly communicate information and news from even remote parts of the country and the world.

The impact of such continuous and live coverage of war and conflict is summed up in this quote from Mark Miller, author of 'How TV Covers War', in the book *New Challenges for Documentary*, edited by Alan Rosenthal (University of California, 1998):

"Watching the news, we come to feel not only that the world is blowing up, but that it does so for no reason, that its ongoing history is nothing more than a series of eruptions, each without cause or context. The news creates this vision of mere anarchy through its erasure of the past and its simultaneous tendency to atomise the present into so many unrelated happenings, each recounted through a series of dramatic, unintelligible pictures... And so we have the correspondent, solemnly nattering among the ruins, offering crude 'analysis' and 'background', as if to compensate us for the deep bewilderment that his medium created in the first place."

In Mumbai, we saw much of this in the live coverage on different Indian channels. The attack was unprecedented, but the reporting failed to put the ongoing and dramatic battle in any perspective. For example, few outside Mumbai would have realised that the battle was confined to the southern tip of a very big city, and that the rest of the city was unaffected. Nor were people reminded that Mumbai had seen other terror attacks in the recent past, albeit not so dramatic. Even the immediate past was erased as television crews forgot that 58 people had already been slaughtered at the Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus even before the attackers laid siege to the two hotels. The present was endlessly telecast, with reporters expected to talk ceaselessly with very little new information. It left viewers uninformed and reduced to believing that they were watching something unreal.

The "deep bewilderment" that Miller speaks of is something that most viewers will endorse. During the first few hours no one seemed to understand what had happened, least of all the journalists on the spot. Their bewilderment, and that of viewers, was compounded by the absence of any kind of authoritative voice — from the police or the state government. Conflicting information kept flashing on different channels. The number of attackers varied, estimates of the dead and injured changed by the moment, the number of people held hostage in each hotel remained guesswork. No one appeared in charge, and the media attempted to get information from multiple sources, often telecasting it live without double-checking.

While the media coverage of November 26 is likely to remain a talking point for some time to come, the criticism around it raises questions that are relevant to the conduct of the media in general, and of its coverage of a range of conflict situations, in particular.

The issues it has raised include the need for perspective in media reporting — before and after the event. In the excitement of reporting something like a protracted terror attack, this is the first casualty. The immediate obliterates the past; it erases all sense of the underpinnings of an event that can be traced to developments in the recent past or distant past. Without that kind of perspective, an understanding of the developments gets exaggerated out of proportion and distorted.

A relevant example of how the lack of history and perspective on an issue distorts people's understanding of a conflict is the reporting in the Western media on the recent Israeli air strikes on Gaza. Writing in *The Independent*, Robert Fisk, who has covered the Middle East for decades, writes:

"How easy it is to snap off the history of the Palestinians, to delete the narrative of their tragedy, to avoid a grotesque

irony about Gaza which — in any other conflict — journalists would be writing about in their first reports: that the original, legal owners of the Israeli land on which Hamas rockets are detonating live in Gaza.

“That is why Gaza exists: because the Palestinians who lived in Ashkelon and the fields around it — Askalaan in Arabic — were dispossessed from their lands in 1948 when Israel was created and ended up on the beaches of Gaza. They — or their children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren — are among the one-and-a-half million Palestinian refugees crammed into the cesspool of Gaza, 80% of whose families once lived in what is now Israel. This, historically, is the real story: most of the people of Gaza don't come from Gaza.

“But watching the news shows, you'd think that history began yesterday, that a bunch of bearded anti-Semitic Islamist lunatics suddenly popped up in the slums of Gaza — a rubbish dump of destitute people of no origin — and began firing missiles into peace-loving, democratic Israel, only to meet with the righteous vengeance of the Israeli air force.”

Fisk's words have a definite resonance in India, particularly when it comes to reporting events in conflict zones like Kashmir or the northeast. Here, an understanding of history is essential while reporting. Yet, quite often, such a perspective is missing, particularly from journalists who “parachute” into conflict situations in these areas and report on them. The perspective of the more rooted journalists, often those who belong to these regions, is overlooked as they are deemed to be too close to the situation. Yet, it is these journalists who daily face the dilemmas of reporting on their conflict zones as Muzamil Jaleel from Kashmir and Thingnam Anjulika Samom from Manipur graphically illustrate in their articles. They have to face the questions of the official agencies, of the people, and of the militant organisations. In both Kashmir and Manipur, journalists have been beaten up and even killed for what they reported. Conflict reporting for them is not a theory; it is a daily and hazardous lived experience.

The second issue that the November 26 coverage underlines is the importance of accuracy at all times, but particularly during situations of crisis where the information conveyed by the media affects the lives of many ordinary people who are either caught in the midst of it or are waiting anxiously for news of their kin who are embroiled in the situation. For the Indian media, this has become increasingly difficult, as often reliable and official sources of information simply do not exist, as happened on November 26. What then should journalists do? Should they announce numbers without adequate qualification, or should they wait until more accurate information is available?

In conflict zones like Kashmir and the northeast, journalists are constantly faced with the problem of verifying official information as there is often a considerable divergence between what the government agencies put out and what they observe on the ground.

Third is the vital question of sensitivity. Increasingly, viewers are reacting negatively to the microphone thrust in the faces

of victims, or their kin, even before they have had a chance to recover. Banal questions like: “How do you feel?” are routinely asked. A newspaper report following the November 26 attack described how one of the policemen who had survived the attack had begged a colleague to keep watch and ensure that the media did not get anywhere near him. He was tired of re-living the trauma and constantly recounting the night of terror. Yet, few respected his right to have the time to regain his equilibrium.

So, how does the media tell the human story without traumatising the very people about whom it wishes to report? Does this require special skills and training, or does good professional training as journalists equip you to deal with such situations?

Then there is the question of responsibility. In times of war, or terror attacks, does the media have a special responsibility to ensure that what it reports does not get in the way of operations by the security forces? Or is its job to report all it sees and hears without considering the consequences? This question has been raised repeatedly in the Indian context, ever since the Kargil war between India and Pakistan in 1999 became the first televised war seen in the country. Is some form of self-regulation needed at such times? Who will set these norms? The News Broadcasters Association, the newly formed group that includes 24-hour news channels, has arrived at a code. But how this code will be implemented remains unclear. Yet, unless the initiative comes from the media, the likelihood of government interference is strong.

These questions arise not just in times of war or terror but also when the media is confronted with caste or communal conflict. As essays in this issue of *Agenda* emphasise, the media's interpretation and reporting of such conflicts determines attitudes and an understanding of events. It is all too easy to report the “official” version without investigating events independently, as the majority of media tends to do. It is also easy to forget past events or events that are often not reported, when an issue takes centre stage, because a personality or a political group is involved, as in caste conflict. The need for the media to have a sense of history, of perspective, and of independence becomes imperative in situations where the victims are also the powerless, those who have no access to the media and, through it, to the decision-makers.

With the growth of the reach and the power of the media in India, and the daily dose of different types of conflicts that it must cover, there is an urgent need to pause and assess conflict reportage. This is as good a time as any to put in place not just checks and balances that will ultimately enhance the media's credibility but also institutions that can train journalists to handle the increasingly complex arenas of conflict from which they must report. — **Kalpana Sharma**

Kalpana Sharma is an independent journalist, columnist and media consultant based in Mumbai. She was a full-time journalist for over three decades. Until 2007, she was Deputy Editor and Chief of Bureau of The Hindu in Mumbai

Amplifying chaos, sowing discord

In many ways, the media revealed more about itself through 60 hours of feverish and frenetic coverage than about the terrorist atrocity that was being perpetrated in Mumbai. After its coverage of 26/11, the question the Indian media faces is not a trivial one. Is it going to be an exclusive forum for the more extreme voices? Or can it find a sensible way forward, to promote a genuine social dialogue?

SUKUMAR
MURALIDHARAN

TERRORISM HAS BEEN A FREQUENT VISITOR to Indian shores over the last two decades and more. Earlier visitations have been instantaneous blows that have stunned and staggered, though they have allowed for a quick recovery of morale as civic processes kick in and people who cannot afford the luxury of disengagement from daily routines, resume their normal activities.

Mumbai 7/11 — to use the media shorthand for the July 11, 2006 suburban train bombings that killed close to 200 — was one such occasion. Yet when it came to Mumbai 26/11, resilience was no longer a virtue to celebrate. The incursion of armed desperados who sprayed death and destruction in vital nodes of the city's life, before commandeering three buildings on November 26, 2008, has become a case study in the tactical confusion that India's security apparatus is prone to. It also illustrates how the media can respond to emergency situations in a fashion that multiplies public anxieties and creates the conditions for imprudent and ill-considered strategic responses.

Though a seemingly trivial point, it is important to understand a reversal in the format of date identification between 7/11 and 26/11. Consistency in usage is not as important as getting the suffix right, so that it rhymes and resonates with 9/11, universal shorthand for the terrorist attacks in the US that inaugurated a phase of global insecurity and instability.

This is not to deny the uniqueness of Mumbai 26/11. Unlike all earlier terrorist atrocities, 26/11 was a slow haemorrhage of public confidence, a long-drawn-out bloodbath that claimed lives and at the same time tested the country's response capabilities, sapped its self-confidence and imprisoned it in prolonged contemplation of a tableau of destruction.

When the gunfire began at Mumbai's Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus (CST) — India's most famous Victorian gothic structure, where millions figuratively tread everyday — it was reported as an outbreak of gang warfare. Only one among the English news channels had the story till well over an hour after it began. Most of India would have slept untroubled through that night. But anybody from the 80 million cable TV households who switched on at an early hour the next morning, irrespective of the channel first tuned into, would have been instantly transfixed. Riveted by

the real-life drama, plunged into the depths of emotional trauma by the shooting war erupting in a locale normally associated with calm and unembarrassed displays of wealth, audience susceptibility was greatly multiplied.

The scenes unfolding in Mumbai heightened the Indian public's mute awareness of its absolute lack of influence in deeply consequential national security decisions. With the media orchestrating this national catharsis, the public mood was quickly transformed into convulsive rage against the politicians who supposedly held all the power and had yet allowed an atrocity of such enormity to occur. And it was just a short transition from raging against the politicians, to raging against the political system that had ensconced them in authority.

Perhaps the media was getting jaded by the coverage of election campaigns that rarely rose above the mundane; perhaps it was fearful that a serious interrogation of the security and intelligence apparatus would be negatively perceived; perhaps it was collectively disoriented at the sight of Mumbai's two most prestigious hotels being gutted from within by faceless marauders.

There was also, perhaps again, a genetic predisposition within the media to go overboard at the spectacle of the most exclusive quarters of India's most affluent city becoming a battleground. The success of the media is premised upon its ability to mirror perceptions of the high purchasing power strata, which are the main focus of advertiser interest. The tone of the media coverage was, in this sense, brutally honest in bringing out into the open the subliminal disdain those accustomed to privilege have for the scruffy world of competitive politics.

In many ways, the media revealed more about itself through 60 hours of feverish and frenetic coverage than about the terrorist atrocity that was being perpetrated in Mumbai. On the evening of November 28, as the siege approached the 48-hour mark, the local police ordered all channels to cease live coverage of the ongoing security operations, having been particularly irked by a Hindi news channel that established live telephonic contact with one of the marauders in the Jewish community centre, the third building to be commandeered. The news anchor then proceeded to harangue the gunmen, denouncing them as desperate criminals and swearing that they would never



escape India's avenging fury.

The morality lesson for the invaders was abruptly interrupted by a commercial break, which was unusual for those feverish 60 hours when all channels dispensed with advertising. Resuming a few minutes later, the channel seemed to have turned the page, though without any effort at an explanation. All arguments with the invading terrorists were forgotten. Later reports which have neither been confirmed nor denied by either side, spoke of the police authorities leaning heavily on the channel to cease its conversation with the marauders.

The ban on live coverage was quickly rescinded. With the siege of Mumbai itself being broken soon afterwards, the news channels went into a mode of retrospection, though offering nothing more edifying than more vituperation against politics.

Politics was not slow with its riposte, though a little clumsy

to begin with. A few days after the siege was broken, the Union Ministry of Information and Broadcasting issued a notice demanding an explanation from the channel that had vainly sought to impart a morality lesson to the terrorists. The channel head pleaded injured innocence, claiming that his broadcast had not in any way given undue publicity to the terrorists but had, to the contrary, had the wholly salutary effect of fortifying public resolve. (1)

Two themes seemed to contend for attention in the political reaction to the media coverage of Mumbai's horror. First was the concern that relentless live coverage may well have limited the scope and effectiveness of the security operations. (2) A second theme that emerged in the *post facto* examination of the media coverage of Mumbai was the effect it had on the public mood. It fuelled anxieties and created an environment in which the appearance of drastic action, rather than prudence, became the priority. And because of the intense competition among the news

channels to firmly ascribe responsibility for the outrage, the government was seemingly stamped into a rather limited range of strategic options.

The Committee on Petitions in the Rajya Sabha took up the first of these themes in a report submitted during the brief sitting of Parliament in December. Responding to a petition on the alleged misuse of the right to free speech by the electronic and print media, the Committee urged that some form of statutory regulations be introduced on the media “in the larger interest of society”. The petition had been under consideration since 2006, but had evidently gained urgency in the light of the Mumbai horror.

The growing competition within the media made “self-regulation” a difficult ideal to realise. And yet, the media industry would always manage to forget their mutual animosity and unite at the prospect, even on the distant horizon, of any regulatory code written by the government or the public. Without quite going into this anomaly, which allows the media industry to influence the public discourse on the rules that it should be subject to, the Committee drew pointed attention to repeated attempts in the past to introduce a broadcast regulatory authority and a “content code” for the electronic media. It went on to affirm the need to reconsider these on a priority basis. (3)

Sections of the media were quick to push back against this line of thinking. India’s largest English language newspaper, which has strong interests in the broadcast sector, fielded a former chief of staff of the Indian Army, to refute any notion that live coverage of the Mumbai operations could have compromised their efficacy. Drawing on his years as a military commander, General V N Sharma pronounced that individuals and forces engaged in armed combat or search-and-destroy operations, are unlikely to waste any time with following news broadcasts. On the other hand, the live media coverage had the positive impact of taking the horror into every home and building up public pressure for swift and accountable action by the authorities. (4)

The second and deeper concern was underlined by Chief Justice of India K G Balakrishnan. “The symbolic impact of terrorist attacks,” he said at a public function in Delhi, has been “considerably amplified by the role of pervasive media coverage”. The “proliferation of 24-hour TV news channels and the digital medium” ensured that “disturbing images and statements reach a very wide audience”. This manner of “unrestrained coverage” may have the effect of “provoking anger amongst the masses” and fuelling “an irrational desire for retribution”. “Furthermore, the trauma resulting from the terrorist attacks may be used as a justification for undue curtailment of individual rights and liberties”. (5)

A week after the intruders were eliminated, India’s Ministry of Information and Broadcasting sent out an ‘advisory’ asking all news channels to refrain from repeatedly airing footage of the Mumbai attacks. Averse as always to any official diktat, the news channels responded with a unanimous rejection. But the ministry was not about to give

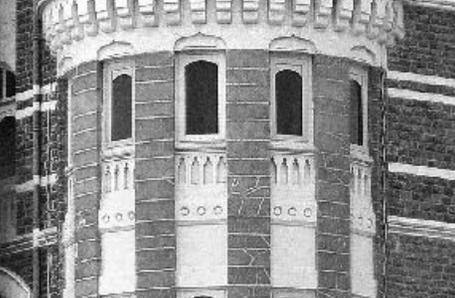
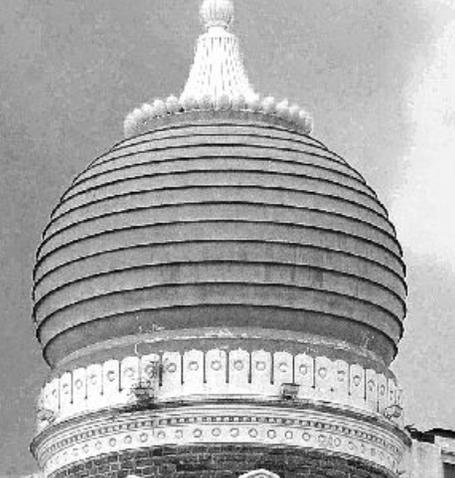
in. Heads of prominent news channels were called in for a number of further meetings, at which the ministry evidently invoked the possibility that it could act unilaterally under the Cable Television Networks (Regulation) Act. Fighting now to retrieve the credibility of the principle of “self-regulation”, channels that have grouped themselves into the News Broadcasters Association (NBA), on December 18, issued a set of “guidelines for telecast of news during emergency situations”.

Drawn up by a grievance redressal committee constituted by the NBA and chaired by a former Chief Justice of India J S Verma, the guidelines uphold “public interest” as the vital touchstone. They commend the virtues of factual accuracy and objectivity, disavow any broadcast that may provide a platform for terrorists to propagate their views, and rule out any live programming that may hamper the efficacy of security operations or put at risk those involved in a hostage situation. Visually disturbing sequences that could cause trauma among victims and their relatives are to be avoided. And archival footage that may re-awaken the sense of trauma or agitation in viewers’ minds should be broadcast only when necessary, after clearly identifying the date and time of its recording. (6)

Despite the eminence of its authorship, the new emergency code was seen among most critics as just another exercise in formulaic thinking. It was as recently as August 2008 that the NBA had come out with a comprehensive set of guidelines on self-regulation, which were conspicuous only in their breach during the Mumbai crisis. (7) The ministry obviously remains unconvinced and is reportedly now thinking of mandatorily requiring news channels to carry pre-authorised content during designated emergency situations. The proposal is at a very early stage of discussion and it is unclear whether its intent is to completely supplant autonomous content generated by the news channels, or to be an additional input. Either way, the media industry is distinctly uncomfortable. (8)

The debate remains incomplete. Even conceding the post-modernist conceit that all information is subjective, a civilised public dialogue is only possible if there is an effort to reach beyond the limitations of subjectivity. If the media is the main platform for this dialogue, then its minimal responsibility would be to reflect an authentic cross-section of the perceptions that have a bearing on the issue at hand. The print media goes through a 24-hour cycle of discovery, verification and analysis before it reports. The electronic media, especially since the 24-hour news channel became a reality in India, breathlessly records every random observation as fact, creating a clutter of information that confuses rather than informs.

There are also questions about the range of voices that people want to hear when they seek to cope with a national trauma. Are residents of Mumbai’s more exclusive neighbourhoods to have the run of the airwaves, their anger stoked by eager news anchors prepared to buy into the



fiction that social merit is proportionate to taxes paid? Or is a more diverse public dialogue possible?

A diversity of voices was not available to the media audience when it came to the Mumbai horror. A diversity of facts, though, was very much on offer. Considering the multiple dissonances that have emerged on basic points of fact on the Mumbai horror, the Indian media seems fully to represent the reality that facts are malleable, provided they conform to the over-arching political narrative. This speaks as much about the quality of the relationship between the media and the public, as about the nature of the governance compact and the degree of accountability that the security and intelligence agencies seem inclined to accept.

The media, in this sense, amplified the tactical incoherence of the official response to an unprecedented tragedy. To mention merely a few instances: early on the afternoon of November 27, well before the siege of Mumbai had reached the 24-hour mark, the director-general of police in Maharashtra announced that the Taj Mahal hotel had been emptied of all threats. The following day, the chief of the Indian Army's Southern Command announced, around midday, that the Taj Mahal had just one remnant gunman hiding out in its old wing. The new wing had been thoroughly “cleansed” and the sole gunman would swiftly be neutralised, he predicted. Gun battles raged on for hours afterwards; it was only early the next morning that the last of the marauders was put out of commission.

There were also periodic broadcasts that the gunmen had seized hostages and were engaged in negotiating a ransom for their release, when the reality was quite the contrary. Early in the encounter, a story was floated that huge quantities of the lethal explosive, RDX, had been uncovered from sites close to the Taj Mahal hotel. This story remained the exclusive property of one of the English news channels, but was quietly put to rest as the commando operation progressed. It resurfaced in another guise though, with the claim that the gunmen had huge quantities of the explosive and could possibly raze all three buildings, burying commandos engaged in combat in a graveyard of rubble.

After the clean-up was completed, the RDX theory, in its mutant form, was decisively scotched by the head of the elite commando force, the National Security Guard (NSG), in full glare of the country's numerous media channels. But even in its death throes, the theory proved to have some fervent adherents. Within two days of the final shot being fired in the siege of Mumbai, it was reprised, with attributions to anonymous sources. The two luxury hotels that had been commandeered, the new narrative went, had been seeded with lethal RDX bombs. These had providentially been detected and defused just in time. The intent of the gunmen otherwise, was to set off those explosives and to escape under the cover of the resultant chaos and confusion.

There were numerous stories that the media managed to float on how the attackers beached on Indian shores. To begin with, three distinct places in Mumbai were identified

as locations where the gunmen had come ashore, though the rubber dinghy they had used for landing had ostensibly been spotted and eyewitnesses to their arrival had spoken to the news channels.

Beyond this, considerable uncertainty was sowed over the mode of arrival. There was first a story of four decapitated bodies being found — all of the crew of the fishing trawler that had been hijacked by the terrorists, possibly off the coast of Porbandar. Within hours, the number of victims of this particular episode was scaled back to one. The captain of the fishing trawler, it was surmised, had piloted the raiders to within sight of the Mumbai shore and then was killed. Concurrently, speculation was being fuelled that elements of the crew may have cooperated with the raiders. The investigation, it was put out, was looking with great interest at fishing boat operators recently incarcerated in Pakistani jails for breaching maritime boundaries, who had perhaps been indoctrinated by Pakistani intelligence.

The identity of the captured attacker — the only one caught on film with reasonable clarity, thanks to a news photographer who reached Mumbai's principal railway terminus just when the first shootout began — was again cause for great confusion. Taken alive after a beachfront shootout on November 26, there were different versions of his name afloat till a week later. First accounts spoke of him as fluent in English and well-educated. A subsequent account told of him being of indigent family origins, with an education well short of primary schooling. There were reports that he had been gravely injured and had begged for life-saving medical attention at the hospital he was taken to, and then a clarification by the dean of the medical college attached to the same hospital, that he was unharmed except for minor bruises. Finally, contrary to the account in one section of the media that he was being held in an “undisclosed location”, the medical expert testifying to the captured terrorist's condition was identified by both name and affiliation.

On December 2, India's Minister for External Affairs Pranab Mukherjee, playing host to the secretary-general of the Arab League, spoke of a range of options that were under consideration to deal with the aftermath of the Mumbai attacks. Though he specified none and indicated no preferences, Mukherjee's statement was interpreted in diametrically opposed fashion by two of the country's biggest English language newspapers: one headlined its story ‘India open to military action against Pakistan’, while the other said quite definitively, ‘Pranab rules out military action’.

The latter attitude, though, was a minimal strain in the media in the aftermath of Mumbai, since Pakistan-bashing was the only constant element in the competitive clamour for attention. That was the imperative that all media, irrespective of the nature of their tortured relationship with fact, had to conform to.

The question the Indian media faces is not a trivial one. Is it

going to be an exclusive forum for the more extreme voices? Or can it find a sensible way forward, even in a conjuncture as trying as Mumbai 26/11, to promote a genuine social dialogue that is attentive to the true risks and benefits of any particular strategic course?

Though difficult in trying times such as now, can the media hear voices from across the border? Would it have any use, for instance, for the following observations from the December 2 editorial in *Dawn*, one of the most restrained and sober voices in the Pakistani media: "...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. Not only does this put pressure on the Indian government to keep up its accusations and resist moves for a cooperative stance, it also damages people-to-people ties, for, after all, the media is meant to speak for the common man."

Beginning on November 29, Karachi, where the Mumbai marauders ostensibly set off from, was gripped by ethnic rioting on a scale never before seen. None of the known players in Karachi's volatile political milieu owned responsibility for the violence. As *The Daily Times of Islamabad*, another newspaper known for relative sobriety, commented in its December 2 editorial, the prime minister of Pakistan had asked for intelligence on the incidents and "at least one TV channel (had) reported that an intelligence report sent to the prime minister has held India responsible for the mayhem".

As the pitch of the diplomatic and political exchanges rose, the media on both sides began playing their accustomed role of amplifying the discord. The difference with earlier phases of mutual hostility, perhaps, was that the media on each side was now the specific target of attack by commentators and government spokespersons on the other side. (9) This has been accompanied by *ad hominem* attacks — as by the anchor person of the Times Now TV news channel in India — on human rights defenders who believe that the response to terrorism cannot be confined within the militarist mindset and needs to be attentive to civil liberties and social justice. (10)

The Mumbai attacks came just as India was beginning to grapple with certain agonising questions about the fundamentals of its approach to terrorism. The Batla House encounter of September 19 in Delhi's southeastern suburb of Jamia Nagar was a catalyst for several of these questions to be aired with rare freedom. (11) The subsequent discovery of a terrorist ring involving supposed preachers of the Hindu faith and serving and retired officers of the Indian Army then broke old moulds of thinking on terrorism, suggesting that a workable approach to the problem needed to look in different directions.

Needless to say, all these questions have been suppressed

with the Mumbai attacks. The dominant media project now is to integrate the Mumbai attacks into the master narrative on terrorism that was being constructed till Batla House and the Hindutva terror ring cropped up as dissonant elements. The directions that the project will take are apparent in a recent piece written by a media analyst well known for his feverishly speculative commentary. The figure around which this new narrative evolves is seemingly Mohammad Sadiq Sheikh, in police custody since September and accused of being the mastermind of serial bombings in Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat, Rajasthan and Delhi.

Sadiq Sheikh is putatively among the founders of the Indian Mujahideen, which has claimed responsibility for all these attacks. It now transpires from the intelligence narrative faithfully parroted by this commentator, that he has had intimate links with the Lashkar-e-Tayyaba insurgent group in Pakistan's side of Kashmir and with Pakistan's Directorate of Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). (12)

When Safdar Nagori, the general-secretary of a shadowy body of uncertain provenance called the Students' Islamic Movement of India (SIMI), was arrested in March 2008, the same analyst had commented that "SIMI cadre have been involved in almost every Islamist terror strike since (2000), ranging from the Mumbai serial bombings of 2003 and 2006 to attacks in Uttar Pradesh, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Delhi". (13)

Despite the seeming certainty behind this pronouncement, obviously inspired by dribbles of information leaked by the intelligence agencies, a tribunal constituted to review an extension of the ban on SIMI, held, on August 5, that there was no evidence connecting SIMI with terrorism. The central government on that occasion secured a face-saving stay on the application of this ruling by the Supreme Court. Media comment was muted and the public, still under the pall of fear spread by the Jaipur, Bangalore and Ahmedabad bombings, remained indifferent to finer points of legality.

Pursuit of the terrorists behind the recent wave of bomb attacks in India picked up momentum with the mid-August arrest of Abu Bashir Qasmi, a 25-year-old cleric, snatched from his home in Azamgarh district of Uttar Pradesh by four men who came visiting on the pretext of exploring a matrimonial alliance. Taken immediately to Gujarat, he was identified by the state police as the man behind July's Ahmedabad attacks. He also, reportedly, confessed to an undefined role in the Jaipur bombing.

On August 24, the Rajasthan police announced the arrest of Shahbaz Husain, a computer software expert who ran a small business in Lucknow. Press reports later blazoned the claim of the Rajasthan police that sophisticated electronic chips and circuits of bombs resembling those used in Surat had been found on Shahbaz's premises.

With Shahbaz's firm implication in terrorism, an elaborate chain of linkages began to be drawn between the various

blasts. Nagori, Shahbaz and Qasmi were all reportedly members of a secretive cell that underwent explosives training in camps as far afield as Kerala and the jungles of Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh. Brooding over the whole conspiracy was the presence of Mohammad Altaf Subhan — later identified as Abdul Subhan Quereshi, and variously described by the alternative names Taufeeq and Tauqeer, by which he was allegedly known in jihadi circles — a computer hardware specialist missing from his home in Mumbai's distant suburb of Mira Road, since 2006.

Subhan was supposedly the technical brain behind the ingeniously designed bombs and the email messages — replete with graphics and intense Islamic religious symbolism — that had been sent out celebrating each terrorist strike in the heart of urban India. When Delhi was gutted by three simultaneous bombings in September, Subhan was the name on every investigating agency's lips.

Working its way through the chain that ostensibly connected Subhan with Qasmi and Shahbaz, the Delhi police quickly identified other links in the terrorism plot, all from Uttar Pradesh. Acting in concert with their Gujarat counterparts, the Delhi police secured access to Qasmi for a round of interrogation.

In the six days between the Delhi blasts and the Batla House encounter, the script was radically rewritten. As the encounter at Batla House began, concurrent media commentary had it that interrogation of Qasmi had led to the identification of the tenement where the terrorists were gathered and that the prize catch, Subhan, was holed out there. When the dust settled, Subhan remained as elusive as ever, and Qasmi, it transpired, had had nothing to do with the Batla House raid. The Delhi police still claimed it had cracked not merely the Delhi bombings but also the Jaipur and Ahmedabad attacks. One of the two youths killed in the Batla House encounter, Bashir, alias Atif Amin, became, in the new narrative, the master terrorist.

The final twist in the story came on September 24, with the arrest of five people in Mumbai. In just a matter of days, the Nagori-Qasmi-Shahbaz chain of culpability was history. The Mumbai police now definitively identified 31-year-old Sadiq Sheikh, a resident of the Cheetah Camp slum sprawl near the city's northeastern suburb of Chembur, as the inspiration and the mentor for all the terrorist actions of the preceding months.

As the project of knitting Sadiq Sheikh into the narrative of the Mumbai attacks proceeds, various new *dramatis personae* should be expected to emerge. The old cast of characters clearly has been dispensed with. Subhan alias Tauqeer, always a shadowy figure, has now been firmly banished. So long as the media fails to ask the hard questions that it should, more names will crop up only to disappear as mysteriously from the future construction of this narrative.

'Made for media' investigations into terrorist atrocities clearly betray the cause of justice and create a new culture

of lawlessness within the country's police agencies. They also create a climate of fear among the country's main religious minority. The hesitant quest for a new approach to terrorism, which began with the Batla House encounter and the inquiries into the Hindutva terrorism ring, has now perhaps been scotched because of the enormous public anxiety created by the Mumbai attacks. If it is capable of occasional introspection, the Indian media should really ask itself if things could have been different, given a little sobriety and responsibility on its part.

Sukumar Muralidharan is a freelance journalist based in Delhi

Endnotes

- 1 'I&B Ministry notice to India TV for airing interview with Mumbai attacker', available at http://www.exchange4media.com/e4m/news/fullstory1.asp?news_id=33284&tag=28231§ion_id=6
- 2 It may be added here that the first breach of this principle was committed by the then Union home minister Shivraj Patil who emerged from an emergency meeting of the Cabinet on November 27 to reveal the exact time at which the special commando force would be leaving its principal base near Delhi to join the operations in Mumbai
- 3 'Panel seeks curbs on media', *The Hindu*, Delhi, December 13, 2008; available at <http://www.hindu.com/2008/12/13/stories/2008121359871000.htm>
- 4 V N Sharma, 'Attack on media for terror coverage is misplaced', *The Times of India*, Delhi, December 12, 2008, p 15. General Sharma was also the obvious source for this comment by a news channel head Rajat Sharma: 'Reality, not television', *The Indian Express*, Delhi, January 10, 2008, p 11. It may be added here that General Sharma retired as chief of staff of the Indian Army in 1990, well before the boom in satellite broadcasts, mobile telephony and the Internet, though this does not mean that he has not since kept abreast of warfare or counter-terrorism doctrine
- 5 'CII assails media coverage of attacks', *The Hindu*, December 14, 2008, available at <http://www.hindu.com/2008/12/14/stories/2008121459891000.htm>
- 6 See 'NBA imposes rules for channels on terror coverage', December 18, 2008, available at <http://www.indiantelevision.com/headlines/y2k8/dec/dec187.php>
- 7 See the analysis by Ammu Joseph, 'Watching the watchdog', in *Tehelka*, December 26, 2008 (posted on December 1), available at http://tehelka.com/story_main40.asp?filename=Ne061208ammu_joseph.asp
- 8 See the two reports in *The Times of India*, Delhi: 'Govt to clear footage for TV during crises?', December 21, 2008, page 1; and 'Channels rubbish authorised feed idea', December 23, 2008, page 13
- 9 See the commentary by Pakistani journalist Beena Sarwar for the IPS: 'Post-Mumbai Journos Struggle Against Hostilities', December 9, 2008, available at <http://www.ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=45037>; also, the edit page commentary by Shekhar Gupta in *The Indian Express*, Delhi, December 20, 2008, 'Press Corps Commanders', available at <http://www.indianexpress.com/news/press-corps-commanders/400808/>
- 10 See Arundhati Roy, 'The Monster in the Mirror', *The Guardian*, London, December 12, 2008; available at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/dec/12/mumbai-arundhati-roy>
- 11 For more on the Batla House and its aftermath, see this author's 'War against terror and the new lawlessness', *Economic and Political Weekly*, October 4, 2008, pages 8 to 12, available at <http://epw.in/uploads/articles/12715.pdf>
- 12 'Lashkar-trained Indian terrorists pose growing threat', *The Hindu*, December 19, 2008, page 12
- 13 'Safdar Nagori and SIMI's jihad', *The Hindu*, March 28, p 1

The ethics of conflict coverage

How much truth-telling do you do in times of conflict? Do you tell it like it is, or weigh the consequences of doing so? Ethics in conflict situations is seldom black-or-white; it has to be shaped by changing contexts

SEVANTI NINAN

SHORTLY AFTER THE KARGIL WAR began and journalists had begun covering some sectors of it firsthand, an Indian editor went to see the then Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee. He told him that he was holding back reports filed by his reporter which described how Indian soldiers were becoming canon fodder at the hands of those fighting for Pakistan. He was telling the prime minister, he said, in case he was not getting the full picture from his army officers. And he had decided not to use those stories because he thought they would affect the morale of the army and the country. But, he told Vajpayee, it would be difficult to keep up the censoring; the obligation to tell the country the truth would come in at some point.

Perhaps the most fundamental ethical issue in conflict coverage is how much truth-telling do you do in times of war. Do you tell it like it is, or weigh the consequences of doing so?

Truth-telling

This dilemma was echoed in November 2008 in Mumbai. Does a reporter blabber into his mike everything he learns about the unfolding situation? Or is he expected to exercise discretion, keeping in mind what the terrorists might learn from television and use to their advantage? Ethics in conflict situations is seldom black or white; it has to be shaped by changing contexts.

On the other hand, censorship, or self-censorship, has consequences. Censoring ghastly footage makes war easier to support. In the case of Kargil, when the body bags began to come home and the TV cameras showed them day after day, some of the euphoria about a “just war” (then minister Arun Jaitley’s phrase) began to evaporate. Should the media then be a party to helping the government gloss over the true cost of a war?

The ethical dimensions of conflict coverage are many, as is the range of conflicts that has to be covered. In addition to border wars there are internal conflicts that a State wages with disaffected sections of its own people. There are terror strikes. There are communal riots.

So what sorts of issues arise in reporting on these?

There is the ethics of letting your nationalism overwhelm your coverage. Arnab Goswami, the Times Now anchor, is a

classic example of someone who has decided to adopt a calculated editorial stance when the issue is India versus Pakistan, or India versus the separatists in Kashmir. The channel tilts towards a nationalist stance, and that goes out on TV day after day and influences the gullible.

In the case of internal conflicts such as areas where Naxalites operate, the question is not one of nationalism but of ideology. Those journalists who cover it sometimes have problems keeping their personal ideologies out of their reading of the conflict between these extremists and the State. Again in the case of Nandigram and Singur, a conflict between a car company allocated land by a Marxist state government and some segments of the local people backed by a different political party, the ideology of a publication like *The Hindu* affected its coverage.

Framing

How a conflict is framed by the publication or journalist reporting it is another issue. In the above instance, is it framed as a capitalist versus labour issue? Or Marxist versus



Trinamul? Or as a conflict arising from conflicting land use demands? Is this framing done in good faith after ascertaining the facts as far as possible, or is it coloured by one’s own ideological bias? Is the attempt to create understanding, or provocation? Television framing is often done in a way that heightens conflict, because it helps the channel ‘sensationalise’ the issue and thereby gain viewers.

Sourcing and language

How do you source stories on conflict? From the government, army, terrorists, victims, or the police? In the case of a conflict within the country’s borders, do you carry the versions of both the government/army/police and the militants? Are you giving the latter the oxygen of publicity by doing so? There was considerable indignation when, during the Mumbai attacks, Rajat Sharma on India TV interviewed one of the terrorists in Nariman House. Are you lending your platform to the government’s propaganda machine by taking your version only from it? When there is a war and you are nowhere near the front, do you have the option of choosing not to take your story from what the official spokesperson is saying?

One of the trickiest issues is the use of language in a conflict situation. Should you mince words to suit one side of the conflict?

A few years ago, Robert Fisk wrote about the “semantic iceberg that has crashed into American journalism in the Middle East”. He described how pressure from readers of the *Boston Globe* led the editors to pressure their correspondent to stop using the term ‘right-wing’ to describe the Likud Party. And how Jewish settlements for Jews only on Arab land used to be called ‘colonies’ by foreign correspondents, but this was softened to become ‘settlements’ first, and then ‘Jewish neighbourhoods’. Similarly ‘occupied’ Palestinian land became ‘disputed’ Palestinian land after the state department instructed US embassies in the Middle East to refer to the West Bank as disputed rather than occupied territory.

Post-Iraq, the BBC has also wrestled with semantics. In 2006, it published an abbreviated version of its journalists’ guide to facts and terminology. It dealt with the description of occupied territories thus:

The general phrase “occupied territories” refers to East Jerusalem, the West Bank and strictly speaking the Golan Heights. However, it is not usually understood to refer to the Golan Heights (unless it is in a story specifically on the 1967 war or Syrian-Israeli relations). It is advisable to avoid trying to find another formula, although the phrase “occupied West Bank” can also be used. Under international law, Israel is still the occupying power in Gaza, although it no longer has a permanent military presence there.

On the use of the word ‘terrorist’, the BBC’s producer guidelines state:

The word “terrorist” itself can be a barrier rather than an aid

to understanding. We should try to avoid the term, without attribution. It is also usually inappropriate to use words like “liberate”, “court martial” or “execute” in the absence of a clear judicial process. We should let other people characterise while we report the facts as we know them. We should convey to our audience the full consequences of the act by describing what happened. We should use words which specifically describe the perpetrator such as “bomber”, “attacker”, “gunmen”, “kidnapper”, “insurgent” or “militant”.

In India we have no such hang-ups; the word ‘terrorist’ is freely used. We have added recently to the lexicon, with the terms ‘Hindu terror’ and ‘Muslim terror’. How ethical is it to give terror a religious tag? Are we falling into the trap of associating terrorism with religion when its causes are multiple?

Reporter or peacemaker?

The relatively new concept of peace journalism complicates the ethical issues involved in reporting conflict or running a radio station in a conflict zone. There is talk of harnessing the media for conflict management. The US Institute of Peace in Washington DC, set up to be answerable to the US Congress, does conflict-sensitive journalism training. It also believes in seeding ideas of peace-building initiatives, and in educating journalists about the media’s potential in helping countries out of conflict situations. For instance, it will promote the capacity of a radio station to produce conflict-reducing programming through training. Where there are radio stations broadcasting conflict-generating programming, training is imparted to neutralise them.

But is it the media’s job to be a peacemaker? I attended a workshop run by this institute where the director strove to outline the values conflict-oriented journalism comprised: accuracy, impartiality, responsibility, sensibility, conflict analysis. Nobody can really quarrel with those. And what does peace journalism consist of? An approach to reporting which is people-oriented, peace-oriented, solution-oriented, truth-oriented.

But here is the rub: peace journalism according to its proponents would also mean holding back on the reality on the ground to reduce tensions, or “putting a brake on the truth,” in the language of this workshop. Would a war correspondent consider it part of his or her brief to do that? Or would the ethics of telling the truth wherever possible, militate against that?

There are no absolutes in the ethics of conflict coverage. But being accurate, responsible, non-inflammatory, using language that does not pander to the objectives of any party, obtaining facts from more than one source, and framing the conflict in a way that promotes understanding is a good set of objectives to reach for.

Sevanthi Ninan is an author and columnist. She edits the mediawatch website www.thehoot.org

Manipur: The tussle and the compromise

Mediapersons in Manipur are caught between the diktats and threats of around 40 underground groups and the authoritarian directives of the state government which recently proscribed publication of a great deal of content from or about “unlawful organisations”. How does Manipur’s media cope with these pressures and still try to uphold the freedom of the press?

THINGNAM
ANJULIKA SAMOM

THERE ARE TWO VISUALS that best describe Manipur to the outside world. One is the dancing Manipuri girls in their colourful costumes and gentle dance gestures. The other is a group of old women, hair flying, aged breasts flapping on their chests, and a banner with blood-red letters daring the army to come and rape them.

These images — of the exotic and the revolutionary — are often taken up selectively to paint a picture of Manipur. On the one hand, Manipur is an exotic, inaccessible land with a backward yet colourful culture. On the other, it’s a society full of gun-toting masked men who “threaten” Indian “nationhood” and must be “curbed” with excessive force, if necessary.

Yet for the people of Manipur, these two images are not solitary events, unrelated to each other. They are two sides of the same coin — a coin which is our collective identity but which few take the trouble to understand. A collective identity that comprises a history, a culture and a tradition so unique and so different from the so-called “Indian” history, culture and tradition.

Twin threads: Conflict and the media

Manipur, situated on the Indo-Myanmar border, is home to as many as 33 listed scheduled tribes and a number of unspecified tribes, apart from the Meities, Meitei Pangals (Muslims) and scheduled castes. The 33 listed scheduled tribes are, again, broadly divided into the Naga and Chin-Kuki-Mizo groups. Among the Nagas, the most prominent ones are Tangkhul, Mao, Poumai, Rongmei, Lamkang, Zeme, Maring, Anal, Maram, Thangal and Liangmei, while Thadou, Simte, Gangte, Vaiphei, Paite, Hmar, Khongsai, Sitlou, etc, constitute the important Kuki tribes.

Thus, multiple histories, multiple cultures and multiple identities are spread out and struggling for recognition within a small geographical territory of 22,327 sq km.

An unfortunate by-product of these inherent complexities and certain insensitive governmental policies is that, today, there are more than 40 proscribed outfits operating within the state. While the main objective of each group is to organise the people’s support and wage an armed struggle against the Government of India under various causes and ideologies, mostly right to self-determination, the history of each of these movements is, again, different.

While the Meitei outfits recall the shame of an autonomous princely kingdom being forcibly annexed to the British Empire in 1891 and later, after India’s independence, merged with the Indian sub-continent in a dubious agreement, the Nagas still suffer the memory of a proud community forcibly divided by new geopolitical boundaries imposed by a foreign hand. Outfits belonging to other ethnic communities like the Kuki, Hmar, Manipuri Muslims and Zomi too uphold the history and wellbeing of their communities as their primary interest.

This situation is further aggravated by the militaristic response of the Centre and state government. On the one hand there are groups of people, armed and trained in warfare, that are ideologically against India’s nationhood. On the other, the government, stating that the armed insurgencies are a law-and-order problem, installs counter-insurgency forces in the state to help the state government function smoothly. Laws such as the controversial Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) of 1958 are enforced to help the security forces in their mission — AFSPA has been in force in the hills since 1961 and in the valley (except for the Imphal municipality area) since 1980. Thus the conflict has been heightened instead of resolved.

Significantly, the first resistance movement in the state was a communist movement led by Hijam Irabat in the 1930s demanding, among other things, that the British quit Manipur, abolish the Manipur state durbar, and establish an elected government. (1) On August 14, 1947, the Naga people, through the Naga National Council (NNC), declared their independence from British rule, one day before India declared her independence. (2)

Interestingly, the first resistance movement of Hijam Irabat also gave birth to journalism in the state. The first recorded event in the history of the print media in Manipur is publication of the journal *Meitei Chanu* by Hijam Irabat in the mid-1920s. Hand-stencilled and cyclostyled by Irabat himself, the publication survived for only a few editions. During 1932-48, Hijam Irabat published pamphlets, journals and booklets with the main aim of spreading political philosophy to the masses.

During the 1930s and 1940s, a number of publications came out including *Yakairol*, *Lalit Manjuri Patrika*, *Bheigyabati Patrika*, *Dainik Manipur*, *Manipur Matam*, *Manipur Paojel*,

Ngashi, Praja, Anouba Yug, and Meitei Leima, although most enjoyed only a short lifespan. These were followed, in the post-Independence era, by political papers like *Prajatantra* and *Simanta Patrika*.

Today, Manipur is considered a frontrunner among Indian states with regards to media presence. The eastern state boasts around 30 news dailies and journals, a large number of home cable networks such as Information Service Television (ISTV), Image Cable TV, Hornbill Cable Network, Laizan Cable Network and Tribal Cable Network, as well as numerous correspondents and stringers for various national and international news agencies, newspapers, magazines and electronic media houses. Most media houses in the state however are small private firms that function with a skeletal staff, on minimal wages.

Media and conflict: The tussle and the compromise

The low-intensity conflict in Manipur that's being simmering for almost 60 years has killed, widowed, displaced and orphaned thousands of its people. The impact of the conflict has not only been the killings, rapes and torture; from the young student who suffers a deep sense of fear and insecurity to the woman widowed by the gun, no one has been spared the effects of this long-standing conflict, including the media.

November 17 to December 2008 has been a significant fortnight in Manipuri history. On November 17, young Konsam Rishikanta, a junior sub-editor at the English language newspaper *Imphal Free Press* was blindfolded, gagged and shot dead by unknown gunmen. With his death, he became the sixth journalist to be killed in Manipur — a paltry number if we go by the innumerable killings that have been going on in the state, but an appalling and significant number when we consider that even in full-fledged wars journalists enjoy a certain sanctity, freedom and impunity.

In Manipur — home to around 40 underground groups and nearly 50,000 central security forces waging an armed war — death by the gun is part of everyday life.

The conflict makes headlines almost every day — a killing, an arrest, a clarification. In fact, reporting on incidents related to militants and militancy in Manipur is becoming increasingly difficult and dangerous for journalists.

Conflict reporting is a precarious and delicate task that requires a sense of balance. To give due credit to the media in Manipur, notable attempts at balanced reporting are being made. But factors like limited resources, inhospitable terrain, lack of good communication facilities and, above all, shortage of staff, make verification of all conflict-related cases that come to the attention of the media a formidable task.

Most conflict reporting done by the media is that of conflict-related killings and arrests. There have also been reports on the impact of the ongoing conflict — displacement, impact on women and children, condition of conflict widows, etc.

While reports of arrests come from police and army sources and handouts, news of killings are usually given either by people at the place where the person/s have been shot, the police, the army, or a hospital. Or by the underground group involved. Verification of news of arrests or claims made regarding the person's involvement with an underground group is often not done.

In the case of killings, however, there is always an attempt at independent investigation to verify the claims — visiting the house of the deceased, talking to family members and locals. However, given that an average of two people are gunned down every day in Manipur, verifying each case becomes a huge task, especially if the killing occurs in a remote area of the state.

Added to this is pressure from State and non-State forces. For the media this means that its work of disseminating information and opinion is a tight-rope walk between the devil and the deep sea.

Ironically, it is the growth and changing awareness of the media as a powerful platform that is threatening the freedom and sanctity of the independent media in Manipur. Underground insurgent groups operating in the state, which used to rely on pamphlets and word-of-mouth as a major means of spreading their ideas and diktats, are now turning to the newspapers and news cable networks to carry their statements to a wider audience.

This strategy is also being used by the army and the government through press tours and events to highlight achievements such as the display of arms captured during operations, and press tours of areas “cleared of insurgents”.

Caught in between are small teams of underpaid, overworked and semi-skilled professionals trying to work towards the ideal of being society's watchdog, frequently at their own peril.

From 1993 till date, as many as six journalists have been shot dead in Manipur. There have been attempts on the lives of others and cases of physical and mental harassment.

Let me run through some of these incidents (4):

- On June 30, 1993, unidentified gunmen shot dead the editor of *Kangla Lanpung* R K Sanatomba at his own gate.
- In October 1999, Hmar Revolutionary Army (HRA) cadres gunned down the editor of a Hmar language newspaper *Shan*, A Lalrohlu Hmar.
- Khupkholian Simte, editor of *Lenlai* magazine, was killed.
- In 2000, Bijoy Koijam, now sitting MLA of Manipur, escaped an attempt on his life when he was working as a freelance photographer for United News of India (UNI).
- On August 20, 2000, Thounaojam Brajamani Singh, editor of the English daily, *Manipur News*, and president of the Manipur State Journalists Association was shot dead by two unidentified gunmen.

- In August 2000, unidentified persons blew up part of the Pan Manipur Youth League (PMYL) office. The PMYL published the monthly magazine *Chingkei Hunba* and was preparing to re-launch the popular monthly newsmagazine *Lamyamba* as a daily newspaper.
- On October 14, 2002, three armed men abducted and killed *NorthEast Vision* special correspondent Yambem Megha, in Imphal.
- On October 8, 2002, two Manipur-based correspondents — Iboyaima Laithangbam of *The Hindu* and Y Arun of *Eastern Panorama* — were kidnapped for two days as they were proceeding from Imphal to Moreh, by the United Kuki Liberation Front (UKLF) that was dissatisfied with inadequate coverage of its statements.
- On February 23, 2005, ESPN/Star Sports correspondent Obed Longvah was assaulted by unidentified armed persons at Litan in Ukhrul district of Manipur.
- On June 14, 2005, the Manipur Hill Journalists Union suspended publication of all Churachandpur-based newspapers from June 16 to 19, 2005, in protest against “interference” and “pressure” from several armed opposition groups.
- On September 7, 2005, the proscribed group KYKL imposed a ban on two local dailies *Matamgi Yakairol* and *Mannaba* and cable network ISTV for allegedly not “properly” reporting on the abduction of Manipur University Students Union president Ashok Kumar Singh.
- In February 2006, an attempt was made on the life of Ratan Luwangcha when he was general secretary of the All-Manipur Working Journalists Union (AMWJU) and bureau chief of the largest selling vernacular daily *Poknapham*. Ratan was grievously wounded and is still undergoing treatment.
- On December 20, 2006, unidentified gunmen unsuccessfully tried to kill the editor and publisher of the evening newspaper *Kangla Pao*, Paonam Labango Mangang, in front of his office in Imphal.
- In April 2006, a faction of the Kangleipak Communist Party (KCP) held six Imphal-based newspaper editors hostage through the night and forced them to publish a statement about the outfit’s “raising day” celebration which the editors had previously ignored. The KCP faction also clamped a three-month ban on the *Imphal Free Press* for misquoting an earlier statement.
- On July 31, 2007, a gift-wrapped Nokia mobile handset package containing a grenade and marked to the editor of *The Sangai Express*, the largest selling English daily in Manipur, was delivered to the office of the newspaper. The reason for the “gift”? One of two factions of a major underground insurgent outfit operating in the state wanted the statement of the other party dropped from publication.
- On November 17, Kongsam Rishikanta, junior sub-editor at

the *Imphal Free Press* was blindfolded, gagged and shot dead by unknown gunmen.

These are just a few cases. Almost every day there are threats over the phone, etc, from the proscribed outfits in Manipur. In most cases, mediapersons respond with dharnas, suspension of publication, blank editorials, and demands to the government for a safe atmosphere to work in. Each time, the threat is withdrawn but working conditions for journalists remain the same as most outfits believe it is their moral right and duty to pressurise newspapers into carrying their press releases the way they want them carried.

To safeguard freedom of the press and to escape this form of pressure, the AMWJU resolved, in June 2005 (5), following threats to the Manipur Hill Journalists Union, that:

- No claim made by unidentified sources/person(s) over the telephone would be entertained. In the event of identification, the editors would decide.
- No press conference called by any individual or organisation without official invitation would be accepted.
- Press releases by any organisation(s) have to be duly signed with the organisation’s seal on the letterhead.
- Press releases by any organisation(s) must be issued before 8 pm for morning dailies, 3 pm for eveningers, and 4 pm for cable news channels.
- In the event of conflict/controversies between two or more parties, the views of all parties concerned would be given equal coverage.
- If the arguments and counter-arguments become harmful to the state and could claim human lives, the AMWJU reserved the right to censor the news.
- In the event of an organisation or individual wanting to withdraw a press release before it is printed, the same organisation or individual who signed the press release must approach the editor concerned.
- If any individual/organisation has a grievance (except petty or small matters that may be resolved by the editor) against any newspaper, the concerned individual/organisation should first approach the AMWJU to address the problem.
- All newspaper mediapersons will follow the norms of journalistic conduct as laid down by the Press Council of India (PCI).
- Editors are advised to refrain from sensationalising any news report or indulging in sensationalism.
- Editors will bear the responsibility for mistakes or omissions appearing in their newspaper.
- All editors have the right to censor/delete partly or as a whole any news report or press release or interview or press conference which could create communal tension or lead to group clashes.

- In case of violation of the code of conduct laid down by the AMWJU by any reporter/newspaper, the AMWJU will initiate punitive action against the reporter/newspaper.
- It is the prerogative of an editor to publish or not to publish a news report or press release.
- A newspaper report should not be contradicted by another newspaper in the form of a rejoinder, advertisement or news report. If the need does arise, the version of the newspaper concerned should be taken by the other newspaper before any such publication.
- Press releases of any organisation should be made available to all offices of the press/newspaper/media organisation by the organisation on its own. No press/newspaper/media organisation should be given the responsibility of distributing a press release/s.
- Editors will not entertain any diktat from any quarter to publish or not to publish a news report or press release.

However, these rules do not seem to have worked very well as the militants have their own tactics by which to get their press releases published, keeping the press constitution and rules intact.

Media pressure and government response

The response of the state government in this regard has been disheartening. Instead of attempting to sanitise the atmosphere, they have instead tried to curb the freedom of the press from time to time in the name of stamping out insurgency.

During 1950-60, government actions like seizing papers, imposing fines, closure of the press, and imprisonment of editors were common when publications like *Ngasi*, *Loumi*, *Bhagyapati Patrika*, *Eikhoigi Patrika*, *Mother Manipur*, etc, criticised the functioning of the government in their papers. (6) Later, in 1970-80, when insurgent movements flourished in the state, seizure of press material and arrests of journalists were routine. One of the most significant cases was the arrest of *Hueiyen Lanpao* editor Salam Bharatbhusan and editor of *Matam*, Meinam Mithai, who were booked under the National Security Act (NSA) and imprisoned for around six months. (7)

In the recent past, in April 2000, N Biren Singh, presently a minister and former editor of *Naharlogi Thoudang* was arrested by the state police for publishing a speech by activist Th Iboyaima, on charges of it being “seditious” and “anti-national”.

Imposition of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), 1958, in the state has also seriously impacted the media, with frequent harassment, physical abuse, obstruction of work, and arrests.

- **July 23, 2004:** At the peak of the recent anti-AFSPA uprising in 2004, state security forces dispersing a group of women protestors barged into the house of Thiyam Ranjan, a senior reporter at *Sanaleibak* and beat him up even after

he identified himself as a journalist.

- **August 14, 2004:** The government clamped a ban on the local news cable network ISTV in the “public interest”, apparently angered by images of thousands of people taking to the streets to protest against the AFSPA, 1958.
- **February 20, 2005:** N Noren of *The Sangai Express* and W Lukhoi of *Mannaba* were brutally assaulted by personnel of the 130th Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) posted at Sajiwa jail, while covering an agitation by a Meitei revivalist group.
- **March 14, 2007:** Personnel of the 38th Assam Rifles (AR) posted at Kotlien in Tamenglong district snatched away the cameras and beat up two journalists — *Ireibak*’s Th Brojen and ISTV’s Gagaan — while *The Sangai Express*’ Samungou, ISTV’s Gagaan and *Naharlogi Thoudang*’s Bokul were detained while covering the rape of a girl by an AR jawan.

On August 2, 2007, while mediapersons were sitting in dharna protesting the “bomb gift” to *The Sangai Express*’ editors, the state government passed the following order, which only served to further push the media in Manipur into a corner rather than help it. The order read:

“In exercise of the powers conferred under Section 95 of the Code of Criminal Procedure, 1973, the Governor of Manipur is pleased to order that any printed material, ie either newspapers or books and any document whether printed or in electronic form, shall be referred to the state government if they contain any material on the following:

- All items directly attributed to unlawful organisations, organised gangs, organisations, terrorists and terrorist-related organisations considered to be subversive and a threat to the integrity of the state and the country.
- Obituary notices for “shradha”, “asti sanchai”, cremation and burial ceremonies showing that the dead person is a martyr in the struggle for an independent and sovereign state and which may contain the names of known terrorists and terrorist-related organisations or unlawful organisations or organised gangs as the sponsors of the advertisement.
- Publication of threats of any sort by terrorist organisations or unlawful organisations or organised gangs or by a person or group of persons to any person or class of persons.
- Publication of any code of behaviour, dress code or social practice decreed by terrorists or terrorist-related organisations or unlawful organisations or organised gangs.
- Publication of any justification for killings, causing injury, assault, kidnapping, imposition of fines or warnings made by terrorist-related organisations or unlawful organisations or organised gangs or organisations.
- Publication of notices for payment to terrorist-related organisations or unlawful organisations or organised gangs in cash or kind.
- Publication of items in the form of an invitation to unlawful organisations, organised gangs and terrorist-

related organisations to settle or solve disputes.”

When the media community protested and urged the withdrawal of the order, the state Cabinet met on August 10, 2007, and, instead of a withdrawal, amended the first point with a clause: “Publication of seditious, subversive literature affecting the integrity of the nation.”

In the Rishikanta killing case too, the state government displayed an authoritarian attitude and complete disregard for the sanctity of the media. From the time Rishikanta’s body was found in a secluded spot in Imphal, on November 17, 2008, the media aired its suspicions about the involvement of the state police in the killing and demanded a CBI probe. There was no response from the state government. On November 19, after discussions at a general body meeting, journalists struck work in protest. They sat in dharna for 13 days; there was an information blackout throughout the state. On November 26, they took out a huge rally in the capital. Hundreds of representatives from the NGO, CSO and CBO sectors participated in the silent rally to express their solidarity.

In the meantime, the Editor’s Guild of India, headed by Rajdeep Sardesai, met the prime minister and, during the meeting, the prime minister apparently called up the Manipur chief minister and instructed him to initiate a CBI inquiry. Still, the evening before the rally, the state government continued to remain a silent spectator. A group of ministers (including the state IPR minister) was sent to negotiate with the rally organisers. Their terms: Stop the rally and we will initiate an inquiry.

Undeterred and uncompromising, the journalists went ahead with the rally which was shown live on the local cable TV network, ISTV. Participants converged at a public ground, but when the first speaker began to talk about the killing and the government’s response the network was forced to cut the programme.

On December 1, a special investigative team formed by journalists tabled its report. That same day, and at almost the same time, the state Cabinet discussed the matter and conceded the journalists’ demands.

Conclusion

The ongoing armed conflict, job insecurity and precarious working conditions in Manipur are some of the factors that impact directly on press freedom and the quality of journalism in the state. Journalists continue to be poorly paid despite talks of implementing the R K Manisana Wage Board, for the simple reason that many newspaper houses are not in a position to generate the type of revenue that would enable payments and perks as stipulated by the Wage Board.

Despite this, however, the media community has been united in its stand that the sanctity of the profession must not be compromised. It goes without saying that the very nature of the job, which requires them to report

in the midst of conflict, exposes them to the risks of being hit from both sides.

In its fifth annual press freedom report for South Asia, *The Fight Goes On: Press Freedom Crises in South Asia (2006-2007)*, the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) identified five key needs to be addressed. First, journalists must be trained to monitor violations of press freedom and journalists’ rights. Systems should be set up to communicate and highlight such violations through alerts. Journalists in conflict areas must be provided safety training and professional skills development. Finally, they should receive training in union/association-building to help them present a stronger, united front and assert their rights to report objectively, free from pressure and harassment.

The All-Manipur Working Journalists Union (AMWJU) might have its flaws, but it has put up a united front when faced with any threat to the community. As for training, nothing can be better than the lived experience. There cannot be a one-coat-fits-all policy for facing the pressures of working in a conflict situation, for the simple reason that the cause and nature of conflict in various parts of the state, nation and the world are so different.

Finally, the government should try and bring about an amicable settlement to the current insurgency problem in Manipur. This would help alleviate the situation in the state. Until then, the media will continue to be tested.

Thingnam Anjulika Samom is a freelance journalist and amateur filmmaker presently attached with the Hueiyen Lanpao group of publications in Imphal, Manipur. Her writings have been specially focused on conflict and gender

Endnotes

1 *Life and Works of Jananeta Irabat Singh*, L Damodar Singh, Ningshing Chephong, 1996

2 An introduction to the Indo-Naga political conflict and the ongoing peace process. <http://www.nscnonline.org/webpage/home.htm>

3 The *Imphal Free Press* referred to here is the newspaper owned by Sapam Nishikanta. Later on, the editor, Pradip Phanjaoubam, left the organisation and took the name with him, which he now uses for his own paper. Meanwhile, Sapam Nishikanta’s paper briefly ran as the *Manipur Free Press* and was later christened *The Sangai Express*

4 The cases described here have been randomly picked. In actuality, there are many more cases of assault and pressure by both State and non-State forces on the media

5 <http://www.newswatch.in/newspaedia/m/102.html>

6 ‘Struggle for Independence by the Manipur Journalist Society’, *Sanathong*, October, 2001

7 Interview with Irengbam Arun, editor, *Ireibak*

Media perceptions vs law enforcement in Kashmir

Reality in Kashmir is multi-layered and multi-dimensional. There is a Kashmir reality, a national reality, and whether we like it or not, a Pakistani reality. All these realities jostle and militate against one another, often overlapping and mingling. The biggest tragedy is that there is no neutral space left in Kashmir. The journalist's challenge is to retrieve this space from the debris of a conflict-devastated state

MUZAMIL JALEEL

THE TERM “MEDIA PERCEPTIONS” is an anomaly, for it presupposes that the media perceives things, and perception is a subjective term. I am not arguing that the media is not, or cannot be, subjective and that it is not influenced by perceptions, sometimes collective and sometimes individual. My point is that perception is not part of the theoretical definition of media.

The role of the media, it is believed, is the pursuit of truth and objectivity. While perception falls in the realm of intellect, the media has to deal with practical reality. It predominantly belongs to the world of the senses, with physical objects as its reference point. Perception is definitely a part of the process, but a sustained effort is made to neutralise its influence.

I have included the word perception in the title of this piece for it truly represents the area of perennial tension between the government agencies and the media. There is an inherent and uneasy mutual ambivalence, if not prejudice. While government agencies dub the media inherently hostile and subjective, the media, for its part, never stops believing that it is always right.

When the setting is Kashmir, this tension becomes even more stark. For the reality here is multi-layered and multi-dimensional. We have a Kashmir reality, we have a national reality, and, of course, whether we like it or not we have a Pakistani reality. All these realities jostle and militate against one another, often overlapping and mingling. Diverse ideologies and their respective spheres of influence act on you, giving stories new meaning and interpretations. The biggest tragedy is that there is no neutral space left in Kashmir. It is also our biggest challenge: to retrieve this space from under the debris of a conflict-devastated state.

The challenge for the media is to respond to and report on this multi-hued reality and to emerge unscathed from it, which is like balancing on a razor's edge in a bitterly polarised state. The Kashmir media has been negotiating this challenge for the past two decades.

While all other agencies are accountable to their respective sides, the media is accountable to all of them simultaneously. A reporter's account of a particular event is studied by everyone. We get calls from the government, from ordinary people and, of course, from the militants.

I cannot purport to speak on behalf of the whole of the media, for the media itself is a complex universe of institutions, individuals and ideas. The media that I represent — my existential position as a reporter in Kashmir, my perception of what responsible journalism means to me, my professional training as a reporter, being a Kashmiri who has been born and brought up in Kashmir, being a Kashmiri Muslim working for a national newspaper — all these are indivisible and intertwined ingredients, conscious and unconscious internal forces that influence my pursuit of journalism. And therefore my view of law enforcement in Kashmir comes from this complexity as well. I am not an exception to the media demographic here.

For example, we were all enraged as members of this society over the exposé, in 2007, of several fake encounters. We understood the situation from within. It was we who had to go to the doorsteps of these people first, and we understood the pain and total shock of the victims' families who couldn't begin to comprehend why their loved ones had died. A colleague and friend visited homes in Kokernag after learning about the identities of the men killed in the fake encounters even before their families knew about their fate. He went to interview the families and didn't know what to tell them.

We are faced with a dilemma because whenever the law enforcement agencies overstep their brief or violate it, the common people are convinced that somehow we journalists have the key to unanswered questions and can alleviate their suffering. Often people get angry and disillusioned when we fail to meet their expectations.

It is critically important to understand two core dynamics of the situation we face here in Kashmir. Firstly, that the media's perception of law enforcement is itself shaped by the law enforcement agencies' perception of the media. And secondly, that the law enforcement agencies have, to a great extent, lost their credibility in the eyes of the public and the media because of their track record.

Regarding the first aspect, it is not our professional conduct or the facts that are under scrutiny but our identity. The message that gets across in the reportage is judged by the byline; the content of the story is seen through this superficial lens. Never mind that we may be writing for a newspaper that is published in New Delhi. Because we

belong to this society and our lives are part of this story, we are seen as biased by all sides. Whenever ugly facts surface and we report them, we are immediately targeted in a misguided attempt to manage the crisis or divert attention. Accusing the media of “bias” is almost always the immediate reaction. Often, in the past, this has led to the persecution of reporters by both sides. And people have been killed.

This creates a challenging environment in which we try our best to uncover, investigate and report stories. Since we rely on the law enforcement agencies for information and confirmation, we often come up against attempts to stonewall or avoid. Without people coming on record to answer difficult questions, our task becomes even more complicated.

As regards the second aspect, media perceptions about any entity are eventually based on the facts that emerge. Anywhere in the world, the onus lies on the law enforcement agencies to establish and protect their credibility. This is the basis of the very concept of accountability. It is their conduct, their attitude, their professionalism and their overall track record that shapes or changes perceptions. For the last 18 years, the conventional opinion based on very real events has been that the law enforcement agencies in Kashmir are caught up in the

inevitable anarchy that accompanies a state of impunity. We have repeatedly observed that even those who have committed the coldest of murders get off scot-free. This has brought the institutions of law enforcement into disrepute. The official mantra that these are the actions of a few rotten eggs becomes hard to digest. What concerns us most is a visible pattern and a regular cycle of commission and omission.

Many within law enforcement are in the unenviable position of having inherited this legacy of public mistrust, unaddressed issues, and unanswered questions. But the roots of this distrust must be explored and owned up to. Let me cite a few examples.

The 2007 exposé of fake encounters — and even those of the past — has not come as a surprise to reporters based here. (In fact, the fake encounters became news and received so much attention only because those killed and dubbed foreign militants were actually innocent civilians.) We know that there is an official categorisation of militants: those who fall in the ‘A’ category are never taken prisoner. This unwritten policy has made further misuse possible; many civilians too have been caught in its web. Then there is a premium on producing the dead body of a militant. Indeed, killings are linked to rewards, promotions and medals.



When the Pathribal fake encounter in March 2000 was first reported, it was billed as a genuine anti-militancy operation. Within hours of the encounter, then Union Home Secretary Kamal Panday and then Union Home Minister L K Advani went on record to say that the army and police had gunned down five Lashkar terrorists responsible for the massacre of 36 Sikhs in Chhatisinghpura. The action of the law enforcement agencies was described as swift and efficient. The facts of this fake encounter would never have been investigated had there not been a public agitation. The case was finally handed over to the CBI who not only concluded that the encounter was staged but also chargesheeted five army officers.

Seven years later, there is still a debate on whether the CBI has the authority to probe the army. Meanwhile, the army officers have been promoted during the pendency of active investigation. The families of the five innocent villagers were given Rs 100,000 each as relief. In fact, justice to people whose loved ones have been killed in fake encounters has become equated with Rs 100,000 or more in ex-gratia. Such instances of injustice have become institutionalised in the state. In these 17 years, there have been many such cases where innocent people have been killed in similar circumstances; the details have never been investigated.

Then there is the instance of an officer from the Jammu and Kashmir (JK) police who was implicated in the killing of three innocent civilians in his custody during a police investigation, in 1999. He is still to be arrested. It has been eight years.

In 2005, JK police investigations exposed a fake surrender. Forty-one villagers from the Chrar-e-Sharief area were taken to Delhi and kept in army custody for six long months only to take part in a stage-managed 'surrender ceremony' in front of a corps commander and the DGP. The IGP, Kashmir, wrote letters to the army, clearly spelling out the involvement of two officers, including a brigadier, in the case. Nobody knows what happened later. Nobody told the villagers or their families what happened to the probe. There was not even an apology, let alone talk of compensation to people who had to go through hell during those six months of illegal confinement.

I would also like to mention the first major massacre in Kashmir which we believe changed the very dynamics of the problem here. I am talking of the January 20, 1990, massacre in Gowkadal that was followed by several months of curfew in Srinagar. We recently checked the status of the case and found it had been closed and marked "untraced", despite everybody knowing that the security forces were responsible for the massacre.

Then there is the January 6, 1993, massacre in Sopore in which members of the Border Security Force (BSF) killed 43 villagers and burnt down an entire market in reaction to the killing of one of their colleagues by militants. That massacre has also never been probed. The government did announce a CBI probe but nothing ever happened. The list goes on...

It is not our professional conduct or the facts that are under scrutiny but our identity. The message that gets across in the reportage is judged by the byline; the content of the story is seen through this superficial lens

The handling of cases of people who have gone missing after being picked up by security forces or the police is a glaring example of how law enforcement has failed to establish any public trust or credibility. Indeed, the credibility of law enforcement in Kashmir has become so eroded that even if there is a genuine move to uphold the law, it is viewed with cynicism by everyone.

Recent action taken in the wake of fake encounters portended the possibility of change. One must acknowledge that visible efforts to bring the guilty to book brought a sense that things were about to change. However, the expectations were shortlived, for, during the probe, different yardsticks were applied to different people who had committed the crime. The police only took action against its own officers and was unable to pursue senior army officers who were named in the chargesheets. This inability has once again dampened expectations.

The rule of law cannot be sacrificed in the name of effective law enforcement. What is supposed to separate those who are entrusted with upholding the law from the forces of anarchy is meticulous adherence to a code and ethic which upholds the protection of individual rights above all. Unfortunately, the mistrust runs so deep that even when steps are taken in the right direction they are perceived to be an exception to the norm. The normal has become abnormal.

The key is to harness the tools and codes of law enforcement to pursue those who violate the law. If the media plays its part and critiques the track record of law enforcement agencies, it should be appreciated rather than questioned.

Muzamil Jaleel is Bureau Chief of The Indian Express in Kashmir and has been working as a journalist for the past 15 years. He has won the Kurt Schork award, the International Federation of Journalists award for conflict reporting and the Sanskriti award for excellence in journalism in India

'The stress is on conflict, not its resolution'

Conflict is at the heart of every interesting news story, says Chindu Sreedharan in this analysis of how the Indian and Pakistani media cover Kashmir. But journalism tends to simplify issues and see things in black-and-white, which won't do in reporting conflict

ADITI BHADURI



Chindu Sreedharan is a journalist who covered the Kashmir conflict for rediff.com from 1997 to 2003, when he was Associate Editor with rediff.com and India Abroad. He edited their in-depth coverage on Kashmir. Prior to that he worked for the Sunday Observer from 1994.

Sreedharan lectures in journalism and communication at the Media School, Bournemouth University, one of the top media schools in the UK. His other research interests include journalism ethics, conflict journalism, online and creative non-fiction. He is currently researching Indian and Pakistani media coverage of the Kashmir conflict at the Media School.

What is the particular thrust of your research on media and conflict? What aspects of the media coverage are you focusing on?

It is a study of media ethics and responsibilities in conflict situations — how the news media goes about its job when asked to cover what I would call 'extraordinary events'. It looks at how the fog of war affects what journalists produce, and, to an extent, what effect such news products have on the conflict *per se*. Whether it exacerbates the conflict, whether it neutralises it, or what effect it has.

Studies elsewhere — in Northern Ireland, in Israel — show the media generally plays a negative role. My effort is to see how far this is true in Kashmir, and what we can learn from the way the Indian and Pakistani media have covered the situation over the years.

Essentially what I have done is examine the way certain key events in the history of Kashmir have been presented in three newspapers (two in India, one in Pakistan), get an idea of the trends, and try and make sense out of that. For this, I make use of data from personal interviews with people who are part of the conflict — separatists, political leaders, military and intelligence personnel, and, of course, journalists. So this is a strategic study that looks at the broader presentation of the conflict to the publics of India and Pakistan.

Based on your study, how would you evaluate media coverage of the Kashmir conflict in India?

Short answer: not supportive of a solution. Let me talk about the English national newspapers I analysed — *The Times of India*, *The Hindustan Times* and *Dawn*. The stress was on conflict, on violence. Even when peace attempts were on, there is a strong indication that the media was on the lookout for 'conflict'.

In a way, this is expected. Every interesting story, feature, interview, script, short story, news report — every interesting story has some sort of conflict at its heart. Journalism academics see conflict as one of the core 'news values', a particular quality that makes a story 'newsworthy'. So conflict has an allure for the media; it's what makes a story interesting. But when there's such stress on violence, it creates an atmosphere that doesn't help a resolution.

Secondly, the journalists who report on these events are part of society. As journalists, they focus on conflicts — and as members of society they focus on reporting the conflict in a particular manner, which might not be the 'reality'. Without getting into a discussion on the existence of reality out there, or on the mythical objectivity, it is safe to say that journalists, by their choice of language, their stance, their entry into the story, tend to present the event in a way they think will suit their society best. So there's a lot of self-censorship going on at the ground level itself (and there's more of this to come at the hands of the editors). The result is that — here I run the risk of over-simplification — the public in India and Pakistan has been mostly presented with stories that portray the self as 'good' and the other as 'evil'. There have been very few discussions of substance or reports that promote peace — hardly any on the front pages.

What did your study throw up as the biggest challenge for the media while covering the Kashmir conflict?

A certain illiteracy about Kashmir and its complexity. For many, Kashmir is a gung-ho assignment — and this is particularly true of 'parachute' reporters (let me also plead guilty to this) who treat it with the same superficiality. There are honourable exceptions, of course. But by and large, journalists haven't done their research, nor have they stopped to apply their mind, nor, more worryingly, are they really bothered. Many have already written their leads in their heads. Many are happy to report from the safety of

Srinagar, visiting the same places, the same sources in Badami Bagh, Gupkar Road, or Raj Bagh. And the sources, they know this. In the memorable words of an army officer I interviewed for this study: “Here comes another ass. We know what he wants, so let’s give him that.”

Is this challenge for the media a Kashmir-specific challenge or is it inherent in the coverage of any conflict?

What I mentioned above is possibly a manifestation of something more deep-rooted: a lack of thought about journalistic ethics, perhaps, or a misplaced sense of social responsibility. Trouble is, conflicts — especially such protracted ones — fall beyond the pale of ordinary journalistic norms. Journalism, because of the demands on it, tends to simplify issues, see things in black-and-white, and construct simple, easy-to-follow storylines.

While this may be fine for ordinary events, it is not so for abnormal events such as conflicts. The norms journalists mostly work with are meant for ordinary situations. Those are square pegs. Forcing them into round holes may not be productive. This problem is endemic to most conflict coverage, I would think. I do get the impression that the current Indian scenario — the profusion of media channels has produced an army of ill-trained journalists — might not be particularly suited for ‘good’ journalism.

Every interesting story has some sort of conflict at its heart. Journalism academics see conflict as one of the core ‘news values’, a particular quality that makes a story ‘newsworthy’. So conflict has an allure for the media; it’s what makes a story interesting. But when there’s such stress on violence, it creates an atmosphere that doesn’t help a resolution

What are the positive aspects of the media coverage on the Kashmir conflict?

It brought the problem out into the public sphere. It told the people, nationally and internationally, that look, there’s a problem here. To an extent, the media did what it is supposed to do in a democratic society: through its coverage it provided an arena where citizens can exchange thoughts and ideas and question political will. However, the contours of this public sphere, and the quality of discussions the media encouraged are questionable.

What are the negative aspects of media coverage of the conflict?

I am not sure the media has succeeded in educating the public about the conflict properly. By and large, it has been partisan in the way it has presented the conflict. It has not questioned enough, nor placed things in perspective.

What are the differences, if any, between your perceptions while you were working as a journalist and now that you have studied the media as a researcher? Did the fact that you had experience as a journalist make any difference to the way you approached the subject as a researcher?

As a researcher I have a broader view than I did as a journalist, I think. My interest doesn’t stop with getting the story. Yes, it did help my research that I had field experience. Academics mostly rely on existing literature — books, journals, newspapers — to decide how to go about their study, to contextualise it, etc. For my part, I had the advantage of ‘knowledge by direct acquaintance’, my personal experiences as a journalist in Kashmir. This also provided me access to sources — for instance, interviews with key decision-makers in the conflict — I would otherwise not have had.

The media is not a homogenous entity. Do your studies find much difference in the quality of coverage on Kashmir by different media houses in India?

My study was limited to two newspapers in India — *The Hindustan Times* and *The Times of India*. When it came to Kashmir, both exhibited similar tendencies.

What are the similarities you found in media coverage of the Kashmir conflict in the Indian and Pakistani media?

Both are State-led. Both look at Kashmir as an issue of national prestige. Journalists — and here I talk of the mainstream media — have taken the lead from mainstream politicians, and have mostly attested establishment views. If you look at it, most of the stories are sourced from government figures. There has been criticism in Pakistan, in recent years, but by and large the media has treated Kashmir as something that would affect “us” — more as societal members and less as professionals. The result is that the narratives on both sides have been high-pitched — and the pitch varies depending on how good or bad State-to-State relations are — and antagonistic. Both sides make selective

Perhaps what we need in such situations is not the pretence of objectivity, but what you could term 'informed subjectivity'

use of human rights violations, for instance, as a weapon against the other.

What are the differences you found in the coverage of Kashmir by the Indian and Pakistani media?

The main difference is that the Pakistani media presents Kashmir through the prism of 'freedom struggle' and 'State terrorism'. The Indians frame it as 'cross-border terrorism'.

Which media did a better job of covering the Kashmir conflict?

This is a black-or-white question, something typical of the media coverage of Kashmir. Can we see a complicated issue such as this in those simplistic terms?

Does the Kashmiri media differ a great deal from the mainstream Indian media (English/Hindi/Urdu) in its coverage of Kashmir?

My analysis was limited to the 'national' newspapers in India and Pakistan, so I do not have empirical evidence about the content in Kashmiri newspapers. From what I could see, I think both the media ended up presenting the conflict in counter-productive, partisan ways. The national media comes across a bit more restrained, if you can call it that, in its approach, but we need to consider the context in which the Kashmiri media functions. It has survived — and continues to survive — under tremendous pressure. First you need to live to write a story. And after you have written it, you need to be able to continue living. Unlike visiting correspondents, you can't retreat to the safety of Delhi or Mumbai. So it's not an easy situation for the local journalists.

Regarding the local Kashmiri media, some of the mainstream publications like, say, *Greater Kashmir* have a distinctly communal perspective. Would you put this down to Kashmiri journalists having to continue living in Kashmir after their stories are published?

There could be other real-world reasons as well, the same pressures that every newspaper faces. Finance, personal views of the reporters concerned, editorial policy, access to information (or the lack thereof), readership demands...

Would you say that extremely little media coverage of

Pakistan-administered Kashmir, where discontent has been brewing for a long time (though, of course, no armed insurgency has broken out) has been a definite shortcoming of the media, both Pakistani and Indian?

Yes.

Based on your study, what can be done to improve the quality of media coverage of the Kashmir conflict? What recommendations would you make to media people who are covering the conflict?

We need to approach conflicts with more care, more sensitivity. These are extraordinary situations demanding an extraordinary measure of responsibility from journalists — and we need to realise that. The traditional model of reporting that most journalists still seem to draw on might not work in this situation. Here you might need reportage that goes beyond textbook norms; it is not enough to say, okay, I have quoted both sides, so my job is done. Journalists need to look at alternative ways of reporting — at the peace journalism concept put forward by Johan Galtung, the 'journalism of attachment' practised by Martin Bell and others, even the expansive field of New Journalism promoted by Tom Wolfe in the 1970s. Perhaps an adaptation of these is what we need. Perhaps what we need in such situations is not the pretence of objectivity, but what you could term 'informed subjectivity'. Scholars have written about this, but most of such work, unfortunately, goes unnoticed by media practitioners. Which makes me believe that we need to show a willingness to question our own traditions and practices, show some flexibility. Without that, the responsibility that conflict situations demand of journalists — in reportage, in research, in gatekeeping — will not be possible.

Finally, what do you intend doing with your research? Will you publish a book, a teaching/training manual or any other publication?

What I hope to do is present to my colleagues in the media a profile of the coverage of the conflict, a measure of the productive and counter-productive statements. Hopefully, it will encourage reporters and gatekeepers to think about their responsibilities more. Theses and academic papers have a specialised audience, so a book is another way of presenting interesting findings to the wider world, yes. But we hope to do more than that. Within my research institution, we are developing some expertise in this field — quite a few of my colleagues are engaged in similar work — and we hope to make that available to the media industry and institutions that are part of the conflict scenario, perhaps in the form of trainings and consultancies. Communication is crucial in such a scenario, and it would be a pity if what we have learnt from Kashmir lives out its life on dusty academic shelves.

Aditi Bhaduri is an independent journalist and researcher writing for the Indian and international print and electronic media. She is one of the few journalists to have lived and reported from the West Bank and Palestinian Territories

Reporting communal conflict

After 20 years of almost continuous communal violence, the basic principles of reportage — facts are sacred, comment free; get both sides of the story; check your facts before writing them — are not enough in reporting communal riots

JYOTI PUNWANI

IN THE FIRST FEW DAYS of the Mumbai terror attacks on November 26, 2008, *The Times of India* carried a set of 'briefs' on top of every news page, which served as news highlights, alongside the headline 'Warfront Mumbai'. Among them was 'Foreigners who are Muslims have reportedly been guaranteed safety by the terrorists'. This was carried on Friday, November 28.

Imagine the reaction of readers to this bit of information. Crucial no doubt, in determining the identity of the terrorists. But worth separating from the text and highlighting? What would have been an average Hindu's instant reaction, especially against the backdrop of the spate of bomb blasts in the last four months and the hype about jihadi terror? And how would an average Muslim have reacted? Would this kind of news highlight have raised communal animosity or lowered it?

* * *

Journalism schools in the 1970s taught us nothing particular about reporting on communal conflict except not to name the communities involved. Probably that was to prevent readers from getting worked up. Bland reports about two groups clashing and one place of worship being attacked are designed to leave readers of both communities in the dark. The premise behind the rule was that readers would riot if they learnt the details. But does that happen? Forget the English press, would even readers of the Shiv Sena

mouthpiece *Saamna* drop everything and take to the streets on learning that Hindus were being killed by Muslims? It's unlikely, given the fact that a newspaper brings the news to its readers at least eight hours after the event, at a time when readers are starting a new day. Those in the affected area already know the violence is on. Most people prefer to stay out of harm's way. Those who actually riot do so at the instigation of some party. If not party cadre, they generally have some links to the party's cultural/social organisations. Rarely do non-political people spontaneously come out onto the streets.

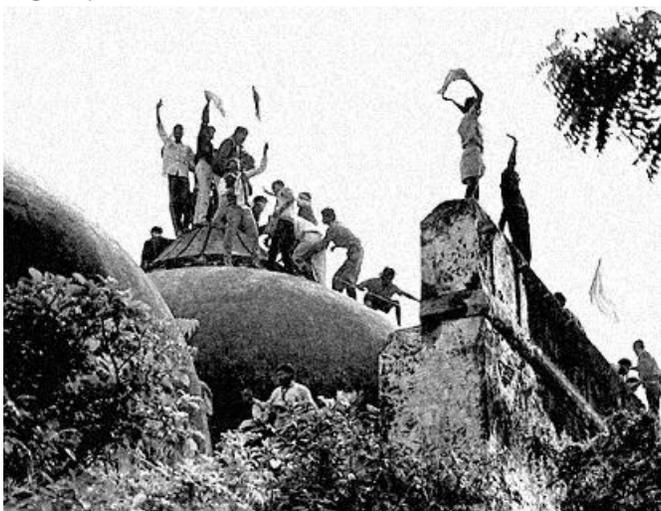
One such spontaneous reaction was by Mumbai's Muslims after the Babri Masjid was demolished on December 6, 1992. Operation Blue Star at the Golden Temple in Amritsar also had Sikh soldiers deserting their posts.

What role did the media play in triggering these spontaneous reactions?

Interestingly, the conflict at the root of these outbursts of anger was not a conventional riot between two groups, but the destruction of, and severe assault on, a place of worship linked to the community's religious identity.

One can safely say that the telecast of the demolition of the Babri Masjid on December 6 by the BBC did play a role in provoking Muslims to come out on the streets in many cities, including Mumbai. What angered them was not just the demolition amid scenes of jubilation by the RSS cadre, but also the inactivity of policemen posted there to prevent the demolition. That is why the first Muslim mobs in Mumbai, on December 6 and even the next morning, vented their ire on public property and symbols of government, such as municipal vans. The only Hindu targeted that evening in Mumbai was a local Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leader who had actively campaigned on the Ayodhya issue.

What is significant, however, is the violence after the demolition by Hindu parties, directed against Muslims. Shiv Sainiks targeted Muslims in Dharavi during a victory rally after the demolition; later that night, a Muslim was killed in Mahim. The media played no role in this communal violence. However, the Shiv Sena mouthpiece *Saamna* had been carrying anti-Muslim editorials for a long time, portraying the so-called *kar seva* at Ayodhya as a religious war in which Hindus had to take part.



Would the Muslims not have taken to the streets on the evening of December 6 had the BBC not telecast the demolition? It is difficult to say. Would Shiv Sainiks not have stoned Muslims had *Saamna* not built up the anti-Muslim rhetoric? Again, it's difficult to say. At any rate, the rule of not naming communities was irrelevant here. The Sikh desertions took place quite a few days after Operation Blue Star. Censorship imposed at that time prevented details being published of the actual extent of damage to the Golden Temple as well as the death of many ordinary pilgrims there at the hands of the army.

Obviously, the desertions weren't inspired by the media. Here, there were no two communities involved; it was a conflict between the State and one minority.

Thus in both these cases where spontaneous reactions took place along communal lines, the naming of communities involved wasn't the trigger. In any case, the perceived advantage of this rule was lost whenever a riot went on for more than a day; the second day's reports sometimes quoted victims. Even today, when this rule is observed only in agency reports, initial reports say "a religious procession lingered outside a place of worship". To those familiar with the pattern of communal riots, the community of the processionists and the nature of the place of worship become obvious.

This rule was thrown out after the Emergency, when investigative magazines such as *Sunday* and *Ravivar* carried in-depth reports on the spate of major riots that took place after the Janata Party took charge: Moradabad, Jamshedpur, Meerut, Biharsharif... Who among our generation can forget *Sunday's* cover page on the Moradabad riots — 'ID, Day of Death' — with the cover story written by editor M J Akbar? This was the period when Girilal Jain, editor of *The Times of India*, wrote edit page pieces fulminating about "the Pakistan hand". Readers could then join the dots as to who was responsible for the riots.

But this was still early days. After the Shahbano affair, all pretence at keeping communities out was gone. The RSS's high-powered campaign on the Babri Masjid, the vitriol against Muslims poured out during L K Advani's *rath yatra*, the so-called debates on pseudo-secularism, the Bhagalpur, Indore, Maliana and Meerut riots — was there any doubt which two communities were involved?

By the time the 1992-93 Mumbai riots took place, nobody remembered this old rule. And a good thing too. When Hindu-Muslim conflict is the issue of the day, it's ridiculous to refer to them as "two groups". Readers were shocked during the 1992-93 Mumbai riots by the free use of 'Hindus' and 'Muslims' in reports. Did that instigate readers? Nobody went out and rioted after reading the English papers. I doubt anyone went out even after reading Bal Thackeray's incendiary edits in *Saamna*. But the reports did impact the riots — creating support among Hindu readers for the Sena's violence against Muslims. That didn't happen because the

two communities were named. It happened because of the way the incidents were reported.

The first task of a reporter covering a riot is to report the violence, find out how it began by talking to both sides, get the official version, try to get corroborative evidence, and present as coherent a picture as possible. Of course, this is tough to do in a day. However, though more than one reporter normally covers the violence, even after a couple of days one rarely gets a comprehensive picture.

Take the recent riots in Thane on September 29, 2008. True, the violence began late at night, so it may not have been possible for Mumbai's dailies to send reporters there in time to get firsthand reports. Hence the next morning's reports were mostly based on what the police told the press. One newspaper got a quote from the spokesperson of the affected Hindus; another had a quote each from both Hindus and Muslims.

But even two or three days later, a complete picture hadn't emerged. How long had the negotiations between the Hindus and Muslims been going on regarding the location of the Navratri arch and pandal, the reported point of dispute? Why did they fail? How had this question been resolved in previous years? Most papers carried quotes of Congress-NCP politicians blaming the Bajrang Dal, followed by a report on the VHP giving its version at a press conference held soon after the incident. But an independent investigation into a riot on the outskirts of the city, which left one dead and 50 injured, and turned neighbours into marauding enemies, is still waiting to be done.

Similarly, the Dhule riots that began on October 5, 2008, got a lot of coverage, but we are still to learn why such vicious and large-scale violence — by both communities — shook Dhule for the first time after the post-Babri Masjid riots there. When was the Hindu Rakshak Samiti formed, which put up the inflammatory posters that were torn off, which in turn led to the violence? Who were its members? Why did the police not heed the complaints against the posters? What was the role of local leader Shabbir Bhangarwala who led a procession hours before the violence erupted? The violence spread to the highway, where Muslim travellers who had nothing to do with Dhule were attacked. How did this happen?

Six weeks after the Dhule riots, newspapers front-paged the remand application for Bhangarwala, which stated: "It is an established fact that Muslims are the masterminds behind all terrorist activities across India." The application justified the actions of the Hindu Rakshak Samiti as "mere retaliation to what has been happening in the country for past few years (sic)". Surely this was an appropriate time for newspapers to go back to the Dhule violence and fill in the gaps, especially regarding the role of the police and the Hindu Rakshak Samiti? However, though this remark made news over two or three days, no newspaper thought fit to follow it up with

a report from Dhule. Is this because Dhule is far away from Mumbai, and its concerns don't really interest Mumbai readers? But then what about Thane, which can now be considered a suburb of Mumbai?

Proximity to big cities where editions are based is definitely a factor determining coverage given to incidents of communal conflict. But then, are riots that take place in big cities comprehensively covered? Depends on how many people die, how much property is damaged, how long the violence lasts, and how widespread it is. Localised violence that dies down in a day doesn't get much attention. After all, for news to be news it must be 'sensational'.

The last major riot in Mumbai began on December 6, 1992, and petered out by December 12; it started again around January 5, 1993, and petered out by January 16. Ample time for spot reports and in-depth investigations. Yet, what is the final image of the Mumbai riots? Radhabai Chawl, where six Hindus were burnt alive; angry Muslim mobs battling it out with the police on Mohammed Ali Road; the killing of

mathadi workers; Muslims burnt alive in Pratiksha Nagar...

The myths of the Mumbai riots were most zealously propagated by the English press. Muslims furious over the demolition of the Babri Masjid came out onto the streets and started attacking the police; naturally, the police had to fire, hence the high number of Muslim casualties.

Demoralised by the criticism of their action, the police refused to fire in January 1993, hence the Shiv Sena had a field day retaliating for Radhabai Chawl and the killings of innocent *mathadi* workers by Muslims.

The Srikrishna Commission showed that this was exactly the theory for the riots put forward by the police and the Congress government, and not too different from that put out by the Shiv Sena. Ironic, isn't it, considering that the English press was accused by the RSS and Sena of being pro-Muslim during the riots! *The Times of India* was even called *The Times of Pakistan*.

The Commission also showed that this theory was wrong; that, in fact, after the demolition of the Babri Masjid, the

Sudharak Olive



first stone was thrown by the Shiv Sena on a mosque; the first person to be killed was a Muslim; the first Muslim mobs were targeting not the police but public property, and, had they been handled better, might have dissipated their anger through *rasta rokos*. The second phase of the riots was not sparked off by Muslim attacks on Hindus; Radhabai Chawl was one among a whole lot of violent incidents that were taking place in the first week of January; the police showed no sign of demoralisation while tackling unarmed Muslim mobs in January, but grew passive when faced with Sena-led mobs — this too was proved by the report. So, how did the English press get it all wrong? It's not as if Justice Srikrishna drew his conclusions from secret documents. There were just two sources he relied on: police records and victims' testimonies. Both were subject to intensive scrutiny; policemen and victims were cross-examined by all parties, for days.

The press too basically relied on the same sources. But while they preferred to take the victims' accounts with a pinch of salt, they swallowed the police version almost hook, line and sinker. The overall impression they gave readers was that of violent Muslims on the rampage in December and early-January, resulting in a Hindu backlash — exactly what the police themselves believed.

The Commission proved that the Mumbai police were communal, that even in their own affidavits, the police blamed only the Muslims even though their records spoke of violence by Hindus. The first stone of the Mumbai riots was thrown by Shiv Sainiks in Dharavi, but, despite this fact being in the police records, the entire police force believed that the violence originated in the Muslim areas. It was this police force that briefed the press. No wonder readers — at least those who read the English press — believed both phases of the riots were started by Muslims, and that the Sena only retaliated, and needed to be supported.

The Srikrishna Commission's findings must surely be the most publicised and debated findings reached by any inquiry commission. Yet, the lasting image of the Mumbai riots continues to be Sena-saved-Hindus-from-marauding-Muslims, not Sena-and-cops-targeted-innocent-Muslims.

Despite this, the Mumbai press continues to rely on the police for its information on communal violence!

Why? How does a Hindu-Muslim riot become a police story? Because the first news of violence emanates from the police control room? Or because the police is the official source of information and therefore seen as the most reliable?

Can they continue to be seen as reliable, at least in Mumbai, even after the Srikrishna Commission report? Isn't it time editors published the police version as just one of the many versions their reporters bring back?

That leads to a third point: should journalists be trained to cover riots? Or should the basic principles of reportage — facts are sacred, comment free; get both sides of the story;

check your facts before writing them — suffice?

These rules cover the essentials of riot reportage. But, after 20 years of almost continuous communal violence, shouldn't editors brief reporters on certain other basics: that the immediate cause of the violence isn't all that needs to be reported; look for the long-term cause of the violence? Often, the immediate violent act is carried out by Muslims: stoning a religious procession that throws *gulal* on a mosque; moving the saffron arch that has come up outside their colony; tearing down posters of a Hindu organisation; going berserk when the police stop them from distributing pamphlets outside a mosque. If you were to ask the police (or the RSS), the first act is always carried out by Muslims.

Getting the background as well as the immediate cause right — as far as possible — or at least publishing both sides, is important, not just because that's our job, but also because one of the fallouts of communal reporting is that existing prejudices between communities get affected. The stereotype of the 'violent Muslim'/'communal Hindu' get strengthened if reporters do not go beyond the surface; the distance between communities can grow if only one side is presented; and both communities might accept the violence of groups who are seen to be protecting them.

The English press has a greater responsibility to report both sides because Indian language newspapers, catering to just one community, never bother to do so. Take the Urdu press: its reports are diametrically opposite those published in the English press. Indeed, the Urdu press is openly biased. While the English press does expose glaring instances of police brutality on minorities (Cheetah Camp, Mumbai, in 1984), or, as in Gujarat and Delhi 1984, State-supported killings of minorities, the Urdu press refuses to even acknowledge that Muslims can be violent. Most Muslims still feel Radhabai Chawl was burnt by mercenaries hired by a builder who wanted that little plot of land. A Muslim once asked me: "You mean Muslims were also violent in the 1992-93 riots (like Hindus)?"

The same attitude exists in the Urdu press regarding Islamic terrorism. I use the phrase deliberately because the Jaish-e-Mohammed, the Lashkar-e-Tayyaba and the Al Qaeda, that openly espouse terrorism, call themselves by Islamic names and use Islamic terms such as *jihad*. In the same way, the Malegaon blast perpetrators are Hindu terrorists. Hasan Kamal, as a columnist, may write against extremist elements among Muslims in his column in the Urdu paper *Hamara Samaj*, but no Urdu publication will ever report anything against SIMI. In this they are like *Saamna*, which portrays its leader and its party as the protector of Hindus. The Urdu press portrays SIMI as religious young men committed to Islam, who dare to speak out for their beleaguered community when Muslim politicians have sold out, and for doing so are hunted by a State which allows the Bajrang Dal to flourish.

Reader compulsions? I doubt Muslims will reject the Urdu press if it told its readers facts about SIMI that are common

knowledge. Many Muslims read only Urdu, so there is no alternative. Those who do know other languages read newspapers in those languages in addition anyway. Far from compulsion, the Urdu press’ bias has more to do with the beliefs held by Urdu journalists.

A parallel here is the Gujarati press. Its readers would have continued to buy Gujarati papers even had they not blanked out all news of the violence against Muslims after the Sabarmati burning in Godhra. Instead, the Gujarati press published wrong accounts of what happened after the train was burnt, including gory tales of Hindu travellers being raped and their breasts cut off in mosques adjoining Godhra station. They did not print the collector’s rebuttal of such ‘news’. Nor did they print the letters of condemnation issued immediately after the incident by Godhra’s Muslims, nor the open apology on behalf of his community by Maulana Umerji, the maulvi of Godhra’s Ghanchi Muslims. This apology was made at a peace committee meeting called by the collector. The 70-plus Umerji is still in jail as a conspirator in the train burning.

Though the Gujarati press knew that the Sabarmati travellers had tried to drag a Ghanchi Muslim girl from Godhra station, they wrote nothing about this, or of the roughing up of Muslims there by RSS travellers. They simply projected the burning as a Pakistani plot. What did the Gujarati press achieve by this one-sided reporting? A lot. Gujarati Hindus ended up believing that Godhra’s Muslims had, without provocation, not just burnt alive 58 Hindus, but had not even been punished for it (there was very little retaliatory violence in Godhra itself); nor had the community shown any remorse. The news about the terrible retaliation by RSS-led Hindus in other parts of Gujarat on innocent Muslims was dismissed as lies cooked up by the anti-Hindu English press. The Gujarati press thereby built up a solid reservoir of support for Narendra Modi, who was projected as the defender of Hindus.

However, here one needs to say that the English press ignored the Sabarmati incident. After the first reports, no sustained attempt was made to find out more about the people who were burnt alive in Coach S-6. It was almost as if because these were VHP supporters, they didn’t deserve any attention. Would the English press have done this if Hindus had burnt a coach full of Muslims, and Muslims had retaliated elsewhere? The defence that violence against Muslims broke out immediately and was on such a large scale that all one’s resources were spent on it, is not good enough. For journalists need to go out of their way while reporting communal violence to ensure that victims from both sides get their stories heard.

If the media doesn’t report the stories of one group, or the State refuses to hear them, they may well be forced to turn to those ‘defenders of the faith’ who want to cash in on their misery. At any rate, professionalism demands that both sides be heard.

Gujarat turned many journalists of the English press into activists. Long before that, editors like Nikhil Wagle have held that a journalist has to be an activist, and for this he’s had to pay the price of being attacked by the Shiv Sena. But many seniors in the profession are against such activism, for they feel it will affect a journalist’s objectivity — the basic principle of the profession. But the manner in which we report communal conflict makes us, to some extent, a part of the Hindu-Muslim question. The language we use: “disputed structure” for the Babri Masjid; “feisty sanyasin” for Uma Bharati, the woman who cheered as the Babri Masjid was being brought down, the politician who enjoyed fast cars when she was chief minister of Madhya Pradesh; “terror techie” for the Muslim computer experts suspected of planting bombs; no adjective at all for Lt Col Purohit, a serving officer of our army, arrested for planting bombs aimed at killing Indian citizens he was duty bound to protect; “terrorists” for suspected Muslim bombers, but “extremists” for Hindus arrested for planting bombs in Thane; “sensitive areas” for Muslim mohallas in Mumbai alone, even though much of the violence usually starts from Dadar and Kherwadi — Sena-dominated areas.

The pictures we use also contribute to raising or lowering the communal temperature. How right is it to put on page one the picture of *namaz* being offered under the shadow of guns (always in the aftermath of a riot), or the unforgettable picture of an elderly Muslim being made to remove his *topi* by a policeman ostensibly searching for explosives on the former’s head, against the backdrop of a Red Fort decked up for Independence Day? This picture appeared on page one of a national daily a few days before Independence Day 2006. The indiscriminate use of *burkha*-clad women for any article on Muslims is irritating to a community that is not homogeneous, for the kind of image it conveys. The reason for using such pictures may be sheer laziness (it’s available in the files), but its effects are much more serious.

But none of this is taught. It comes only through trial and error, when one’s own gaffes are pointed out by the affected communities. Perhaps it’s time to start specialised courses in conflict reporting, at journalism schools. Apart from the basics of reporting, the guiding rules should be: in reporting communal conflict, look for the background; don’t perpetuate the stereotype; find residents who deal with both communities; corroborate victims’ accounts as well as police accounts; ascertain the role of the police, the politicians and the media; highlight stories where communities have helped each other. It’s also time the English press took the initiative in conducting a dialogue with the Hindi, Urdu, Marathi and Gujarati press about these issues — to learn what they feel about the English press.

Jyoti Punwani is a Mumbai-based freelance journalist who specialises in communalism issues

The art of not writing

How does the media in Chhattisgarh report the conflict between the Naxalites and the Salwa Judum, or the conflict between local communities and corporations? Quite simply, it doesn't. The pressures on journalists in Chhattisgarh are unique. They are paid not to report stories that are critical of the powers-that-be, whether they are industrial lobbies or state authorities

**SHUBHRANSHU
CHOUDHARY**

I WAS IN BHAIRAMGARH to cover a Salwa Judum rally. Bhairamgarh is a small town in the Bijapur district of southern Chhattisgarh where the State is engaged in a bloody war with the Maoists.

According to the government, the Salwa Judum is a "spontaneous people's movement" against Maoists; human rights activists call it a brutal State-created militia.

The rally was scheduled to pass along narrow tribal paths deep in the jungle where no vehicle can go. So the Salwa Judum leader Mahendra Karma very kindly arranged for me to ride on the back of a motorcycle.

The bike moved easily through the jungle, weaving in and out of several tribal groups *en route* to the rally. I discovered in the course of my conversation with the bike rider that he was a local journalist. Indeed, the ride turned into a crash course in local journalism for me.

The journalist worked for one of the top dailies in Chhattisgarh.

"How much salary do you get," I asked him. "I do not get a salary," he replied. "Oh, so how do you earn a living?" "By not writing," was the answer.

Noting my surprise, he clarified.

"Journalism here is the art of not writing," he said. "I earn around Rs 5,000 every month by not writing."

I still could not make sense of what he was saying.

"Being journalists, we know who is doing what; the ins and the outs of corrupt practice, and the perpetrators," he continued. "We get a fee for not writing about the corruption. That is our salary."

He added: "Not only do we not get a salary, we spend from our own pockets to collect and send the news to the head office. It is still worth our while. There are a handful of journalists in the district headquarters who do get a token salary. But in reality they earn many times more than that."

"It is an easy profession for making money," he explained. "As we know good things about the Salwa Judum, similarly we also know all the bad things about the Salwa Judum. But we do not write about the bad things, for obvious reasons," he added, watching leader of the Salwa Judum, Mahendra Karma, who was standing nearby. Karma is also leader of the

opposition in Chhattisgarh.

Almost every newspaper in Chhattisgarh still refers to the Salwa Judum as a "peaceful people's movement" even though there are numerous reports in the national press about human rights violations perpetrated by the group.

After the rally, I proceeded to Dhurli village to cover a possible meeting between Essar and local villagers. The corporate house was seeking a no objection certificate (NOC) from local landowners to set up a plant.

When we reached Dhurli, a group of villagers approached us and said threateningly: "You must be a broker for Essar." They spotted our camera, paused a bit, but then added: "All journalists are also brokers of the industrialists. You must leave the village. We do not want to talk to you."

I was shocked at the level of hatred for journalists in the village.

In Dantewada town, after hearing my story, some journalists explained to me in great detail how much Essar was paying journalists to "keep their mouths shut". They could not give me any proof, unfortunately.

People in Dhurli had told me: "Tell the government, if they want to take our land they must first kill us. They can take this land only over our dead bodies."

Back in Delhi, I was amazed to read a report by the Indo Asian News Service claiming that the people of Dhurli had agreed to give their land to Essar. They were so happy with Essar's rehabilitation package, the report said, that they had written a letter to the government expressing their willingness to give away their land.

The report received prominent coverage by newspapers like *The Times of India*, *The Hindu Business Line* and *The Economic Times*.

It also furnished details of how many people had signed the letter and to whom the letter had been given.

I could not believe it! The story must be true, I thought, if so many papers had carried it.

After reflecting on this for a few days, I could not help calling the officer named in the newspaper report. SDM Ambalgam was shocked: "What letter? And which newspaper are you talking about," she asked. "I have not

Sudharak Olwe



got any letter, and no one has agreed to give land as far as I know." "Have they given the letter to another officer," I ventured to ask. "No. I am the officer in charge of land acquisition here. Even if they had given the letter to another officer it would have come to me," she replied. "I can't believe what you are saying," she added.

I faxed the articles to Ambalgam, at her request.

She issued a show cause notice to Essar asking for an explanation for the news item. The article also featured a quote from the head of Essar in Chhattisgarh commenting on the "letter from the villagers".

According to Ambalgam, Essar replied saying it had been misled by the reporter.

Ambalgam was subsequently transferred from Dantewada. No one followed the matter up with the reporter or the newspaper.

That incident prompted me to look more carefully at news items being generated from Raipur in the national newspapers. This is what I found.

The Indian Express carried a report on the front page saying that Naxals had killed three farmers because they had

continued farming in defiance of a Naxal ban on all farm activities.

I had not heard of any Naxal ban on farming whilst I was there!

A few phone calls told me that the three people had indeed been killed by Naxals but that the killings had no connection with farming. Farming was on full swing in Chintagufa village, I was told.

"These people were killed because of their alleged connection with the police, not because they were farming," former sarpanch of Chintagufa told me over the phone.

If I was able to speak to the people of Chintagufa by phone to crosscheck a story from Delhi, why couldn't journalists from Raipur do the same? I wrote about this in my column in a local daily the following week.

No one took notice of the article. In fact, the very next day *The Times of India* carried the same old story about Naxals attacking farmers because of the ban.

Some journalists told me, off the record, from which intelligence officer's desk the story had been generated. But they could not provide any proof. "The officer gave the story

only to his trusted ones,” a journalist explained.

In the meantime I had begun working on a story about farmer suicides in Chhattisgarh. I was shocked to find that, according to National Crime Records Bureau figures, Chhattisgarh has the highest number of farmer suicides in the country, each year.

Despite the alarming numbers, and eight years after the state came into existence, not a single journalist in Chhattisgarh had written about it!

I mentioned this in my column. Shortly after, there was an article on the front page of the paper with the headline, ‘Everybody loves a good fraud; untruth of farmer suicides in Chhattisgarh’. The article called the National Crime Records Bureau data a lie, to which, astonishingly, the Bureau did not respond — a basic journalistic procedural requirement.

My column in the local newspaper was stopped. After years I was suddenly told that my writing was inaccurate and full of lies!

Journalists who do not wish to be named have told me: “We want to write the story of farmer suicides. We can see it happening around us. But the story will go against the government and then the government will stop (publishing) advertisements in our newspapers. So we cannot write the story.”

Kamlesh Painkra’s story

The story of Kamlesh Painkra probably best explains the situation of journalists in Chhattisgarh today.

Painkra was the first journalist to write about human rights violations by the Salwa Judum. Following his report, he was told by the local superintendent of police (SP) to apologise and admit that his story had been a mistake.

When Painkra refused, he lost his job. His brother, who was a teacher, was put behind bars, ostensibly for sheltering Naxalites.

The district administration cancelled Painkra’s licence to sell public distribution system (PDS) grain in the local market for no apparent reason. It was his main source of income.

Painkra was finally forced to flee his home, taking his family with him, when a friendly policeman told him that the police was going to kill him in an “encounter”. They still live like refugees.

No local newspaper reported his ordeal.

I tried to help out by asking a few editor friends to hire him as their Dantewada district correspondent. Painkra now lives in Dantewada after fleeing his home district of Bijapur.

Painkra was hired, but the fine print of his appointment letter was interesting. The letter stated that his salary would be Rs 3,000 a month. It went on to say that he would also have to collect advertisements worth Rs 20,000 every month and that his salary would be a proportion of the amount he managed to collect.

“That means that if the advertising money goes down, the salary will go down accordingly,” Painkra explained.

He declined the offer, saying: “If I have to collect Rs 20,000 every month in a town with a population of less than 25,000, you can imagine from whom I will have to collect the advertisements. How can I do any journalism after that?”

Last month, the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) bulldozed Painkra’s house in Bijapur to make room for a volleyball ground for soldiers. There were no reports in the papers about this. Painkra’s family was not informed of the demolition. Nor was any compensation paid to them.

The pressures on journalists in Chhattisgarh are special.

Some time ago, the Naxals sent an audio CD to every newspaper office in Raipur. The CD contained, among other things, a recording of a conversation, via walkie-talkie, between the same superintendent of police, Bijapur, who had threatened Painkra, and his deputy.

During the conversation, the SP tells his subordinate: “Keep an eye on the area and if you see any journalists just kill them.”

The government reacted by saying the recording was bogus. Police officials in private accept that the voice was indeed that of the SP and that the Naxals had tuned into his conversation on the walkie-talkie.

No national newspaper covered the news. The SP was sent to work with the State Human Rights Commission.

Shubhranshu Choudhary is a founder-member of the citizens journalism initiative in Chhattisgarh, CGnet (www.cgnet.in)

Who is Ima Gyaneswari?

The media portrays the northeast as one homogeneous trouble-torn frontier. Why doesn't the media get behind the statistics of the number killed and ammunition recovered? Who bothered to find out what led Ima Gyaneswari and 11 other women to protest the Armed Forces Special Powers Act by stripping in front of the Assam Rifles headquarters?

TERESA REHMAN

OUR CAR REACHED THE OFFICES of the ceasefire monitoring cell of the Nationalist Socialist Council of Nagaland-Issac-Muivah (NSCN-IM) at Diphupar, on the outskirts of Dimapur town in Nagaland. Our escort Apaam helped some men unload groceries from a van. He made a quick call on his mobile and told us there were some protesting villagers on the way. "There could be trouble," he warned. When I insisted, he said: "Okay. It's your decision." He went inside and emerged with an AK-47. "Come, let's go. If someone fires, I will also fire a shot or two." He laughed, hopped into the car and sat next to the driver. He spotted some guavas lying on the dashboard and gobbled up two of them. "I'm hungry," he smiled.

Sounds like a page from a thriller? Well, it was for me. After all, I was going to meet Th Muivah, chief of the NSCN-IM, at his council headquarters in Hebron, some 40 km from Dimapur. As we proceeded, I tried to prod our escort. "When did you join the outfit?" Apaam laughed. "Oh many, many years ago." I asked again: "Was the training tough?" He smiled. "Yes, it was." "Where are you from?" "Ukhrul," he replied. I kept up the questions. "What is your designation in the outfit? Do you enjoy the life of a militant?" Apaam paused for a while and then laughed. "If you have to interview me, you will have to take a prior appointment." He took out a new sim card from his wallet and fixed it on his mobile phone.

My meeting with Th Muivah was candid and invigorating. So much so that at the end of it Muivah commented to his personal security officer: "This reporter is very cunning." I thought that was the best compliment I had ever received. Muivah was smiling all through the interview as I shot questions at him ranging from what kind of person he was, to his love for pork, his gradual conversion to vegetarianism, and whether his religious beliefs clashed with his 'cause'.

The lower-rung cadres at the camp were amused when I asked them to play the keyboard and drums at a sprawling church inside the general headquarters. From their conversation I sensed their deep spirituality, their strong faith in God, and their commitment to the 'cause'.

From my personal experience of encounters with militants, I would like to emphasise that reporting insurgency in this conflict-torn region should not be confined to mere statistics of the number of people killed and the number of arms and

ammunition recovered. Mediapersons should venture down the untrodden path, ask the unanswered questions, and get an objective view of these non-State actors.

The northeast has often been misrepresented by the so-called 'mainstream' national media. Mediapersons reporting in this region have an important responsibility to alter the stereotypical manner in which the northeast is represented in the media.

There are several faces of this militancy-ravaged region which have to be brought into the public domain. The northeast is clubbed together as a homogeneous whole, a trouble-torn frontier that must be protected at all costs. It is therefore a challenge for mediapersons reporting from the field to act as a catalyst in creating an understanding between the State and non-State actors. We need to find a solution for the long-drawn-out conflict and analyse what it is that makes young boys and girls, barely out of their teens, take up arms without batting an eyelid.

With globalisation, the region has witnessed a surge in media activity, with a growing number of vernacular and local dailies, including four private television channels. There has also been a boom in FM radio stations, most of them entertainment-driven.

Many mediapersons today are beginning to raise their voices for a cause. For instance, in Guwahati, the media actively campaigned for pro-democracy crusaders in Myanmar. However, the local media still lacks maturity and must get over the tendency to 'sensationalise' issues. Local TV and FM channels often add spice to their stories and succumb to the national media's obsession with Bollywood and cricket.

Still, representatives of the national media in the region do play a pivotal role in projecting the northeast in an appropriate manner, as Delhi continues to be the decision-maker.

Times have also begun to change for the militants of the northeast. It's now easy to visualise a gun-toting militant sitting with a laptop in the middle of his camp in the forests of Manipur, Nagaland or Assam, e-mailing press releases to the media. As we ill-equipped journalists grapple with the hostile terrain and psychological barriers that accompany dealing with complex insurgency operations, cyber-savvy militants shoot out press releases, e-newsletters and even

threats to mediapersons and prominent personalities via e-mail! ULFA's publicity secretary, who writes under the pseudonym 'Rubi Bhuyan', even engaged in a debate on one of Assam's e-groups.

Many big-time militant groups have impressive websites and boast computer engineers among their cadres. Today's cyber age allows them to communicate with the media, which acts as a force multiplier for underground outfits for whom coverage is otherwise hard to come by. Militants are easily able to access Internet editions of newspapers and read what's been written about them; news establishments also provide them tip-offs about impending army operations. The Internet has, in fact, become the militants' latest tool to communicate with the outside world and seek solidarity for their cause.

There is now a definite and marked change in the manner in which the media and cyber-savvy militants operate. The northeast is home to a number of militant groups, some prosperous, many rag-tag. Of late, it has become fashionable for mediapersons to be invited to militant camps so that they can dish out 'exclusive' news to those watching thousands of miles away. I myself have travelled to several militant camps for a first-hand experience of the gun-toting, lower-rung cadres as well as their top leaders.

It's an undeniable fact that journalists working in this troubled region, especially in Manipur and Nagaland, are constantly flirting with danger. In a state like Manipur, where over 20 different underground outfits operate, editors have been killed by unidentified gunmen and journalists stopped from doing their jobs by militant outfits that have gone to the extent of closing down newspaper offices. Mediapersons often have to face the wrath of both the underground outfits and government agencies, including the security forces.

My brush with terror was in a remote village in Manipur's Thoubal district when I was attempting to meet the family of a 'child soldier'. The house was suddenly surrounded by commandos of the Manipur police who, incidentally, are notorious for killing civilians. I had to show my identity card and verify my credentials before they apologised and left.

Terror in these parts, especially in Manipur and Nagaland, is all-pervasive. But in spite of the perils, persons from the media have to be sensitive and perceptive to the real issues. It is important that someone sitting in Delhi or Mumbai knows that there is a lady called Irom Sharmila in Manipur who has been fasting for the past eight years demanding a repeal of the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act of 1958.

I remember an interesting conversation with Ima Gyaneswari, one of the 12 elderly mothers of Manipur who were catapulted to fame when they stripped and held a banner across their bare bodies, challenging the army to rape them if they had the guts, right in front of the headquarters of the Assam Rifles. Gyaneswari, a wife and mother, smiled as she narrated the events of that fateful day.

She told me she is so traditional, she touches her husband's feet whenever she goes out for an important function. On that particular day however, she simply told him she was taking part in a protest. When she thinks about it now she feels it was a 'do-or-die' situation for her and her associates; she had to protect the daughters of Manipur. Her husband and her sons later reconciled to the fact that what she did was indeed courageous. Gyaneswari believes that the army has become more sensitised in their dealings with women. But she wants the draconian Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act of 1958 to go.

Gyaneswari admits that although the daring act received widespread media coverage, it did not have the desired effect on the authorities. She was amused and touched by my questions. She said nobody had ever tried to delve into their psyche and understand why these mothers of Manipur had done what they did. This was the first time someone had asked her to speak her heart out.

It is the responsibility of the media in the region to also file stories on surrendered militants, portraying their sense of disillusionment, etc. There can be balance only when both sides of the story are told. For instance, Sunil Nath, former ULFA publicity secretary and one-time think-tank of the outfit, expressed the futility of any armed rebellion when he told me: "I came in close contact with the top leadership and I could sense that these are ordinary men without the vision to lead a revolution. I did not see a light at the end of the tunnel. It was a dead-end."

In this insurgency-ravaged region there are many stories involving common people waiting to be told in the mainstream media. How many people know that there is a powerful and prolific organisation of women writers in Assam that has been honing new talent and preserving the long-forgotten writings of women? Or that there is a *dorbar*, or traditional institution, in every locality of Shillong city in Meghalaya which settles local disputes and even takes care of its own garbage? Or how the church in Mizoram and Nagaland actively addresses social problems including combating HIV/AIDS and drug abuse? And how many of you have heard of Shillong's famous 70-year-old radio jockey?

Teresa Rehman, Principal Correspondent of Tehelka magazine, reports on the myriad hues of India's conflict-torn northeast. She has visited several militant camps in the region. She was awarded the 7th Sarojini Naidu Prize for Best Reporting on Women and Panchayati Raj, instituted by the Hunger Project

Sensation and sympathy

Dalits can figure in contemporary media only under two conditions: when they are pushed to doing something dramatic and spectacular (like burning a bogey of the Deccan Queen to protest the Khairlanji killings), or when a bleeding-heart publication carries a sad story on “suffering” dalits. But daily atrocities against dalits and democratic assertions of civil rights by dalits are not covered

S ANAND

MAY 21, 2002. Murugesan and Ramasamy, two dalits in Thiniyam village in Tiruchirapalli district, Tamil Nadu, were branded with hot iron rods and forced to feed each other human excreta by an OBC Thevar family of the village. For weeks, the news was not properly reported even in the Tamil media. There was no outrage in civil society except in dalit circles. In June, the Dalit Panthers of India (known as Viduthalai Chiruththaigal Katchi in Tamil) under the leadership of Thirumavalavan staged a massive protest against the incident in the district headquarters of Tiruchirapalli. Nearly 200,000 people gathered. The local and national media remained indifferent.

Cut to September 2005. Actor and TV star Khushboo was being attacked for her comments on how young women should have safe sex and how men should not expect their wives to be virgins. These comments were deliberately twisted by sections of the Tamil media to make Khushboo appear ‘anti-Tamil’. *Tamizh Murasu*, a forgotten evening paper that had been recently acquired and re-launched by the Dayanidhi Maran-owned Sun TV group (which then owed allegiance to the ruling party, Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam) noticed that Khushboo’s as-told-to column in the Tamil edition of *India Today* (in its annual ‘sex issue’ targeted at sales and advertising revenue) had gone almost unnoticed for over a week since it hit the stands on September 18. *Tamizh Murasu* was looking for some sensational news that could boost its sales and visibility. It chanced upon Khushboo’s comments — a Gujarati Muslim who had made

Chennai her home, and someone who was hosting a show on the rival Jaya TV. A soft target. Before running the story, the newspaper sought the opinion of various Tamil cultural/ political/ film personalities on what they interpreted as Khushboo’s “disparaging comments sully all Tamil women”. Many, including DPI’s Thirumavalavan, initially refused to comment, saying they were not aware of Khushboo’s remarks. Yet *Tamizh Murasu* ran the story with the banner, ‘Tamil women have no chastity, says Khushboo’ on September 24, 2005, with indignation expressed by some nonentities from the film industry. The Sun media group orchestrated a campaign around Khushboo’s comments. There were *Tamizh Murasu* posters across the state and the Sun group used its television arm, the most-watched channel Sun TV, to run short teasers on Khushboo’s ‘sensational’ comments exposed by *Tamizh Murasu*. The group’s FM radio Suryan also encouraged people to read the evening paper. The many arms of the Sun media empire fed one big mouth.

In the next few days, several political parties were forced to react and condemn Khushboo. Leaders of the BJP, Paattali Makkal Katchi, Marumalarchi Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam and Dalit Panthers of India aired their views about how Khushboo was “denigrating” Tamil women and “encouraging women to be immoral”. The DPI and PMK were especially shrill since they had joined hands to launch the Tamil Protection Movement earlier that year. Some DPI cadre, led by women, held street protests with *chappals* and brooms, demanding that Khushboo apologise or leave Tamil Nadu and “return to her Bombay”. A Khushboo effigy was made to ride a donkey.

Since 1998-99, I had witnessed the rise of the Dalit Panthers of India (DPI) as a social movement that had once called for the boycott of parliamentary politics, saying dalits had no future in such a system. The DPI raised several issues related to the oppression of and State brutalities against dalits in the late-1990s and later. For their participation in agitational politics, many of its young cadres were jailed both by the DMK and the AIADMK governments under the draconian Goondas Act and National Security Act. Riding on a wave of protests, especially after a dalit-inclusive Third Front was forged with the late G K Mooppanar of the Tamil Maanila Congress in 1999, Thirumavalavan gave in to the temptation of electoral politics and contested the September 1999 Lok



In Khairlanji, Bhotmange's wife and three children were dragged out of their house, stripped and paraded in the village square where they were beaten to death

Sabha elections from Chidambaram (reserved) constituency. Large-scale violence was witnessed. The PMK and DMK unleashed organised terror on dalits and prevented them from voting; dalit houses were burnt in several villages. The state police, however, arrested scores of DPI cadre. As a People's Watch report then noted: "The state DGP was trying to portray the DPI as a 'terrorist' organisation." Yet, Thirumavalavan secured 2,25,768 of the 7,24,305 valid votes polled. The media and civil society were not perturbed. For many of them, the militant assertion of civil rights by the DPI was only an expression of 'terror' — not the injustices perpetrated on dalits by society or the State. The DPI was demonised by the media and civil society as a disruptive, antisocial force.

However, the same media actively solicited DPI and Thirumavalavan and incited them to speak out and act against Khushboo and her ostensible attack on Tamils. When 40 to 50 DPI cadre demonstrated before and for television cameras demanding that Khushboo apologise or go back to Bombay, the national media got very interested. Over 200,000 people demonstrating peacefully against the dehumanisation of dalits in Thinniyam did not count for the media. The force-feeding of human shit to dalits itself did not make for news. However, a few DPI cadre wielding brooms on a Khushboo effigy mounted on a donkey makes for a suitable portrayal of dalits. This is the image of dalits as barbaric, as a community that is anti-modern and opposed to civil expression, that suits the media.

Since May 2001, as a correspondent of *Outlook* magazine, I had sought to report on the significant interventions the DPI had made on a range of issues: when the DPI had battled the State and a feudal society to ensure elections in the reserved panchayats of Keeripatti and Pappapatti in Madurai district where Thevars had repeatedly opposed the very idea of dalits heading the civic bodies; when the Thinniyam incident happened; when over 400 dalit homes were attacked by the state police in collusion with local Thevars in November 2001 in Sankaralingapuram, Tuticorin district; when on December 6, 2002, Thirumavalavan staged a unique protest against J Jayalalitha's anti-conversion legislation in a ceremony where thousands of Dalit Panther cadre and other secular Tamils shed their Sanskrit-inflected Hindu-sounding names and assumed secular 'pure Tamil' ones. *Outlook*, representative of mainstream print journalism at its liberal best, never deemed it necessary to allow space for reportage of such 'caste issues'. The magazine's readers were ostensibly not interested in the struggles of dalits at the grassroots level. The first and only opportunity I got to write about the DPI and Thirumavalavan in *Outlook* was when they had been pitchforked to national attention thanks to their anti-Khushboo demonstrations.

There's no question of defending the odious position that Thirumavalavan and his party cadre were manipulated into taking by the media over Khushboo. That some foolery, a show of *chappals* and brooms, ensured space on prime-time

national television, made the dalit cadre offer repeat performances for the sake of the camera. They came to relish their 15 seconds on television. Several times in Chennai, such protests came to be staged specifically for the media. The same cameras would not travel to Thinniyam to record what was perhaps one of post-Independence India's most dehumanising acts.

Elite media like *Outlook* and NDTV took an active interest since their constituency — the liberal, secular middle classes — saw the attack on Khushboo as an attack on themselves. New forums to protect freedom of expression were launched in Chennai. Civil society actors who had been routinely indifferent to atrocities against dalits and the DPI's activism on this front were quick to condemn the DPI without considering how the party and its cadre had been manipulated into posturing on this non-issue.

Such a script was repeated in the case of Khairlanji in Maharashtra's Bhandara district, where month-long dalit-led protests against the rape and lynching of the Bhotmange family in October and mid-November 2006 were ignored by the media. However, when agitating dalits in Mumbai burnt two emptied bogies of the Pune-Mumbai Deccan Queen and a local train on November 30, 2006, to draw attention to Khairlanji and to the desecration of an Ambedkar statue in Kanpur, Uttar Pradesh, the corporate media began to take notice. Whatever the context, we see that democratic assertions of civil rights by dalits are not given attention, whereas a desperate recourse to violence and sensationalism are magnified and condemned as typical of dalits.

Why does this happen? Routine atrocities against dalits — that two dalits are murdered in India every day, according to official records — cannot be commodified by the media, be it local Tamil newspapers like *Tamizh Murasu* or channels like Sun TV, or by more elite media like *Outlook* or CNN-IBN. Whereas when the media sets the stage for a conflict over Khushboo, they can create a constituency for such news. Dalits can figure in contemporary media under two conditions: when they are pushed to do something dramatic and spectacular (a show of brooms against Khushboo, or burning a bogey of the Deccan Queen), or when a section of the media that passes for the conscientious (the odd bleeding-heart liberal newspaper/channel) seeks to shower 'sympathy' on dalits who are 'suffering' (like when a BBC television reporter tells us, "because of their extreme poverty, rat is often the only form of protein the Musahars get to eat", as he munches on a burnt rat leg, something an Indian reporter is unlikely to do). Sympathy-driven journalism, bereft of a deeper political and social understanding of caste dynamics, wins awards for reporting the unreported world, the invisible India. Sensation-seeking journalism, driven by commodification of the spectacle, brings in advertisements, revenue. The dalits are crushed between these two.

S Anand has worked with The Hindu, Outlook and Tehelka. He runs Navayana, a publishing house that exclusively focuses on the issue of caste from an anti-caste perspective

A skewed definition of balance

Media coverage generally displays an alarming lack of curiosity in exploring and reporting land/livelihood struggles and campaigns. The media never finds out why people choose to fight for their land, what it is that drives them to defend it with their lives. Instead, as was clear in the coverage of the conflict in Singur, the media is likely to over-represent the views of commerce and government

NITYANAND
JAYARAMAN

THERE ARE VERY FEW who accuse the media of being fair.

In my initial years as a freelance journalist, I wrote for a magazine (now dead) called the *Far Eastern Economic Review*. It was the early-1990s. Enron's Dabhol controversy was raging. Enron contributed its own *masala* to the intrigue. Consumer fears over escalating electricity tariffs, apprehension over redundancy of public sector utility jobs, and the refusal of farmers to give up their lands — all these, at odds with a State and corporation that were intent on executing the project, fuelled the controversy. My article interviewing peasants and fisherfolk about why they didn't want to leave their land bounced back from the *Review*. It wasn't balanced, I was told. Enron officials were not interviewed.

I could have argued that my article that interviewed only farmers and fisherfolk did not need balance. It was the balance. Two articles published within 12 months in the same publication quoted not one of the land-losers, only Enron and government sources. From the point of view of the editors at the *Review*, those stories passed the balancing act. The people who matter had been quoted.

That access to media space is horribly inequitable is evident from the power equations among the line-up of players in any conflict involving large-scale acquisition of land for SEZs, industry, commercial projects and even government schemes. Developers, commercial interests and the state and central government are almost always together on one side — the land-takers. The land-losers — peasants, indigenous peoples, sharecroppers and other landless people dependent on the agrarian economy — occupy the other side, usually at loggerheads with the designs of State and commercial interests over their land and livelihoods.

Left to its natural inclinations, the media is likely to over-represent the views of commerce and government, even portray these favourably.

Generally speaking, the elite bias reflected in the *Review's* skewed definition of balance is a common disease afflicting media coverage, particularly of land struggles and campaigns by peasants, fisherfolk and indigenous peoples for rights over their livelihoods and natural resources. Numerous factors lend to this bias, including the fact that adivasis, dalits and other backward communities that comprise a bulk of land-losers are under-represented, if at

all, in the media. Dr Ambedkar's observation that "dalits have no press..." is as true today as it was then. What exist as dalit newspapers are not mainstream, and not read by those who ought to be reading them.

Media coverage, again generally speaking, reeks of an alarming lack of curiosity in exploring and reporting on why people choose to fight for their land, on what it is that ties them to land and drives them to defend it with their lives.

Writing for the *International Herald Tribune*, Anand Giridhardas actually came close to expressing this curiosity. "Whether or not these particular farmers were paid enough for their land, whether or not the protests were politically manufactured, one thing is clear — it is easier to produce a car for the cost of a Lexus surround-sound stereo system than it is to separate Indians from their land and from the idea of land."

Pretty well summed up, and the farmers will likely agree. This was even reprinted as an excerpt in *The Indian Express* in a September 2008 article titled 'Singur in Foreign Media'.

But Giridhardas stops short of examining why it is difficult to separate Indians from their land. Instead, he expresses the disappointment of "policymakers" and "business people" over the outcome of farmers' resistance to progress. "In a country where 740 million people — two-thirds of the population — live scattered in 660,000 villages, the closing of Tata's (Nano) factory deals a cruel blow to a widespread hope among policymakers and business people: that India will find a peaceful way to wean these millions from their land and move them into productive alternative livelihoods," the *IHT* article reads.

"Wean these millions?" The millions referred to here are our farmers and peasants.

Commenting on the Tata threat to relocate from Singur, this time in the *New York Times*, Giridhardas writes: "This country's project to build the world's cheapest car has driven into a quintessentially Indian ditch." This is the lead. The portrayal of peasants not wanting to part with their land, and the consequent political battles as the "quintessential Indian ditch" is worth noting. But what is startling is the manner in which Tata Motors' entirely commercial venture of producing a small car has been portrayed as "this country's" national project.



In both articles, the reporter fails to interview even one of the millions who need to be weaned away from their land. Instead, Suhel Seth, a long-time Tata adviser and friend, and Arundhati Roy are called in to speculate on why it is that the peasant is unwilling to part with his land. While their points of view are incisive and valuable, the land-loser probably has a story to tell too. After all, they number in the millions.

Following the first signs of trouble, less than a week after the Nano plant in Singur was announced in June 2005, news coverage in the English mainstream newspapers in India totally blacked out the farmer's voice. This was before Mamata Banerjee and the Trinamul stepped in. *The Hindu* wrote three stories with not one quote from any protesting farmer between June 27 and June 30, 2005. *The Times of India* wrote two pieces quoting only Buddhadev, Jyoti Basu, Biman Bose and some party functionaries. Tata was projected as a victim, and the state as having blundered. *The Telegraph* dismissed 1,000 villagers, by its own admission, shouting, "We'll give blood not land," as "a small incident".

To its credit, though, *The Telegraph* did quote, and continued to quote, farmers, at least one section of them — those who were welcoming of the project and had pledged their land voluntarily, expecting jobs and upward mobility.

In contrast, three out of four articles carried in *The Statesman* not only interviewed the farmers but also treated them sensitively, highlighting the issue of sharecroppers and landless labourers.

It was after this that the Trinamul, whose MLA represents Singur, took up the issue. From here on, till date, even the minimalistic coverage of farmers' voices ended. The media projected the ensuing struggle only as a turf war between two political parties — Trinamul and CPM — with poor Ratan Tata caught in the crossfire. Subsequent coverage of the Singur struggle rapidly degenerated into open name-calling and partisan reporting. Only *The Statesman* ceded that Mamata had latched onto issues that were simmering under the surface among her constituency. Even *The Statesman* was unable to restrain itself from describing her

as having a “proclivity for street theatre”.

India Today, no surprises here, resorted to a rant after Ratan Tata’s relocation threat: “It happens only in India. One Mamata Banerjee, 40,000 furious protesters and a coalition of unnatural allies shut down a highway, hold a state to ransom, and drive out an iconic investor like Ratan Tata and investments worth Rs 1,500 crore.” In one sentence, the protestors are reduced to unreasonable blackmailers, while Ratan Tata is the iconic investor, whatever that means.

From the patronising coverage, where farmers are seen as illiterate and misinformed protestors standing in the way of progress and their own good, to portraying them as unreasonable after the entry of Mamata Banerjee, the media’s treatment of Singur progressed from bad to worse. However, it was not the mere perception of misinformed agitation that seems to have rankled the media. Any reader of say *The Hindu*, *The Times of India*, *Frontline*, *India Today*, *The Telegraph*, or *The Indian Express* would have reason to believe that the Singur protestors were not just unreasonable, but also violent, and infused with criminal elements.

Frontline describes the struggle committee as “a group of ‘reluctant’ land-losers, Naxalite elements, Islamic fundamentalists, and other smaller parties” that “carried on a violent agitation in Singur, which culminated in a siege outside the plant site from August 24 to September 8, practically forcing Tata Motors to suspend work for over a month”.

The victim of the Singur controversy, going by any reading of popular Indian newspapers, would seem to be Ratan Tata and the state of West Bengal. None of those who lost their lives after and because of Tata’s entry into Singur seemed to have evoked the sympathy that media houses poured out when Tata Motors decided to move to Gujarat. It would appear from a reading of Indian newspapers that villagers, unknown, not written about ever, magically transformed overnight into Naxalites, gun- or arms-toting *goondas*, loaded with foreign contributions and a sinister agenda to derail India’s development the minute a big industrial house comes looking for their land. There is no examination of this magical phenomenon. The media projects it as a given.

No portion of the blame for the vitiated atmosphere is ever laid at the doorstep of the industrial house. Corporations such as Tata Motors have actually signed the United Nations Global Compact that requires the company to ensure that there are no human rights violations within their sphere of influence. The more Tata pushed, the more polarised the atmosphere became, and violence and killings followed. Not just in Singur, and not merely with the Tatas. The Tatas in Kalinganagar; POSCO in Jagatsinghpur; Salim Group in Nandigram; Reliance in Haryana, Raigad — the list is endless.

But the verdict, it seems, is that if we are to have a Nano car, the death of a few unnamed farmers is a small price to pay.

Singur before Tata’s entry was largely “peaceful”, with a

minimal role for the police. Since then, the police have performed at least 14 post-mortems. Four out of five suicides were of unwilling land-losers and sharecroppers; the fifth was a person who had given up his land willingly and got jobs for his three sons. He consumed pesticide after Tata announced its plan to relocate. At least two farmers — Shankar Das and Kalipada Majha — died of starvation in what is undisputedly hailed as a food-producing centre in Bengal. Four, including a 15-year-old child who was raped, strangled and burnt for the crime of participating in protests against the factory, were murdered.

Imagine if Ravi Kant, the Tata Motors MD, or even one of the unknown Tata engineers had been killed. Would the media have given it as cursory a mention as the 14 Singur residents who died got?

The Hindu, a respected daily seen to be sympathetic to people’s struggles and similar struggles in other states, fared very poorly in disguising its affiliation with the Communist Party of India (Marxist). The farmers’ side of things is hardly represented. When it is, it is couched in the words of Mamata Banerjee or some other Trinamul spokesperson. To a person reading *The Hindu*, it would be impossible to figure out that there actually were people — Mamata’s “votebank” if you may — and other organisations, including trade unions, representing landless workers at the centre of the protest. The fact that these people were the nucleus around which Mamata built her campaign was pushed beyond the reach of people.

Mamata’s 25-day fast may have had political motives. But the last I heard, politics was not illegal. The apparent cause for undertaking this long fast was arguably legitimate. But the “indefinite fast” (within cynical quotes) is dismissed as “high-wire theatrics” in an editorial titled ‘Singur and Beyond’ in *The Hindu*. All said and done, a 25-day fast cannot be dismissed as theatrics. As a form of *satyagraha*, the hunger strike allows the protestor to underline the truth by resorting to an extreme measure.

The Singur struggle committee is, in *The Hindu’s* words, a “ragbag of political friends — ranging from Naxalites through communal elements to free-floating and freelancing NGOs and individuals”. And their crime: targeting “the organised Left in a year it has scored major electoral victories”. It is unfortunate that a politician is blamed for practising politics. Can a business house be blamed for practising business? If there is a legitimate agitation for rights, political parties not just will, but should, go in its support. The fact that the entry of Mamata drowned out the voice of the community is as much the media’s mistake as it is Mamata’s.

Anuradha Talwar of the Paschim Banga Khet Mazdoor Samiti (PBKMS) never got around to reading *The Hindu*. But news does travel. “I have heard that *The Hindu* is very pro-people. But in covering Singur, they had a very party line, putting out only the CPM’s point of view,” she said. Indeed, the southern newspaper carried a long opinion piece by Brinda

Karat on Singur that claimed to present the facts, many of which were in dispute. But the courtesy was not extended to anyone from the struggle committee. The PBKMS's rejoinder to Karat's note was never published, not even acknowledged.

The Telegraph went several steps further to present people with a distorted and questionable picture of things. An article dated September 20, 2008, profiles highlights from a report by a "politically neutral and respected research organisation, the Work Foundation". The excerpts not only exonerate the Tatas but portray them as examples of progressive capitalism.

However, the Work Foundation is not politically neutral. It is clearly industry-friendly. What's more, Tata Consultancy Services is a key partner and sponsor of this organisation that published a glowing report on the Tatas. This is revealed on the organisation's website www.theworkfoundation.com.

Only *The Statesman* got the basic minimum of getting the farmers to speak for themselves right. Usually, in terms of covering conflicts, getting what you want from the horse's mouth is a foolproof strategy.

But with things the way they are, it is virtually impossible to get any sense of reality from the mainstream print media.

Singur, at least, was national news. Even this did not happen until some villagers decided to challenge the Tatas, and more so after thousands of Singur residents laid siege to the block development officer's (BDO's) office in protest against the forcible land acquisition. The involvement of the Tatas, and the treatment meted out to this corporate house, allegedly by a bunch of ill-informed peasants, combined with a liberal dose of violence guaranteed the issue column space. None of the newspapers seemed to have any difficulty in fathoming the national ramifications of the controversy.

Not all politically significant land struggles make it to the national edition. One of the most dramatic land struggles in free India — the campaign for land rights and radical land reform by dalits and adivasis in Kerala — has hardly penetrated the radar of national media houses. Since mid-2007, a growing number of dalits living in squalid shanties spread across Kerala's numerous urban centres began migrating to the Chengara estate to squat on an inhospitable hillside within RPG-owned Harrison-Malayalam's rubber plantation in Pathanamthitta district of Kerala.

In less than a year, more than 7,000 families of the poorest of Kerala moved to the hillside to claim their share of land as a right. The choice of the Chengara estate was strategic as the plantation company — with combined landholdings in excess of 25,000 hectares — had failed to pay lease rent on their holdings since the mid-1980s. Technically, the estate is an illegitimate landholding. This also highlighted the fact that many companies, including Tata Tea, had allegedly encroached on thousands of hectares of land, while the historically oppressed people had to make do with scraps

thrown their way as charity.

Curiously, many national newspapers referred to the dalit-adviasa squatters only as "encroachers" violating the sacred private property rights of the company. Once again, as in Singur, Harrison-Malayalam, with holdings well in excess of all the lands distributed to dalits and adivasis as part of land reforms in Kerala, was portrayed as the victim. The squatters were greedy "landless" out to grab land. 'Now, Landless out to Grab Munnar Land' shouted an *Indian Express* headline, referring to separate incidents of squatting by dalits and adivasis in various parts of Kerala.

Once again, in keeping with its allegiance to the CPM, *The Hindu* systematically decontextualises the aspirations of the landless by referring to them only as "encroachers".

It is curious that Chengara never made it to the national news considering that the issue has redefined politics in Kerala, exposing the lie of radical land reforms in this blue-eyed Indian state. But dalits as victims of heinous crimes is what gets it reluctantly-yielded media space. M J Vijayan of Delhi Forum explains that while struggles like Singur may drum up some sympathy owing to the fact that they are defensive struggles against the forced takeover of land, Chengara is seen as an offensive struggle waged by historically marginalised communities. Despite this, support from the public has poured in, from within Kerala, for the Chengara struggle. Media coverage inside Kerala, on the whole, presented a fair account of the struggle and its context, according to Vijayan.

The absence of violence primarily due to the massive numbers of squatters and their innovative *satyagraha* methods of threatening self-immolation or suicide by hanging if faced with eviction may have dampened the violent instincts of the state. But the lack of bloodshed has also meant that there is nothing newsworthy for the national media to cover. The coverage in Kerala has been good, says Vijayan. But newspapers like *The Hindu* have covered it very negatively, carrying uncritical statements by the ruling party about the involvement of Naxalites and CIA agents, he adds.

Indeed, the key descriptors deployed to discredit social movements include "Naxalites", "anti-development", "foreign-funded", "outsiders", "anti-industry" and "politically-motivated". Any group of people who are not prepared to yield their land and are hopeful of getting the media to cover them sympathetically must work out ways of fighting their fight without raising any money, be visibly non-violent in deed and thought, periodically get beaten up or, better still, killed, avoid seeking the help of any outsider, spout their anti-Naxal credentials at every opportunity, and eschew politics or politicians.

Nityanand Jayaraman is an independent journalist and researcher focusing on investigating corporate abuses of the environment and human rights. He is based in Chennai and is associated with the International Campaign for Justice in Bhopal

Is it really tiger vs tribal?

In reporting on environment, why does the media always present the conflict in black-and-white — tribal versus tiger, trees versus wider roads? These are fundamental questions, because it is the media that plays a key role in setting debates and deciding both the frame and the outcome

PANKAJ
SEKHSARIA

FOR MORE THAN TWO YEARS NOW, discussions on wildlife conservation, forest protection and tribal rights in India have centred around what is now the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest-Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act that came into force in January 2007. The Act seeks to correct the historical injustices committed in denying, even snatching away, traditional rights and forest lands from tribal communities across the country, and has found huge support from tribal and human rights activists and prominent sections of the political setup. It has, at the same time, come in for serious criticism, particularly from one section of wildlife conservationists and forest officials who argue that implementing the Act will drive the final nail into the coffin of India's already threatened forests and wildlife.

The debates on these issues have been acrimonious, to say the least. Not surprisingly, they managed to garner considerable newsprint. In the English mainstream press, for instance, editorial positions were well defined, sometimes aggressively so.

Nothing illustrates this better than the opposition to the Act articulated in *The Indian Express*. The paper carried a series of editorial pieces in the middle of 2006 that vehemently argued against the provisions of what was then still a Bill. The general argument was that the Tribal Bill (as it came to be known) should be jettisoned as it was not in the interests of the country's forests and wildlife.

It was surprising therefore that the newspaper agreed to publish an opinion piece by me that went against its line of argument. It was my contention that the proposed legislation was not the disaster it was being made out to be, and that, importantly, discussions on its provisions needed to be far more balanced and nuanced. 'Balance needed in the Tribal Bill discussion' was how I titled the piece I submitted for publication.

The title my article finally appeared under was drastically different and could only be called 'eye-catching' — 'It needn't be tigers vs tribals'. The original title, admittedly, was drab in comparison.

That set me thinking. It was not how I had seen the issue. It had not been my intention to position the tiger and the tribal in a 'vs' kind of situation. I had wanted to move away from precisely this, and the tiger, in any case, had found only one passing mention in the entire piece of over 1,000 words.

Was it the work of a creative sub-editor? Phonetically, tribal and tiger certainly do sound nice together.

Perhaps journalism demands clear and starkly polarised conflict to make it attractive. And where better to put that conflict than in the title? Or was it something else? Was it a statement more about those articulating the debate (me included) and less about the real situation on the ground? Do we do this because it helps to effectively push the issue into a domain that we are not part of, isolating and sanitising us from the responsibility of what happens or doesn't happen?

Every problem has its visible and proximate reasons. The obvious ones are the poor tribal killing a wild animal to feed his family; a farmer committing suicide because his crop failed; cities losing trees because there is not enough road width to carry the increasing number of vehicles. But what we also know is that these are mere symptoms. The malaise lies deep and some place else. The underlying causes, the root of the problem that's not visible. These are the real drivers.

Is the tiger really posited so obviously against the tribal? Are they really threatening each other so squarely? Or is this articulation a function of the reality that English newspapers, their contributors and their editors exist in?

These are fundamental questions because the media, we all know, plays a key role in setting debates, contextualising them and, in many cases, deciding both the frame and the outcome. When the problem gets articulated as that of tribal against tiger, there's little space left to look at a number of other issues, be they economic policy, the political set-up, or social situations that play a significant role.

The issue of tiger (and by extension wildlife) conservation in India has, over the years, been pushed into a strait-jacketed framework. And the role of the media, though not fully researched, is certainly an important one here.

An excellent example of this is a recent *Newsweek* report ('India's missing tigers', May 5, 2008) that argued that it was, in fact, a combination of 'democracy and economic development' that was driving the tiger to extinction in India — a serious contention, particularly when democracy is one of the most cherished notions of our times.

While one would be willing to examine the contention that

Every problem has its visible and proximate reasons. The obvious ones are the poor tribal killing a wild animal to feed his family; a farmer committing suicide because his crop failed; cities losing trees because there is not enough road width to carry the increasing number of vehicles. But what we also know is that these are mere symptoms. The malaise lies deep and some place else

democratic processes are antithetical to the interests of wildlife, the problem becomes evident when one looks at the conclusions and the premise on which the articulation is based. It is solely the opinion of a few who oppose the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest-Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act. For any publication to argue, in this context, that this single piece of legislation is an example of democracy negatively impacting wildlife is naïve at best and grossly unrealistic at worst. The law is less than two years old and implementation, if it is happening at all, is only just beginning. Although fears about forest and wildlife loss may indeed be justified, selectively wiping away history and placing the responsibility for the demise of the tiger entirely at the door of this one piece of legislation is not only irresponsible, it could even prove counter-productive.

Particularly so because one aspect of India's conservation history continues to be repeatedly invoked — the role of former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. There is a whole generation of wildlife enthusiasts and conservationists in this country who believe, and with good reason, that Indira Gandhi ensured that Indian wildlife still has some hope. She was the architect, during her tenure in power, of critical legislation and frameworks that helped protect wildlife, and her personal interest and intervention, as in the case of Silent Valley in Kerala, ensured that many critical habitats

were saved from certain destruction.

It is a legacy we cannot deny or wish away, but we also need to ask whether we can keep hanging on indefinitely to the past. Our socio-political-economic realities have changed so drastically since Gandhi's time that no one, herself included, would have been able to predict them. It is crucial to recognise that the same wildlife conservation policies will not succeed today just because they did in a different era. It is a matter of conjecture, but if she were alive today, Gandhi, the astute politician, would perhaps have agreed.

There is also a whole new 'post-Indira Gandhi' generation of wildlife biologists involved in cutting-edge research across wild India. Many of their formulations of problems and solutions are extremely nuanced and far more representative of the realities on the ground. Rarely, if ever, does the media seek out this younger generation for its opinion and perspective.

The reality on the ground is a complex one and yet talk about protecting wildlife inevitably comes down to blaming the poor and the tribal; demanding their displacement to protect wildlife; seeking stricter and military-like protection for wilderness areas. Arguing, additionally, that the enactment of one law has caused the demise of wildlife is the wrong place to start.

Many parallel realities are being ignored in the process. Most of the communities that share landscapes with wildlife, for instance, live extremely low-impact lives and yet they are made to pay the greatest cost for conservation. In the hierarchy of power, it is these communities that are considered expendable in the interests of wildlife and of capital, industrialisation and greater economic growth. And in the toss-up between wildlife and an economic growth that needs mines, dams and infrastructure projects, the side the coin will fall on is already decided. It is this complexity that the media needs to reflect in its reporting and in its editorialising.

It is not a coincidence that countless people's agitations across the country today are fighting policies and projects that threaten the basic survival of forest and land-dependent communities. Neither is it a coincidence that many of these are important habitats that support a great diversity of threatened flora and fauna. It is as important that we recognise this overlap as it is for us to recognise that both communities and wildlife are, together, losing the battle. Nothing, be it the laws and the courts, the politicians and the bureaucrats, or the media and the wildlife conservationists, is able to help them there.

This connection has to be made, and it's something the media must not lose sight of because embedded power hierarchies have too much at stake to be able to see it. Herein lies the promise and the challenge.

Pankaj Sekhsaria is a member of the environmental action group Kalpavriksh where he edits the Protected Area Update, a bi-monthly newsletter that carries news on wildlife from across South Asia

War, peace, and journalism

What is the duty of a journalist reporting on the horrors of war? To join the chorus of chest-thumping outrage against the enemy? Or to tell the story of war in such a way that we understand and value peace? Honest journalism about war and violence must ask the hard questions, challenge authority, and never be blinded by what passes for patriotism

DILIP D'SOUZA

War

During the 1999 Kargil war, Pakistan returned the bodies of six Indian soldiers killed in the fighting. The bodies had been mutilated. This one incident triggered a storm of outrage and hatred in India, with all manner of evil being attributed to Pakistan.

Like many other Indians, I thought a lot about this episode at the time. The more I did, the more it seemed to me that what had happened was an inevitable consequence of war itself. Certainly the mutilations were horrifying and nauseating — but where there's war, there are going to be atrocities like this. It doesn't excuse them, but it explains them.

In fact, there were reports (far less widely publicised in India, of course) that our soldiers did equally horrible things to Pakistani soldiers. Men from the Naga regiment, for example, decapitated the Pakistanis when they reached the heights where the intruders had established themselves; they even took photographs of themselves posing with the heads. In 'Guns and Yellow Roses', a collection of essays on the Kargil war, Sankarshan Thakur wrote:

Troops of the Naga and Jat regiments told us quite plainly they had killed a few intruders they had captured alive in the heights above Drass. "It was rage, just rage," one Naga soldier said. "They had killed many of our mates, we were angry. When we got them, we butchered them." As and when they brought bodies of intruders back from the heights, they tied them with ropes and dragged them down. "We had enough load to carry as it was, who was going to bother carrying their bodies? Dragging them down was a favour." There was no sense of guilt or remorse there, just plain retelling; it was as if a fire of emotion had cleansed the act of murder.

This is not restricted to Indians and Pakistanis. Take Eugene B Sledge, a US Marine during World War II. Like thousands of fellow American soldiers, he fought the Japanese fiercely across the Pacific, and after the war ended he wrote the finest war memoir I have ever read. His *With the Old Breed* is not literature, and I don't know if Sledge would have called it journalism either. Yet it is a brutally honest account; it paints a vivid picture of what the war was like for Sledge and his fellow soldiers. And in the end it is a profound, powerful statement for peace.

So what was the war like for Sledge? After a battle on Peleliu island, another Marine came up dragging what Sledge assumed was a Japanese corpse. Only, the man wasn't dead. He "had been wounded severely in the back," writes Sledge, "and couldn't move his arms". The Marine sat down with the wounded Jap, took out his *kabar*, his Marine knife, and began... but let me just give you, in full, Sledge's own words about this incident:

The Japanese's mouth glowed with huge gold-crowned teeth, and his captor wanted them. He put the point of his kabar on the base of a tooth and hit the handle with the palm of his hand. Because the Japanese was kicking his feet and thrashing about, the knife point glanced off the tooth and sank deeply into the victim's mouth. The Marine cursed him and with a slash cut his cheeks open to each ear. He put his foot on the sufferer's lower jaw and tried again. Blood poured out of the soldier's mouth. He made a gurgling noise and thrashed wildly. I shouted, "Put the man out of his misery". All I got for an answer was a cussing out. Another Marine ran up, put a bullet in the enemy soldier's brain and ended his agony. The scavenger grumbled and continued extracting his prizes undisturbed.

Such was the incredible cruelty that decent men could commit when reduced to a brutish existence in their fight for survival amid the violent death, terror, tension, fatigue and filth that was the infantryman's war.

Sledge's book opened my eyes like never before. This was a man who fought hard in his war, who made no bones about his hatred for the Japanese enemy. But this was also a man who saw and didn't shrink from recounting the horrible things his American colleagues did too, things we hardly hear of. This was a man who understood that the business of war itself turns ordinary men into brutes.

Again, none of this is to suggest that there is some convoluted justification for what happened to the six mutilated Indian soldiers. But war, the pressures and horrors of battle, does terrible things to soldiers. After all, the Pakistanis had been shooting down at the Naga and Jat troops as they climbed the slopes. After all, the Japanese had been doing ghastly things to American soldiers fighting their way across the Pacific. How do we expect young men to maintain self-control and remember niceties like the Geneva Convention when they finally meet and overwhelm

their tormentors?

This forms something of a context for thinking about journalism during war, about where journalism travels during war. I believe the inherent responsibility of journalists — be sceptical, ask questions — is only underlined in war time. For us in India, it's been underlined again by the November terrorism in Mumbai, when we saw plenty of public anger and also serious questions about how the media responded.

In other words, and again, yes what happened to the six soldiers was horrible. But what is the duty of a journalist reporting on this horror? Join the chorus of chest-thumping outrage against the enemy? Or work towards peace, which is the one sure way to ensure that such atrocities don't happen again?

If it is the latter, that tells us something about journalism and peace. For I believe it must be the role of journalism to make the case that Sledge's memoir does — tell the story of

war so that we understand and value peace.

Patriotism

Brutality like I've discussed earlier isn't just about men on the frontlines of wars either. It's soldiers elsewhere, it's us civilians too, and again that raises questions about the responsibilities of journalists.

For one example, consider the infamous massacre of 36 Sikhs in Chhatisinghpora in March 2000. Under enormous pressure to find the killers, our armed forces produced five dead bodies within a week and announced that these were the perpetrators of the atrocity. The dead men were dressed in fatigues and the army said it had shot them in an 'encounter'.

It turned out that these were ordinary Kashmiri civilians who were rounded up by some soldiers, shot and then dressed in uniforms to make them look like militants. In the uproar, the



Jammu and Kashmir government ordered an inquiry into the whole sordid episode and sent DNA samples of the dead men and their relatives for testing. Early in 2002, we learned that most of those samples were fake. More than once, a woman’s sample had been passed off as a man’s.

Such are the lengths to which our security forces can go, as they scramble to respond to public outrage, to meet public expectations.

And nearly lost in all this was the army’s bland, but quiet, announcement in August 2000 that it had arrested the men who killed the 36 Sikhs. In itself, that was a tacit admission that the five killed earlier were innocent, but few of us noticed or even cared.

Think of the questions this episode raises.

One, what is the state of mind of our soldiers in Kashmir if they can pick up and kill five villagers because they feel pressured to produce the perpetrators of a crime? What is such pressure doing to our army?

Two, given that, and the deliberate subversion of the DNA tests, why would people not begin to think that perhaps our own men murdered the Sikhs? Sure enough, some journalists reported that people in Chhatisinghpura were asking this question. Relatives and neighbours of the murdered Sikhs were themselves wondering whether their own country’s armed forces had killed their loved ones. The thought alone makes me queasy.

Three, and this is what most alarms me, is the complacency with which the rest of us react to news like this. Even in the face of disturbing questions, people shrug and say: “This is war and there’s no other way to fight it.” We accept brutality and lies as necessary, or inevitable, not least because we think the enemy does worse things. We think our patriotic duty is to support whatever is being done in our name, even if it’s deceit and crime, in pursuit of victory.

Yet there are questions that journalists must ask. If patriotism blinds us to lies and brutality committed in its name, what kind of patriotism is it? What kind of country are we being asked to love? What kind of country do we turn ourselves into?

There are those who will say: “We will preserve our territorial integrity at any cost.” And, “We will not give up an inch of our soil”. Such people are lauded as great patriots. But after years of hostility, I wonder why we cannot instead say: “We will preserve the lives of all Indians, and our soldiers first, at any cost.” I wonder why we cannot say: “We will not give up a single Indian life.”

Why should this not be patriotic? Or ask this: “Why is it patriotic to go along with the lies that kill innocent fellow Indians, fellow human beings?”

Truth, the first casualty

Indeed, a twisted sense of patriotism is likely the main

Eddie Adams



reason wars bring us a web of doublespeak, lies and cover-ups. From “collateral damage”, to a coffin scam, from exaggerated claims of damage caused, to outright falsehoods, we’ve seen them all.

During World War I, the British Army initially refused to let war correspondents report from the frontlines. When they did, the army heavily censored their reports. If that seems routine to you, consider that some correspondents even censored themselves. They felt it was their patriotic duty not to report the true brutality unfolding before their eyes, but instead to pretend that British soldiers were winning. In fact, some even painted a picture of jolly Englishmen greatly enjoying the war; jolly patriots fighting for the glory of the country.

C E Montague, an assistant editor of the *Manchester Guardian*, who had done his share of fighting, wrote at the time:

The average war correspondent... insensibly acquired a cheerfulness in the face of torment and danger. [He usually implied that] officers and men enjoyed nothing more than “going over the top”, that a battle was just a rough jovial picnic, that a fight never went on long enough for the men, that their only fear was lest the war should end this side of the Rhine. This tone roused the fighting troops to fury against the writers. This, the men reflected, in helpless anger, was what people at home were offered as faithful accounts of what their friends in the field were thinking and suffering.

And if journalists rendered the home country’s soldiers in such rosy colours, they managed to depict the enemy as fantastic brutes. For example, Germans were accused throughout the war of burning British soldiers’ corpses to distil glycerine for their arms industry. The truth? They were indeed distilling glycerine, but by boiling dead horses and other animals. Yet this far milder account was not news and found no takers. Building on all this, the *Daily Mail* managed to call the German Kaiser a “lunatic”, a “barbarian”, a “madman”, a “monster”, a “modern Judas” and a “criminal monarch” — all in one article. For their part, and not to be

left behind, the Germans alleged that the Allies were gouging out German soldiers' eyes. One 10-year-old German boy was widely reported to have seen a "bucketful" of those eyes. No truth there either.

Move forward 80 years, and we find A M Sethna writing during the Kargil war. In his article 'Information is Half the Battle Won' (*The Times of India*, June 1, 1999), he says: "We are dealing with a country which has shown itself capable of extreme cruelty... In such hands, officers and men reported missing face being skinned alive or horribly mutilated before being killed."

How different is Sethna's prose from that of the World War I journalists?

I don't know of examples of similar writing in Pakistan, but I feel certain there were some. If war does things to soldiers, it does things to journalists as well.

Honesty, instead

Rupert Murdoch's father Keith was an Australian correspondent during World War I. He went to Gallipoli, the scene of some of the most futile massacres of the war. In particular, his Australian countrymen died there by the thousands, so much so that this desolate spot in Turkey is a favourite and revered destination for Australian tourists even today, nearly a century later.

By all accounts, Keith Murdoch was angered and horrified by the killing. Defying the censors, he wrote an 8,000-word report to the Australian prime minister. This 'Gallipoli Letter', even with some factual errors he made because he was relying on memory, remains one of the most important documents of the war. Here's how the writer Philip Knightley, in his *The First Casualty*, described Murdoch's effort:

Although the war correspondents in Gallipoli faced the same difficulties over censorship and were subjected to the same pressures from the [authorities, Murdoch] succeeded in getting out a fresh eyewitness account of what was happening there. If the war correspondents in France had only been as enterprising, the war might not have continued on its ghastly course.

In other words, honest journalism about this horrific war was a weapon that might have stopped the killing. It might have brought peace. It was only with the voice of the occasional dissenter like Murdoch, and the enormity of the truth itself that could no longer be suppressed, that the world finally woke up to what was happening in those blood-soaked battlegrounds of Europe and the Middle East. Men were being slaughtered by the hundreds of thousands, for no reason at all, and this killing went on for four years because generals on both sides did not know how to put an end to it.

What a tragedy that it was only after the war, after tens of

millions lay dead, that we understood all that.

And on a smaller scale and in a different way we understand it after the Mumbai terrorism too. For just one example, questions are being asked about whether TV channels should have been showing footage of commando operations, or telling the world which important people were stuck in which nook of the Taj. There is evidence that the terrorists learned all this and acted on it, to tragic and deadly effect. So consider: If TV reporters had been less eager to hit the air with the latest 'exclusive' information, we might just have defeated the terrorists faster. We might just have lost fewer lives.

The lesson? Here's Sledge again:

I recalled some of the eloquent phrases of politicians and newsmen about how "gallant" it is for a man to "shed his blood for his country" and "to give his life's blood as a sacrifice," and so on. The words seemed so ridiculous. Only the flies benefited.

And if only the flies are benefiting, I think all of us should be asking some questions. Journalists first.

Perspective

All of which serves to put into perspective the idea of peace journalism. It's not about platitudes or easy mantras. Peace means bringing an end to bloodshed and killing, and platitudes can't make that happen. Peace means the steady, unflinching, forthright work of bringing enemies together, getting them to talk and find common ground. Peace is hard, let's have no illusions. Waging it is a difficult task that allows no breaks, no sabbaticals. And yet think of the rewards, the vast benefits to us all of a real and lasting peace.

At its best, journalism — and now I deliberately don't qualify that with the word "peace" — is just as hard and demanding; and therefore, just as rewarding. It must remain true, it must ask the hard questions, it must challenge authority, it must never be blinded by what passes for patriotism.

When journalists shy away from those musts, as too many invariably do during war, the killing carries on. Peace remains a mirage.

And maybe that's the ultimate challenge for journalism of the kind we are discussing: to turn a mirage of peace into reality.

Once a computer scientist, Dilip D'Souza now writes. He has won several awards for his work, has published two books and a collection of essays, and is working on a third. He lives in Mumbai

To give peace a chance, make peace the story

A journalist recounts how she discovered the many nuances of the Palestine-Israel conflict, and how she discovered the truth in the statement that objectivity doesn't mean treating all sides equally, it means giving each side a hearing. After years of covering the conflict, she found herself increasingly telling stories which proved that, along with the indignities, there was also a constituency for peace

ADITI BHADURI

IN POLITICS IT IS SAID that perceptions are often more important than anything else. This can well be said about conflict and conflict reporting too. Conflict reporting has its own challenges, and perceptions play an especially significant role. In my experience of reporting on Israel-Palestine, the subject with which I began my writing career, I found that perceptions are almost centrestage. I can recall two occasions that encapsulated and instantly conveyed to me the reality of the region — its complex makeup, and its multiple identities, which go much beyond what is superficially made out to be an Arab-Jew/Jewish-Muslim/Palestine-Israel issue.

The first instance was when I landed in Ben Gurion airport — the very first time I was in the region. I took a taxi from there to Nazareth, to a friend's place where I was to stay initially. The taxi driver mistook me for an Arab, his impression bolstered by the fact that the friend I was going to see was an Arab woman living in Nazareth — a predominantly Arab town in Israel. As a gesture of friendship, the driver put on an Arab CD for me and Arabic music soon blared in the small confines of the car. When I

asked him, in some confusion, whether he was an Arab, he laughed and explained that he was a Jew, but of Iraqi origin. He had spent a great deal of his adult life in Iraq, but later decided, for security reasons, to move to Israel. But, he told me, he often listened to Iraqi Arab music, spoke the Arabic prevalent in Iraq, and cooked Iraqi food at home.

Here was one aspect of Israeli life revealed — many Israeli Jews have Arab origins or are culturally Arabs. Later I was to find out that one of Israel's most famous singers was a Jewish immigrant from Morocco, and that one of the very popular Israeli artworks and charms, the 'Khamisa', was of North African origin.

The second occasion was when I made my first visit to a church in Israel — the Church of the Holy Annunciation (the largest church in the Middle East) — in Nazareth. The church has a number of services in different languages; the one that happened to be held during my visit was in Arabic. So here was a flock of the faithful — Arab by ethnicity, language and culture, but Israeli by citizenship and Christian by religion. They sang to Allah, but it was a Christian god not a Muslim one as Allah to my mind had always been. This then was another great reality of the Middle East — Christian Arabs. Arabic is the sacred language of Islam — the *Quran* was revealed in Arabic — and a majority of Arabs in the Middle East and in the world are Muslims. But there is also another Arabic community that sings hymns in Arabic to Allah, the father of Jesus. They are Arab Israelis in Israel and Christian Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza. Before 1948 and the partition of Palestine, they constituted a single community — Christian Palestinians — "...a part and parcel of the Palestinian national identity..." (1), in the words of Palestinian political activist and feminist Hanan Ashrawi.

I mention these two instances because, minor as they seem, they reflect a certain reality in the region, which is important to understand the conflict there and its different nuances. These instances removed certain stereotyped images in my mind, and as I found out later, in those of many of my readers here in India. They reiterated that nothing is black-and-white in life, and certainly not in the region of Israel-Palestine. This is particularly important while reporting on conflict and peace. The conflict in the region, therefore, is that of Palestinians vs Israelis, not Muslims vs Jews, for not all Israelis are Jews and not all Palestinians are Muslims. This



is a powerful deterrent to stereotyping and generalising, and hence a deterrent to the demonising of one side or the other. Individuals not only have multiple identities, but nations comprise multiple identities.

This is perhaps why one of the bedrocks of peace journalism is the principle of framing conflicts in terms of many parties pursuing many goals. Any kind of reporting entails balance and places immense responsibility on the reporter. In the case of conflict reporting, the responsibility immediately increases — the reporter should not only report, but report in a manner that presents in as unbiased a way as possible, without creating scope for the conflict to escalate.

It is this fact — that there are many parties to a conflict — that demonstrated to me that we had a simplistic view of the Israel-Palestinian conflict. And it was to bring these facts, which I found so important, to light that I began doing human interest stories. I did not consciously embark on peace journalism; it seemed to be a natural outcome. Since I was writing features, I also had greater scope for peace journalism. In the words of the veteran Israeli journalist Danny Rubinstein: "...A big terrorist attack would make a good story. But peace negotiations will be relegated to the secondary place. My conclusion is that to give peace a chance, make peace the story." (2)

One of the cardinal rules while reporting on conflict and peace is to do thorough research. And read both histories — that is, written and propagated by both sides to the conflict and from both perspectives. It is also imperative to listen to the histories of various participants on the two sides — for example, the history of Palestinian Christians in the Palestinian Territories, or that of Israeli Bedouins in Israel. It is only by knowing both sides that we can come up with unbiased, informed reports. The principles of my work were — do extensive fieldwork, engage in participatory observation, and talk to everyone. How different, for instance, Palestinian refugee camps in the West Bank seemed to be from what I had imagined them to be.

It helped me tremendously to have friends on both sides of the divide. It made it especially difficult for me to take sides, no matter how great the temptation at times, and generated a greater urge to create a situation where taking sides was no longer necessary. It also made it more difficult to report. There were invariably criticisms from both parties that I was favouring 'the other' more, and sometimes that I was hunting with the hounds and running with the hare. This is perhaps where my Indian-ness, my Indian identity, played a role — not only with the Israelis and Palestinians but also with myself.

Being Indian, I grew up reading about Anne Frank and got a tiny glimpse into the trauma of the Jewish holocaust. Being Indian in the city of Kolkata, I grew up eating pastries from Nahoum's in Kolkata — one of the traditional and best bakeries in the city, and Jewish. Being Indian, I also met Palestinian students who lived as refugees in Jordan because their part of Palestine had become Israel in 1948. The pain of

both communities reached me at an early age, which is why perhaps it resulted in a lifelong interest in the region, an interest not always comprehensible to my fellow Indians. Especially since I am not of any Semitic religious persuasion, which excludes any religious bonding with the area. Therefore, I was able to relate to both sides. I have been as welcomed in Jewish but multi-ethnic and multi-cultural Israel as I have been in Muslim-dominated Palestine. There are also commonalities in culture. As a Hindu I found cultural similarities with Jewish Israelis. As an Indian or a person from the East, I found cultural similarities with Arabs — Palestinians and Israelis, Muslims, Christians and Druze. Establishing a personal rapport is important in journalism — it gives us enormous access to private stories, hopes, fears, the sum of daily lives in a community. It opens up doors otherwise closed, opportunities which seem far away.

Being Indian, specifically Hindu, also gave me physical access to spaces closed to other communities, even those from the region itself. I could visit the Tomb of the Patriarchs and the Al Haram Al Ibrahimy and the old city of Hebron — all contested sites which are crucial to an understanding of the Israeli-Palestinian divide. Access to some is denied to Israelis, Palestinians, Jews and Muslims. Only as a Hindu Indian could I cross all these divides and gain physical access to these sites.

As an Indian I realised what an opportunity it was to be able to report from Israel and the Palestinian Territories. As an Indian I could travel there, while other States in the region — primarily Bangladesh and Pakistan — forbid their citizens from doing so, as do most other Muslim countries. Yet, there was enormous interest in the region in these countries because of obvious religious and cultural ties, and it usually resulted in one-sided information being available. Writing for the media in South Asia, I realised there was a huge information gap and it would be valuable to plug this gap.

Since the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is primarily about human lives, human hopes and aspirations, it is important to bring out the human angle of any conflict. Unconsciously, that is what prompted me to deal with this subject in the first place, though I did not recognise the impulse then. What I wanted to do, even as I learned more about the region and the people locked in this conflict, was to also set the perspective for write-ups published in the mainstream press, which I found skewed. Either it was the 'fascist Zionists' against the 'dispossessed Palestinians' or it was 'murderous Palestinians' against the 'ever-persecuted Jews' — both of which was not quite the case, but reinforced age-old stereotypes. That is how I embarked on reporting on this region.

One of the fears that haunted me initially was that I would not be allowed to return to the region. In order to enter the Palestinian Territories, and Israel of course, I needed an Israeli visa — which is always a difficult task. The Israeli representatives in India were constantly tracking what I wrote on the region, and constantly sending me rejoinders and responses, especially when they found something I had

Do's and don'ts for the peace journalist

1 Avoid portraying a conflict as consisting of only two parties contesting one goal. The logical outcome is for one to win and the other to lose. Instead, a peace journalist would disaggregate the two parties into many smaller groups, pursuing many goals, opening up more creative potential for a range of outcomes.

2 Avoid accepting stark distinctions between "self" and "other". These can be used to build the sense that another party is a "threat" or "beyond the pale" of civilised behaviour — both key justifications for violence. Instead, seek the "other" in the "self" and vice-versa.

3 Avoid treating a conflict as if it is only going on in the place and at the time that violence is occurring. Instead, try to trace the links and consequences for people in other places now and in the future. Ask:

- Who are all the people with a stake in the outcome?
- Ask yourself what will happen if ...?
- What lessons will people draw from watching these events unfold as part of a global audience? How will they enter the calculations of parties to future conflicts near and far?

4 Avoid assessing the merits of a violent action or policy of violence in terms of its visible effects only. Instead, try to find ways of reporting on the invisible effects, eg, the long-term consequences of psychological damage and trauma, perhaps increasing the likelihood that those affected will be violent in future, either against other people or, as a group, against other groups or other countries.

5 Avoid letting parties define themselves by simply quoting their leaders' re-statement of familiar demands or positions. Instead, enquire more deeply into goals:

- How are people on the ground affected by the conflict in everyday life?
- What do they want changed?
- Is the position stated by their leaders the only way or the best way to achieve the changes they want?

6 Avoid concentrating always on what divides the parties, the differences between what they say they want. Instead, try asking questions that may reveal areas of common ground and leading your report with answers which suggest some goals may be shared or at least compatible, after all.

7 Avoid only reporting the violent acts and describing "the horror". If you exclude everything else, you suggest that the only explanation for violence is previous violence (revenge); the only remedy, more violence (coercion/punishment). Instead, show how people have been blocked and frustrated or deprived in everyday life as a way of explaining the violence.

8 Avoid blaming someone for starting it. Instead, try looking at how shared problems and issues are leading to consequences that all the parties say they never intended.

9 Avoid focusing exclusively on the suffering, fears and grievances of only one party. This divides the parties into "villains" and "victims" and suggests that coercing or punishing the villains represents a solution. Instead, treat as equally newsworthy the suffering, fears and grievances of all sides.

10 Avoid "victimising" language such as "destitute", "devastated", "defenseless", "pathetic" and "tragedy", which only tells us what has been done to and could be done for a group of people. This disempowers them and limits the options for change. Instead, report on what has been done and could be done by the people. Don't just ask them how they feel, also ask them how they are coping and what they think. Can they suggest any solutions? And remember refugees/the dispossessed have surnames as well.

11 Avoid imprecise use of emotive words to describe what has

happened to people.

- "Genocide" means the wiping out of an entire people.
- "Decimated" (said of a population) means reducing it to a tenth of its former size.
- "Tragedy" is a form of drama, originally Greek, in which someone's fault or weakness proves his or her undoing.
- "Assassination" is the murder of a head of state.
- "Massacre" is the deliberate killing of people known to be unarmed and defenseless. Are we sure? Or might these people have died in battle?
- "Systematic", for example raping or forcing people from their homes. Has it really been organised in a deliberate pattern or have there been a number of unrelated, albeit extremely nasty incidents? Instead, always be precise about what we know. Do not minimise suffering but reserve the strongest language for the gravest situations or you will beggar the language and help to justify disproportionate responses that escalate the violence.

12 Avoid demonising adjectives like "vicious", "cruel", "brutal" and "barbaric". These always describe one party's view of what another party has done. To use them puts the journalist on that side and helps to justify an escalation of violence. Instead, report what you know about the wrongdoing and give as much information as you can about the reliability of other people's reports or descriptions of it.

13 Avoid demonising labels like "terrorist", "extremist", "fanatic" and "fundamentalist". These are always given by "us" to "them". No one ever uses them to describe himself or herself, and so, for a journalist to use them is always to take sides. Instead, try calling people by the names they give themselves. Or be more precise in your descriptions.

14 Avoid focusing exclusively on the human rights abuses, misdemeanours and wrongdoings of only one side. Instead, try to name ALL wrongdoers and treat equally seriously allegations made by all sides in a conflict. Treating seriously does not mean taking at face value, but instead making equal efforts to establish whether any evidence exists to back them up, treating the victims with equal respect and the chances of finding and punishing the wrongdoers as being of equal importance.

15 Avoid making an opinion or claim seem like an established fact. ("Eurico Guterres, said to be responsible for a massacre in East Timor ...") Instead, tell your readers or your audience who said what. ("Eurico Guterres, accused by a top UN official of ordering a massacre in East Timor ...") That way you avoid signing yourself and your news service up to the allegations made by one party in the conflict against another.

16 Avoid greeting the signing of documents by leaders, which bring about military victory or ceasefire, as necessarily creating peace. Instead, try to report on the issues which remain and which may still lead people to commit further acts of violence in the future. Ask what is being done to strengthen means on the ground to handle and resolve conflict non-violently, to address development or structural needs in the society and to create a culture of peace.

17 Avoid waiting for leaders on "our" side to suggest or offer solutions. Instead, pick up and explore peace initiatives wherever they come from. Ask questions to ministers, for example, about ideas put forward by grassroots organisations. Assess peace perspectives against what you know about the issues the parties are really trying to address. Do not simply ignore them because they do not coincide with established positions.

From Peace Journalism — How To Do It, by Jake Lynch and Annabel McGoldrick, 2000. Jake Lynch is a correspondent for Sky News and The Independent, based in London and Sydney

written distasteful to them or “biased towards the Palestinians”. Yet I learned a great lesson, a lesson later bolstered by the advice that journalist Danny Rubinstein gave me when I met him: “...Being honest is to be safe; honest reports and honest analysis give you credibility.” (3)

I overcame this dilemma by quoting Israeli sources to substantiate charges or allegations or grievances reported by Palestinians. For example, if Israeli sources quoted Palestinian casualties as ‘x’ number, I knew there was no way that the figure could be inflated. Or if Israelis cited human rights violations by the Israeli defence forces in the Palestinian Territories, then exaggeration charges could not be levelled, as they could have been had I cited Palestinian sources.

Similarly, I cited Palestinian sources to substantiate atrocities committed against Israel or instances of intra-Palestinian fighting. Gradually, I came to follow this methodology — to quote representatives of the transgressing side on the transgressions. That kept it safe and accurate. I did this primarily through interviews and that is how I became acquainted with the constituencies of peace that exist on both sides.

The interview was one methodology that I used extensively. I gave a voice as often as possible to representatives of both sides and of as many factions as possible. For example, I interviewed a Palestinian human rights activist on the gun culture in Palestine. Through my interview with Israeli peace activist and political scientist Lev Grinberg, I informed my readers of the military occupation of the Palestinian Territories and the significance of the Refusenik movement (refusal of Israeli defence recruits to serve in the Palestinian Territories), and so on. I acknowledge that this honesty worked. To the extent that my next visit to Israel and the Palestinian Territories was on the invitation of representatives of the Israeli government, during the Gaza withdrawal in 2005. This, in part, can also be attributed to the fact that with all its shortcomings and drawbacks, Israel is a democracy and there is a free press.

One of the rules I have always followed is to let people narrate their own stories. While there were numerous agencies breaking news and reporting on the technical aspects of the Israel-Palestine conflict, I preferred to dwell on subjects and features that more often than not did not make it to the news. Again through interviews and features I brought out how a Zionist could also be a peace activist who initiated the ‘Bring back Israeli soldiers from Lebanon’ movement. I gave a voice to Khulood Badawi, an Israeli Arab woman whose entire impression of Jews and Israel changed the day she “...saw old Jewish women confront armed Israeli soldiers; being beaten by these soldiers. These women were in the firing zone for the sake of Arabs — people who are deemed to be their enemies”. (4)

And so I let participants of the conflict, inhabitants of the region, talk, and captured their voices in my writings. Not all these were published as interviews; some were stored in my

database and proved useful later when I needed to bolster or substantiate a claim or quote a precedent.

I used another not-so-traditional method. At the peak of one of Israel’s military operations into the Palestinian Territories, in 2002, condemned by many, including people inside Israel, I published personal letters sent to me by a young Palestinian man I had met in one of the refugee camps in the West Bank where I had lived for some days. The letters were published in *Refugee Watch*, a publication in the alternative media, but they found their way to a moderately large readership — especially of students. It was a very good first-person account of someone inside the conflict — with all the attendant anger, outrage, sadness, as well as resilience and undying hope.

One of the pitfalls of this approach, and perhaps of conflict reporting in general, was that both sides tended to see themselves as eternal victims and this victimhood sometimes became a trap that coloured objectivity and reality. It also led sometimes to exclusivism. While it is true we can never fully imagine or understand what another person suffers without going through an experience ourselves, this can sometimes simply blur reality, even leading to the demonisation of the other. The narratives can often be exaggerated. It was not, for example, uncommon to hear that the Palestinian tragedy was the tragedy of humankind for all times. Simultaneously, the hum on the other side of the divide was that no community had suffered as much as the Jews had, and that one could never fully comprehend the holocaust. This indeed was and is true. However, it would serve no community’s cause if the Jewish holocaust and the Palestinian dispossession were allowed to colour every act of Israel or those of the Palestinians.

Victimhood and exaggeration in some cases also led to the abdication of duties. On a visit to Bethlehem once I was taken aback that the absence of toilet paper in the svelte Bethlehem Star Hotel, where I was staying, was blamed on the Israeli occupation and not on the staff’s carelessness! There are numerous such examples.

Nevertheless, it was important to experience local life in the different communities. As already mentioned, participatory observation and extensive fieldwork was another methodology that I used in my reports on the region. This was especially important because information is difficult to access on the Palestinian side. While Israelis — both civilians and State representatives — do an excellent job of furnishing and supplying information, including that which is not always flattering to Israel, the same is difficult to say of the Palestinians. While the Palestinians were always willing to talk, and numerous blogs and articles in the alternative media surface on the Internet, accurate, reliable data is often hard to come by. Hence, extensive fieldwork in the Palestinian Territories is mandatory.

Only by standing in queue with other Palestinians at checkpoints in the freezing winter, in the scorching summer

or in the sudden rain (and without an umbrella) could I fully understand the agony of waiting at a checkpoint. In the constant security checks in the smallest of cafes and simplest of pizzerias I understood the level of insecurity with which Israelis live their life. By living in the old city of Jerusalem, I understood what Christians living in the middle of the strife between two major communities — Jews and Muslims — felt. Participatory observation was extremely important in order to know and understand exactly what the issues are and what the inhabitants of the region — who were my principal subjects — experienced. Participatory observation helped me, to some extent, not only to do justice to the experiences I reported on, but also informed my judgement in choosing which stories to write.

Semantics was another challenge. How to use words; how to convey information without causing offence or heartache to one side or the other. Indeed, it was often difficult to be ‘objective’. I tend to agree with Christiane Amanpour that, “there are some situations one simply cannot be neutral about, because when you are neutral you are an accomplice. Objectivity doesn’t mean treating all sides equally. It means giving each side a hearing”. (5) Sometimes, a term had to offend one side or the other. I partially solved this dilemma by referring to terms used by journalists who had gained credibility on both sides. While there are quite a few, special mention has to be made of Israeli journalist Amira Hass, who became the first Israeli Jewish journalist to live and report from Gaza and later the West Bank, but who never hid her Jewish identity. The writings and books of Amira Hass, the child of holocaust survivors, have been a great guide for me in my understanding of the Israeli-Palestinian issue.

Gradually, I moved into what can be considered ‘peace journalism’. Peace journalism is commonly defined as the choices that editors and reporters make — of what stories to report on, and how to report them — which create opportunities for society at large to consider and to value non-violent responses to conflict. According to Jake Lynch, director of the Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies at the University of Sydney: “Peace journalism entails exploring the reasons for violent incidents; the stew of tensions, fears and grievances that underlie the visible effects of conflict. In doing so, it reaches out to many sources, including those with suggestions for peace initiatives.” (6)

It would be too ambitious to say that I have been able to reach sources with suggestions for peace initiatives. But I can definitely say that I have added a drop in the ocean of efforts and initiatives to humanise the parties to this conflict — at least to a small section of readers in South Asia, and in the Middle East too. Many of the stories I have written, which I hesitate to call ‘peace stories’ but which have highlighted the fact that a constituency for peace exists on both sides of the divide, have travelled around the world and have been translated into other languages, thanks in part to the efforts of one Jewish couple — Libby and Len Traubman — in the US. The Traubmans have been

conducting a Jewish-Palestinian living room dialogue for almost two decades now. Some of the stories have been used to demonstrate how ideas and initiatives can be replicated.

Yet, obfuscating the truth in order to pursue the larger agenda of peace has never been my intention. There can never be peace without justice, and that can only happen when the truth is highlighted and acknowledged. But what my interviews and observations revealed was that there was something retrievable in this longstanding bitter conflict. I was determined to tell those stories which proved that, along with the indignities and the insecurities faced by Israelis and Palestinians, there was a constituency for peace.

When I think back now, I find that I have left a lot of stories unwritten. I have not appreciated or been able to convey the enormous existential threat that Israelis perceive. And perceptions, as I said earlier, are so important. This has coloured their daily lives and actions. At times I have not given enough space to Israeli voices. There are numerous stories of harmony or of cooperation that men and women from both sides have engaged in, braving a dangerous divide, defying hardliners on their own sides and risking their lives, and I have not highlighted them. I also realise that I have not captured, in particular, the stories of the many brave women on the Palestinian side who are caught, on the one hand, by growing militarisation and religious radicalisation of Palestinian society, and on the other by the Israeli occupation, and their own initiatives to democratise Palestinian society. Then too, I have not done justice to the constituency for peace that exists among the Palestinians. A lot is left undone, but in the process Israel and Palestine have taught me that in every conflict there is always something retrievable.

Endnotes

- 1 Bhaduri, Aditi. 2008. ‘In Conversation with Dr Hanan Ashrawi’, in Paula Banerjee (ed), *Women in Peace Politics*. South Asian Peace Studies: Volume 3. New Delhi: SAGE, 2008
- 2 ‘Make Peace The Story’, *The Hindu Business Line*, Chennai. May 11, 2007
- 3 *Ibid*
- 4 Bhaduri, Aditi. 2006. ‘A Minority in a Minority’, *The Hindu Magazine*, Chennai and New Delhi. October 8, 2006
- 5 Schmitt, Eric. 1996. ‘Five Years Later, the Gulf War Story Is Still Being Told’, *The New York Times*. May 12, 1996
- 6 Lynch, Jake. 2008. ‘Peace Journalism About Afghanistan’ http://www.transnational.org/Resources_Media/2008/Lynch_PeaceJournalAfghan.html

Terror on TV, or *by* TV?

Leading television anchors including Barkha Dutt of NDTV and Ashutosh of IBN7 counter questions from our correspondent on the sensationalism, hyperbole, unnecessary editorialising and inaccuracies of the real-time television coverage of the recent Mumbai terror attacks

RASHME SEHGAL

SIXTY HOURS OF WATCHING the tragedy of 26/11 unfold on our television screens has taken a heavy toll on all of us. The war-like violence that exploded in November 2008 was brought into our living rooms in real-time — guns reverberating, grenades exploding, fire and smoke billowing out of the Taj Mahal hotel, and choppers with heavily armed commandos hovering over buildings in Mumbai's business centre.

But while the horror was being played out for us till the last terrorist was shot dead, another, almost farcical, tragedy was also unspooling before us, leaving us cringing. Despite having 67 news channels (at the present count), not one of them was able to come up with the mix of restrained and balanced reporting that a terror attack of this magnitude required. Instead, young, hysterical reporters betraying their inexperience with every sentence, brought us conflicting

reports on the number of casualties, the number of terrorists involved in the incident at the Leopold café and Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus, the number of hostages at the Taj and Trident hotels, and even the number of defence personnel brought in to control this fast-deteriorating situation.

The deluge of near-hysterical reporting on TV brought a unanimous verdict from TV analysts. "It was not terror *on* TV but terror *by* TV, with TV channels unleashing their own brand of terror," pointed out journalist Anil Dharker. Film director Anurag Kashyap went a step further, saying: "All that the electronic media managed to do was propagate fear. They had no sense of protocol, complete disregard for the operation. Two senior journalists even went to the extent of fighting with each other over whose coverage was better. Shame!"

Barkha Dutt, group editor of NDTV and Rajdeep Sardesai,



Sudharak Olive

editor-in-chief of CNN-IBN went to ground zero to cover the situation in the manner of reporters providing ‘exclusive’ coverage of the attack. The problem with editors eager to don the mantle of reporter is that they are so keen to keep the limelight focused on themselves that overall coverage by the team suffers. And their newsmen back in the studios seem so overawed by their presence that they seldom step in to correct them on basic issues of style or delivery. The sense of competitiveness among the channels was so great that Rajat Sharma’s India TV took the unprecedented step of telecasting two live interviews with terrorists holed up at the Oberoi and the Taj.

Editors who rush to do spot crisis reporting end up doing a great disservice to their channel. Giving shape to a crisis story means possessing the ability to be an unbiased observer. It also means that channels need to have in-built systems whereby disaster coverage is seamlessly handled by trained teams of seasoned reporters who are able to steer clear of hyperbole and sensationalism.

Rajdeep Sardesai explained that such criticism levied against his coverage of the attack was unfair. Speaking at a recent media meet in the capital, he claimed that he had spent no more than an hour covering the event; during the rest of the crisis he was stationed at the studio. Barkha Dutt concedes that the Mumbai attack was of an “unprecedented nature” and that nothing in the past, including her coverage of hotspots in Jammu and Kashmir, had prepared the news channels to cover something so sustained and multi-pronged.

She said: “New lessons need to be learned from Mumbai. The government needs to prepare an emergency protocol about delayed telecasts. There could be a 10-20-minute or even longer delay. This should have been indicated from the start. If the government had indicated even once that no channel should go in live, we would all have followed suit. But this was not done. During the NSG commando operation at Nariman House, we (NDTV) gave a 40-minute delay so as not to jeopardise the operation. But this was based on our own assessment of the situation, and not indicated to us.”

Asked why the media gave conflicting evidence throughout the operation, Dutt replied: “We were being provided with conflicting information from different sources. The police said one thing, the hotel staff another, and the politicians said something completely different. We were talking to our primary sources but they never spoke in one voice. The situation was dynamic and the media was putting out statistical information, as also information on the hostages. It was the Oberoi spokesperson who said there were 200 people trapped inside the hotel. This remark created a lot of confusion.”

Dutt is convinced the government should have created one coordinated point of contact that would have held regular briefings. “That was the way the US dealt with the media after 9/11. But since the government failed to create a centralised dissemination centre headed by a spokesperson, we had several people talking to us. For example, the head of the marine commandos chose to address a press conference

even as the operation was still on. If the media has a lot to learn, so does everyone else,” she declared.

Ashutosh, managing editor, IBN 7, blamed the government for speaking in conflicting voices. “Former Maharashtra Chief Minister Vilasrao Deshmukh, on record told Rajdeep (Sardesai) that 25 terrorists had participated in the Mumbai attack — a fact that was later contradicted by his own police chief. In the same way, the naval commander declared at a press conference — 48 hours after the attack had commenced — that the Taj had been cleared of all terrorists, which was not the case. It was they who provided all the details; we simply reported what they said.

“The government has to prepare a proper protocol for coverage. If they had been providing us with regular briefings, our coverage would have been more cohesive. Similarly, the government should have indicated how far they wanted the TV cameras to be positioned — 500 or 1,000 metres. We would have all complied with their requirements.

“Four months ago, when militants held a family in Jammu hostage, the NSG insisted all TV cameras be placed 2 km away from where the operation was being conducted, and we (the TV teams) obliged,” Ashutosh said.

He, along with Barkha Dutt and several other journalists reporting from ground zero, complained that the media was being unnecessarily vilified. Among the accusations made against them was that they had compromised the security of the NSG commandos when they were being airdropped to Nariman House.

“Apart from one channel, all the other news channels gave a delayed telecast, varying from 10 to 45 minutes. The electricity in that area was also cut off, so where was the question of our providing information that assisted the handlers of the terrorists? The real operation took place inside the hotels and Nariman House in which no TV team was allowed. So how did we compromise security,” he wondered.

Another accusation deals with the release of information that guests had taken shelter at the Chambers, in the Taj. The terrorists went to the Chambers and opened fire there after they learned that guests were hiding there. Again, the media in its defence says they only repeated what had been told to them by the hotel staff.

Ashutosh believes the media vilification has been orchestrated by some senior government officials especially after Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Minister for External Affairs Pranab Mukherjee complained about the anti-politician slant the Mumbai attack had attained.

Initially, the heads of all government agencies including NSG boss J K Dutt and internal security officials went on record praising the support they had received from the media. But when Mumbaiers collected at the Gateway of India to express their opprobrium against politicians, the government changed its stance and their ‘yes men’ started talking in terms of reining in the media.



Sixty hours of non-stop news also served to highlight other limitations, including the growing tendency of reporters/anchors to editorialise even while they report.

On being asked to comment on this trend, Barkha Dutt said: “This is a bit subjective. What does it mean to editorialise, especially in the context of our reflecting the mood that is around us? If a reporter is placed in the middle of a space where the overwhelming mood is one of anger with the politicians, he is going to reflect that. Take the case of CNN coverage of Hurricane Katrina where Anderson Cooper’s reporting was extremely emotional and passionate. Now that is not the BBC style.

“A style issue cannot be confused with a code of ethics issue. A code of ethics means that we cannot force people to speak (against their will), nor can we spread panic. The accusation that coverage of the attacks was TRP-driven at the cost of ethics is something I reject outright. I speak for my own channel. We were not looking for those extra TRPs. No one, including the print media, can question our intentions. This is a dangerous game. At the end of the day, we all have to learn to strike a balance between TRP ratings and ethical reportage. We have also, in the last 10 years, learned a great deal. Ten years ago, if there was a bomb blast, we would show ghoulish close-ups of bodies. We are no longer doing that, but the learning curve continues,” Dutt insisted.

Television reporters express unhappiness at the mounting criticism against India TV for telecasting “live interviews” with two terrorists. The Ministry of Information and Broadcasting has served notice to Rajat Sharma’s channel asking him to explain how his reporters had access to the terrorists’ phone numbers and also the ethicality of speaking to them whilst they held Mumbai to ransom.

The question being asked is why the government failed to make any attempts to rein in the channels. The News Broadcasters Association had recently given a pledge that channels would self-regulate and had prepared a set of guidelines that would be adopted across all channels. These have still to be implemented. After 26/11, security agencies are also stepping up the pressure demanding that channels be subject to greater regulation.

Television journalists counter these charges by pointing out that channels across the globe, including Al Jazeera, have telecast tapes that were reportedly shot by members of Al Qaeda. Newspapers and magazines frequently carry interviews of the leaders of LeT and Jaish-e-Mohammad. In fact, Operation Thunder, conducted in 1988, which helped flush Khalistani militants from the Golden Temple in Amritsar, was telecast live by the national broadcaster Doordarshan.

Vinod Mehta, editor-in-chief of the Outlook group of magazines, speaking at the same media meet, said that the difference between print media coverage and television coverage was that while the print media ensured that a reporter’s story was vetted at different stages by the chief reporter, the news editor and, in some cases, by the editor

himself, this did not happen with television reporting, especially when the coverage was live.

Dutt disagreed. “We follow the same rule as the print media in that every story we telecast is vetted by at least two sources,” she said.

Ashutosh maintained: “We have senior people manning the desk and every story will first go to the news desk. In a live situation, even when the reporter has been trained, no one knows what he is going to say. Unless he is very seasoned, he may say something inadvertent and, unfortunately, television is such a powerful tool, every word stands out.”

Faced with various challenges, news channels are in the process of evolving. And with the government having failed to create an overarching regulatory body for the channels, each channel owner touts its own mantra of self-regulation.

Said Dutt: “We are not following any foreign model but are in the process of evolving. The BBC has its own code, CNN its own. The present broadcaster code has not been able to arrive at a consensus and so I believe our self-regulation code needs to be fleshed out more. Our own broadcasters did not anticipate this kind of attack. Justice Verma is looking at how the code should be strengthened, with the government also providing inputs. We need to flesh out the code but that does not mean that the government should mandate what the code should be because then that will be an infringement on the media.”

Insiders in the business have a different perspective. They claim news channels are completely market-driven.

Alka Saxena, one of the doyens of Hindi news reporting and presently consulting editor with Zee TV, said: “From the time a reporter joins a channel, he is told ‘*masala wala maal lao, tab hi air par jayega*’ (bring in a juicy story, only then will it go on air). This line is made to sink into his DNA; so that is what he is on the lookout for. The style of talking, presentation, attitude — all are determined by this one fact.”

TV journalists know only too well that TRP ratings reach their owners’/editors’ office on a weekly basis. Every quarter, channel owners receive statements of the profits and losses.

Saxena said: “In the print media the losses may run into a few lakh rupees, but in television the losses every quarter are not less than Rs 20-30 crore. TV viewership has risen exponentially though the ad pie has not expanded as much. Owners treat their channels strictly as a business proposition that must be milked. This is the language the average reporter understands.”

Reportage is bound to suffer because of such an attitude, and this will show up much more in a time of crisis. If viewers found terror by TV tough watching, then they had better hold one more candlelight vigil across our cities to protest the sorry state of television news.

Rashme Sehgal is a senior writer and journalist based in Delhi. She covered the media for several publications including The Telegraph and The Independent

'We need to handle painful stories with great care'

Indian television channels have been criticised for their coverage of the November 26, 2008, terror attacks in Mumbai. How would older, more experienced television networks like the British Broadcasting Corporation have handled a situation like the one in Mumbai? To find out, *Agenda* e-mailed questions to Peter Horrocks, head of the newsroom at the BBC in London



If a terror attack like the one that took place in Mumbai on November 26, 2008, were to occur in London, would the BBC feel justified in giving it blanket coverage for over 60 hours as did Indian television channels?

We would and we did when London was attacked in 2005, and when New York and Washington were attacked in 2001.

What kind of norms and guidelines has the BBC developed to cover such terror attacks, particularly after the July 7, 2005, train bombings in London?

We have a detailed section of editorial guidelines dealing with national emergencies, war and terror that all our news staff must be familiar with. These guidelines have been in use for many years preceding the London train bombings in 2005. They deal comprehensively with all issues: what language to use, attributing information correctly, what images to show, and who is appropriate to use as a live contributor (here is a link to our full editorial policy guidelines: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/guidelines/editorialguidelines/>).

In the aftermath of the train bombings, did the BBC stick to telecasting information only from official sources or did it investigate independently and make public this information even if it was from unofficial sources? Do you think journalists need to stick to verifiable sources of information at such times, given the panic amongst the public and the fact that the media is the only source of information for them? Or is it justified for them to make public whatever information they can gather? In Mumbai there were several instances where TV channels quoted unnamed sources for information that turned out to be completely wrong. Is this inevitable?

Our guidelines begin with this description: *The BBC has a special responsibility to its UK and international audiences when reporting conflict. At such times, large numbers of people across the world access our services for accurate news and information. We must ensure they can be confident that*

we are telling them the truth. They also expect us to help them make sense of events by providing context and impartial analysis and by offering a wide range of views and opinions.

We need to be sensitive to the emotions and fears of our audience when reporting matters involving risk to and loss of life, as well as human suffering and distress. Some will have relatives or friends directly involved. We will need to handle painful stories with great care.

After 2005, we were careful to source all information about casualties, causes and deaths, and also to provide helpline information to concerned friends and relatives. It is always also important to us that, as far as possible, next of kin do not receive first news about their loved ones from our news coverage, and that we are careful not to make uncertain times any worse by broadcasting information we are not confident about.

Indian news channels are afflicted by what we call "the breaking news syndrome". What are the BBC's norms when it comes to newsbreaks that are not fully confirmed? Do you wait until they are verified or do you go with the story even with partial information?

Whilst wishing to be as fast as possible to break news, as every news organisation should be, we are more concerned that our news coverage is accurate. As a general rule, if a story has not been supplied by a BBC correspondent, or received firsthand confirmation from a primary source, we apply a two-source rule to breaking stories. That is, two separate secondary sources such as reputable news agencies. Sometimes we break a story and attribute it, therefore making clear that at that stage we are only reporting what another news source is reporting.

Do you think journalists need special training to cover conflict, terror, war? What would such training entail?

All BBC staff who are expected to cover these kinds of stories must have special training. As well as detailed knowledge of our editorial guidelines in these areas, we also provide mandatory safety training. This is a week-long residential course that must be renewed every three years.

Some hard questions

The media coverage of the Jamia Nagar police operation at Batla House in New Delhi is a sad reminder of the diminishing credibility of the media, says this critique by the Delhi Union of Journalists. Besides the shocking confusion over the reported facts of the case, the media displayed implicit bias and uncalled for dramatisation on television. Excerpts from the DUJ report

THE DELHI UNION OF JOURNALISTS (DUJ) and its ethics council are concerned at the falling standards of reporting as evident in the manner in which the police operation at Batla House on September 19, 2008, was reported by various newspapers and TV channels in the capital.

Accuracy in reporting facts is the first responsibility of the media. Where facts are disputed, the discrepancies should be pointed out and the sources questioned. Presenting several versions of incidents and using multiple sources of information is an inalienable part of credible reporting.

Uncovering the truth may not always be the job of the media. The media is not equipped to investigate and uncover the truth in severely complicated cases like the incident being examined in this report. But presenting different facets of events as they emerge is part of the professional responsibility of the media.

In this report we have analysed the reporting of *The Times of India*, *The Hindustan Times*, *The Hindu*, and *The Indian Express* (Delhi editions of September 20 and 21, 2008). Among the Hindi newspapers we have examined *Dainik Jagran*, *Amar Ujala*, *Dainik Hindustan*, *Jansatta*, *Punjab Kesari* and *Rashtriya Sahara*; the Urdu newspaper we looked at is *Rashtriya Sahara*.

We wish to make it clear that we hold no brief for either the police or the suspects, two of whom were killed and several rounded up. We are not passing judgment on whether it was a planned encounter or a fake encounter or a police operation gone wrong. We do not know the truth. We are only examining the professional conduct of our co-professionals with a view to pointing out the casual manner in which serious issues have been handled right from the day of the serial bomb blasts in Delhi.

A research team of the DUJ decided to examine the way in which the print media reported the police operation on September 19, 2008, at L-18, Batla House, Jamia Nagar in Delhi in which two alleged terrorists and one inspector of the special cell of the Delhi police were killed.

Analysis of newspaper reports dated September 20, 2008

The facts first.

1 Inspector Mohan Chand Sharma of the special cell of the Delhi police killed.

2 Two young boys, Atif Amin and Mohammed Sajid, killed.

3 Mohammed Saif arrested.

The rest of the facts regarding the police operation at L-18, Batla House, Jamia Nagar, Delhi, on September 19, 2008, are uncertain. Although the incident took place in India's capital, and all newspapers and TV channels used the same source — the police — even the basic facts are not in place. Every daily newspaper and television channel seems to have its own set of 'facts' and often these contradict each other. Accuracy seems to have been sacrificed in the rush to be first with the news and provide the more sensational coverage. Let us examine how the incident was reported in the Delhi editions of the dailies.

The time of the shootout

The Hindustan Times and *Dainik Jagran* have given the time as 11 am. *The Indian Express*, quoting a resident, says the first shot was fired around 9.45 am. *The Times of India* report does not mention any time. *The Mail Today* says it began at 11 am. The Hindi *Hindustan* report would have us believe that it all began at 10.30 am. *Amar Ujala* says firing began at around 10.45 am and lasted until 11 am.

The duration of the shootout

The Hindustan Times says the shootout lasted 15 minutes, whereas its Hindi publication, *Dainik Hindustan*, says it lasted 90 minutes. According to *The Times of India*, the entire encounter took 25 minutes. *The Mail Today* says the operation lasted 30 minutes. *Veer Arjun* says the shootout lasted between 30 and 45 minutes. *Rashtriya Sahara*, Urdu, claims that the shooting lasted nearly two hours. *Amar Ujala* says the encounter lasted one hour and 15 minutes. *Punjab Kesari* claims the encounter lasted one hour.

Number of rounds fired

According to *The Times of India*, 25 rounds were fired by the police and eight by the 'terrorists'. *The Indian Express*, *The Hindu*, *Dainik Hindustan*, *Punjab Kesari* and *Rashtriya Sahara*, Urdu, say the police fired 22 rounds. They are all silent about the number of rounds fired by the suspects. *Rashtriya Sahara*, Hindi, and *Amar Ujala* say the police fired 22 rounds and the 'terrorists' fired eight rounds.

Interestingly, *Navbharat Times* claims that both the police

and the suspects were armed with AK-47s but did not use them!

'Explosive' stuff

All the dailies reported the police claim that those shot at Batla House were terrorists responsible for several bomb blasts.

The Hindustan Times quoted Police Commissioner Y S Dadwal as saying that "explosives made by him (Atif — our clarification) and his team bore their signature — two detonators, wooden frame, ammonium nitrate and analogue quartz clocks".

In light of this claim, the list of explosives claimed to have been recovered from the flat occupied by the suspects is interesting.

Dainik Hindustan says one AK-47, two pistols, one computer, and important papers were recovered.

Veer Arjun reports one AK-47, .30 bore pistols, cartridges, and 21 country pistols were found.

Navbharat Times says one AK-47, two .30 imported pistols, 20 live cartridges, a magazine, two laptops, mobile phones and other items were recovered.

Rashtriya Sahara, Hindi, says the police recovered one AK-47 and two .32 bore pistols, one computer, and books.

Punjab Kesari says the police found one AK-47, two pistols and one computer.

Amar Ujala says the police seized one AK-47, a .30 bore revolver, two laptops, half-a-dozen mobiles and six pen-drives.

None of the dailies report the recovery of any ammonium nitrate and analogue quartz clocks. No question is asked about the recovery of these chemicals or equipment, claimed to be part of the terrorist group's signature.

How many policemen were there?

The Indian Express reports that Sharma went there along with five officers.

The Mail Today reports a 15-member team led by Sharma.

Veer Arjun claims 50 personnel led by Sharma landed there.

Navbharat Times says a total number of 24 police personnel went there.

Amar Ujala reports that a 22-member police team cordoned off the area under the leadership of Sharma.

The Times of India, *The Hindustan Times*, *Jansatta*, *Dainik Jagran* and *The Hindu* refrain from mentioning the number of policemen involved in the operation.

How many bullets hit Sharma?

The Times of India, *The Indian Express*, *The Hindustan Times*, *The Mail Today*, *The Hindu*, *Veer Arjun*, *Rashtriya Sahara*,

Hindi, all say three bullets hit Sharma.

Navbharat Times says four bullets hit him.

Jansatta claims that five bullets hit him in the abdomen, thigh, left arm, upper part of the shoulder and right hip (anchor story).

Rashtriya Sahara, Urdu, reports four bullets hitting him, one each on the shoulder, arm, back and right hip.

Rashtriya Sahara, Hindi, claims that all three bullets were taken out during an operation in Holy Family hospital.

Amar Ujala also claims that bullets had been removed and quotes Dr Rajesh Chawla to this effect. It says Dr Chawla was summoned from Apollo hospital. He reportedly told the paper that there was excessive bleeding because the bullets hit the lung and the lower part and that after "bullets had been removed" it was felt that Sharma may survive.

Subsequent post-mortem reports quoted by some of the dailies said that Sharma had been hit by only two bullets and that both bullets had exited the body. No bullets were removed from his body.

About Mohan Chand Sharma

Even in paying tribute to Inspector Sharma the papers have reported different facts. *The Hindustan Times* says that he had "shot dead 75 criminals and terrorists". *The Times of India* says he was "credited with the killing of 35 terrorists and the arrest of 80 others". *The Indian Express* says that "Sharma's 'kill tally' stood at 75 criminals including 35 terrorists". *The Hindu* says he was instrumental in "neutralising 35 terrorists and arresting as many as 80 militants". It goes on to say he had "gunned down 40 gangsters" and arrested "120" criminals. *Amar Ujala* reports that Sharma killed 35 terrorists and 40 gangsters, nabbed 80 terrorists and 129 gangsters. It says he was involved in 75 encounters.

The sensation trap

Apart from the confusion over facts, we are deeply concerned at the implicit bias in many news reports. This becomes blatant in screaming headlines in print or uncalled for dramatisation on television. Far more caution is called for in reporting events that pose a grave threat to communal harmony. We wish to use this report to warn our co-professionals of the danger of demonising an entire community by questioning their loyalty to the country and putting their lives at risk. It is vital that we exercise utmost restraint while reporting events that further polarise communities.

Regrettably, in the competition to grab eyeballs we sometimes resort to hype, forgetting that some issues are too explosive for such treatment. They are volatile enough without the media adding fuel to the fire. Unfortunately there are several instances of such coverage. We cite one blatant example. On September 20, 2008, *The Hindustan Times* devoted all of page 3 to reports on terror, with the

bold page slug saying 'Terror Hunt'. The shrieking banner headline was 'India's Bin Laden was a good boy in school'. This was the headline for a report based on interviews with the schoolteachers of alleged terrorist Abdus Subhan Qureshi, one of the men arrested in Mumbai for his involvement in the bomb blasts. The teachers claimed that he was a quiet boy and a good student. The story opens with the sentence: "The world may be calling him India's Bin Laden but it's an image Abdus Subhan Qureshi's teachers find hard to reconcile with his school-day persona." The story did not warrant the headline. Such headline-givers live in a world of their own. It is sheer exaggeration to label someone hitherto unknown to the average citizen as a 'Bin Laden'.

Frequently, the language used by the media to describe such incidents and suspects leaves much to be desired. It lays the media open to the charge of being judgmental and biased.

By and large, the press has forsaken the use of certain prefixes like 'alleged' and 'suspected'. Most newspapers have described those who were killed and arrested in Delhi as 'terrorists'. It is a basic premise of Indian law that no person may be presumed guilty unless proved otherwise. The media's use of epithets like 'terrorist' without the qualifying adjective 'alleged' or 'suspected' amounts to a declaration of guilt without trial in a court of law. This is equivalent to trial by the media. Journalists should know better. We understand that reporters in the field work under tremendous stress and pressure to be the first with the news. However, some editorial control of language should be exercised at the desk, which is sadly missing in many reports.

Television reports have been even more blatant, with the words 'alleged' or 'suspected' simply missing from the language used by both reporters and anchors.

On September 19, TV channels first began breaking the news around noon that policemen in the city were battling 'terrorists' holed up in L-18, Batla House, Jamia Nagar. The reporters in the field sounded breathless with excitement, reporting whatever they saw or heard. Some talked to residents without taking the elementary precaution of blurring their faces or concealing their identities. These residents, we presume, did not seek anonymity but some of them later complained to the DUJ team that visited the area that cameras were flashed at them without even seeking their permission and they wondered if that exposed them to risk. Since the TV reporters were vying for more news, in conditions that must have been rather confusing at the site of the incident, the editors in the studio could perhaps have exercised some restraint, keeping the safety of the residents in mind.

The newspapers carried the reports in the next day's edition. Newspapers had at least eight hours to finalise their reports. Despite this, most of the newspapers mentioned in this report used only one source, the police, in their lead stories. The line between the reporter and the source is completely

blurred in these stories.

For instance, *The Times of India* said in its first lead "...Delhi police killed two terrorists including key SIMI operative, Bashir alias Atif, who allegedly played a crucial role in the September 13 Delhi blast".

Note that Atif has been killed, so the press has not been able to talk to him. Yet, the police version that he was a terrorist has been taken at face value without appending any evidence.

Reporters by definition must be Doubting Thomases. They have no right to suspend disbelief whilst on the job. Otherwise all reporting will become meaningless. In fact the search for new angles not only forms the cornerstone of the serious competition between reporters but throws up new facets of any unfolding story. It is clear that at least to begin with, most reporters suspended disbelief while reporting the operation. Considering the fact that the Delhi police has attracted a lot of flak from the media in the past for its inept handling of crime, this suspension of disbelief and showering of encomiums on the police seems strange. This can either be a result of 'lazy' reporting dependent solely on handouts, or the belief that people accused of serious offences can be bumped off with impunity. Both have serious implications for the profession and cannot be justified on any grounds, moral or professional.

In this case the media seems to have competed for superlatives to describe the martyrdom of special cell Inspector Mohan Chand Sharma and abusive epithets for those accused of being terrorists. Some sections of the media have even dubbed Azamgarh, identified as the hometown of many of the suspects, 'Atankgarh' (den of terror).

An exception to the trend

In contrast to most other dailies, *The Mail Today* did a good job of reporting the incident, incorporating the weak points in the police version and some questions in its lead story. In fact, it is the only paper that in its lead on September 20 played up the fact that Atif Amin had recently filled up a tenant verification form at Jamia Nagar police station, with a copy of his driving licence, his mobile number and his previous address in Sangam Vihar. All these details were later found to be correct. The paper argues that if the police had actually moved to verify the form, they could perhaps have averted the bomb blasts. It also says that either this points to Atif's innocence or indicates that he was a devious terrorist who wanted to avoid raising suspicion.

The Mail Today had even made an effort to talk to the Azamgarh police and the SHO of Saraimeer police station under whose jurisdiction Atif's village falls. The SHO, S N Singh, according to the paper, said none of Atif's family members had a criminal record.

The picture of Sharma being led away by two men has also been used in full. However, the picture is not credited to anyone.

The day after

On September 21, *The Hindustan Times*, in an intriguing headline, says 'Solved'. No questions are asked about how the police, which was clueless a week earlier, had within 24 hours solved all the bomb blasts in Delhi, Ahmedabad, Varanasi and Jaipur.

On page 2, alongside pictures of two people arrested and two killed, it gives thumbnail sketches of the boys. These are given out as facts and the source obviously is the police.

A notable feature of the second day's reporting by several dailies is that still only police sources are being quoted. And no attempt has been made to cross-question them about some of the facts. For instance, according to *The Times of India's* front-page story, the police is now claiming that Bashir alias Atif is the mastermind of the Indian Mujahideen.

Navbharat Times, in a front-page story on September 21, says that the police used personal cars for the raid because the special cell had no vehicle available. It also says that "because the bad-quality 35 kg heavy bullet-proof jacket hampers activity the police personnel started the mission without wearing bullet-proof jackets" (a loose translation). Quoting unnamed personnel from the special cell, the story says that "Atif fired shots" after Saif had been overpowered in the drawing room of the flat.

The previous day (September 20), the same paper had said that when Inspector Sharma knocked on the door and Atif opened it and yelled, suddenly Sajid fired from his .30 pistol that pierced the left shoulder of the inspector. Another bullet wounded him in the lower abdomen.

Which version is to be believed?

In the same *Navbharat Times* story on September 21, the last paragraph creates a new record in contradictions. We quote:

"Balwant (constable) tried to get in, but either Shahzad or Junaid, present in the room behind, opened fire. His bullet hit Balwant. Despite this Balwant had a scuffle with them. It is suspected that Junaid and Shahzad were not in the flat."

Positive notes

Although, in most cases, the lead stories in the dailies depend entirely on the police version of events, almost all of them have carried separate stories on the atmosphere in Jamia Nagar. They talk about the anger and fear prevalent in the area. Some papers published pictures of residents alongside their views.

TV channels talked to residents too about what they saw and what they felt.

These reports present the different opinions of local people and some, like *Jansatta*, carry their photographs. *The Indian Express* on September 22, in *Newsline*, carried a story reporting how residents said they could have been of help to the police had they been taken into confidence. These reports say that Muslims in Jamia Nagar support the killing

of terrorists but not of innocent people. One resident says that people are scared that they may become the next target of the police. But this story too does not ask them how the operation was executed, whether they witnessed it, or what they saw. It records only their opinion.

The Mail Today has done some of the best reporting, both from Delhi and Azamgarh, recording the various views of the Delhi and Azamgarh police, as well as residents of Jamia Nagar and Sanjarpur village in Azamgarh where the boys come from. It carries the opinions and photographs of several relatives of the suspects. Most importantly, it has maintained its objectivity and questioned the official version, pointing out discrepancies in the facts given out.

Society's watchdog?

The Jamia Nagar episode is a sad reminder of the diminishing credibility of the media. Instead of playing the role of society's 'watchdog', the media seems to be getting increasingly lazy and dependent on police handouts. The main job of the media is to question and not accept whatever is being served to it on a platter.

Because of this increasing laziness of the print media and increasing 'greed' for sensationalism on the part of the visual media, news tends to be presented to the public without proper investigation, which is the most important job of the media. Investigation does not mean that every mediaperson has to become an 'investigative journalist'. That is not the job of the daily reporter, nor is it expected from him. What is expected is that the reporter tries to give different sides of the incident after questioning as many eyewitnesses as possible.

In most of the papers the boys killed were declared terrorists much before any proof could be established against them. It is unfortunate that not even the prefix 'alleged' or 'suspected' was used. Every TV channel was competing with the other to sensationalise the raid as much as possible, perhaps with an eye on TRP ratings.

Fortunately, there are still people in the media who caution their colleagues against such gullibility and try to present more reliable reports.

The magazines are definitely much better at analysing facts, maybe because they are less constrained by 'deadlines' than are daily reporters. Some columnists are also critical and reflective.

In *The Week*, Antara Dev Sen, in her column 'I Witness', comments (*The Week*, September 29 to October 8, 2008): "Terrorism is bad enough, worse is the eerie suspicion that we may never know what really happened, that instead of addressing terrorism we are pursuing cosmetic security while the real culprits plot the next attack." She laments that "the days of sceptical caution, of not accepting a one-source story, are numbered. What started as lazy journalism, as reporters warmed to PR handouts, is now news etiquette".

The use and misuse of photographs

By Sadanand Menon

Monday, September 22, 2008, was an extraordinary day in the annals of the Indian media. I would like to call it a day of shame. For, on that day, our media collectively displayed its herd-like mentality and its entirely uncritical attitude towards the use — and misuse — of the photographs it publishes.

At least eight mainstream English language newspapers (including *The Times of India*, *The Indian* and *The New Indian Express*, *The Hindu*, *The Hindustan Times*, *The Deccan Chronicle*) and many more in the language press from north to south, east to west, uncritically published almost identical photographs on their front pages. The photographs were not generated by any single agency. They were neither taken by 'citizen' photographers nor were they official handouts. They were shots by individual staff photographers as well as professional syndicated photographers. What is amazing is what newsrooms across the country chose to do with the image.

The photographs were of three suspects involved in the Delhi blasts who were arrested at their residence in Delhi's Jamia Nagar. Reports also claimed they were students of the Jamia Milia Islamia. What was fishy about the photographs was that they showed three totally unidentifiable people, their heads and faces swathed in generous lengths of cloth, flanked by gun-toting policemen in mufti and other hangers-on. Yet, it seemed obvious that this was a photo-op provided to the media — not to protect anyone's identity but to precisely create a definite sense of identity.

To mask the identity of all three suspects, they were dressed up by the local police in identical Palestinian *rumaals* or *kaffiyehs* or *abayas* or *cassavas* as this piece of head-dress is variously known. Though none of their faces were visible, to any casual reader of the newspaper it would be abundantly clear that they were of 'Arab', 'West Asian' or 'Islamic' origin. A clear case of racial profiling!

Some sceptical comments about this on the Net, primarily generated by documentary filmmaker Yousuf Sayeed who lives in the same area, led to a small critical piece in *The Hindustan Times* two days later, raising some crucial questions. The sceptics wondered how it was that the three arrested suspects came to be in possession of identical, brand-new *rumaals*, which they could readily pull out of their pockets to cover their faces. As if, on realising that they would be arrested soon, they went shopping and bought identical scarves so that everyone would recognise them as 'Islamic terrorists'. Critics pointed out that, usually, suspects arrested on various charges mask their faces with their own handkerchiefs or borrow towels or a black cloth to cover their faces; never before had it seemed like such a costume drama as the Delhi police had managed to stage.

Then came the stunning revelation by the Delhi police commissioner. He confessed that it was his department that had dressed the suspects up in such a suggestive manner and, even more alarmingly, that the Delhi police had purchased these pieces of cloth "in bulk" for use by those arrested. Obviously, every arrested person could now be given a suggestive 'Islamic terrorist' look, thereby setting up dangerous subliminal propaganda within the media.

Repulsive as it is, most people will agree that the police and its dirty-tricks department are not beyond using such obnoxious

methods. What is beyond explanation is how the media collectively fell into the trap and carried the images without a single question or doubt about what they were so readily displaying on their front pages.

For those not used to thinking about such things, the question can be framed a little differently. It has to do with conceptual issues related to the use (or misuse) of the image in the media. On any given day, hundreds of thousands of photographs are taken. Of these, by common consensus and governed by a largely abstract logic dealing with the received wisdom of 'news-value' or 'news-worthiness', around 500-1,000 pictures are considered for use within the media. After that it is a matter of chance or dependent on strong editorial choices as to why a particular photograph makes it to the papers, in particular the front page.

The front page photograph, in the world of the print media, is usually associated with having an iconic status. It is supposed to be a quick encapsulation of what a paper or a region or a nation or a civilisation imagines as its primary concern. It frames the news of the day with a kind of visual evidence or back-up which then illustrates how it wants to set up the communication and how it wants readers to enter the narrative.

Very seldom, across 365 days in a year, do we find identical images on the front page of the newspapers. It is supposed to be the greatness and the strength of democratic media practice that the editorial position and interpretation of events could vary. It is also part of the notion of healthy competition in the media that variety, diversity and contrariness are seen as virtues — that a news item or image which is used sycophantically by one section of the press can as easily be used critically by another section of the same press.

That is why, when you come across a substantial section of the national press using one common image on their front pages, that too without any critical remarks or interrogative comments, one begins to smell the workings of an 'ideology', which is nothing but a blind acceptance of certain 'ruling' ideas of a class or of a moment — ideas that indicate the power structures within which 'information' and 'meaning' are manufactured.

To me it is shattering that on the evening of September 21, across the newsrooms of the best of Indian newspapers, not one editorial discussion chose to evaluate the photograph of the three arrested youngsters draped in checked cloth and use their judgment to 'read' the picture in a dispassionate manner worthy of a free press. Instead, the Indian media collectively behaved as they had not even during the period of the Emergency and its draconian censorship. They all fell prey to their own prejudices and communal mindsets. The Nazi propaganda machine could not have produced better results!

Obviously, the Indian media needs to re-investigate the 'frame' within which it is presenting, colouring and analysing news. Such evidence of a collective cop-out is a serious failing, which it must critically examine to carry out correctives. In fact, this is a case fit to be taken up before the Press Council.

Shame, a little shame is all that the media needs. For shame, as Marx said, is a revolutionary sentiment.

Sadanand Menon is a senior journalist who has worked with The Economic Times and other publications

Sevanti Ninan, reviewing the media's role in *Dainik Hindustan* (September 28, 2008), points out the slanted reporting against Muslims. She notes that when there are reports flowing out of Orissa and Karnataka about the activities of the Bajrang Dal we never get to know anything about the people involved in it. "Are their pictures, addresses, life stories plastered in all the newspapers and on TV channels? Why is their profiling not done?"

The language used to describe the Bajrang Dal also indicates the way the media treats them. They are described only as "goons of Bajrang Dal," they are never thought of as anti-national or terrorists. "Where do they get money from? This never becomes a subject of debate. But when it comes to those Christians and Muslims who are accused of religious conversions, the media takes great interest in filing news on where they are getting their money from."

In *Outlook*, Smita Gupta and Chandrani Banerjee raise a number of questions. They cite a central minister as expressing concern over not just the fact that the Delhi police's special cell may have botched up the case but of the long-term consequences it may have. "At a time when the majority of young Muslims are vying to join the mainstream, moving to the big cities to get better education and improve their opportunities, we appear to have alienated the community further." The article says, quoting a senior intelligence officer, "At an early stage of the investigation, when the police are just exploring leads, such detailed press conferences are irresponsible. It only creates panic and reinforces cultural stereotypes," (*Outlook*, October 6, 2008, page 30, 31).

The bias continues...

Despite the criticism it is a matter of concern that some TV channels continued with the strident note, describing the accused as 'terrorists'. On the night of Sunday, September 28, 2008, IBN7 telecast a programme showing pictures of each of the four accused and calling them 'terrorists'. It said they were absconding and gave short profiles of each of them.

NDTV at the same time was telecasting a discussion in its regular programme 'Hum Log' on whether Muslims should introspect. A point made forcefully by some of the participants was why should only Muslims introspect; why should India as a whole not do so. It also had a section on the way the media reported the incident.

Some attempts to act more responsibly are now evident. In *Dainik Jagran*, September 28, the picture of a woman from Mehrauli who claims to have seen the two motorbike riders who planted the bomb has been blurred. The blurring is not as good as it could have been, but an attempt has been made. However, the story carries her name, so any good done in hiding her identity by the blurred picture is cancelled by this oversight!

Other papers too have carried the story of a woman having had an altercation with those who planted the bomb. The

woman was interviewed by at least one television channel which concealed her identity by showing her with her face covered with a pink *dupatta*, revealing only her eyes.

Conclusion

The growing reach and influence of the media, both print and electronic, has unfortunately not been accompanied by a corresponding growth in a sense of responsibility and accountability to society. The media plays watchdog to society, but there is no one to watch the media itself. As a consequence, public dissatisfaction with the media is on the rise.

Journalists have long held the view that they are beyond scrutiny. The 'freedom of the press' argument has been stretched to permit abuse and licence on the one hand and sycophancy towards the powers-that-be, on the other. Cases where the media has overstepped its brief, indulged in defamatory stories or relied on dubious sources are becoming common. The damage done to individuals' lives and careers can sometimes be irremediable. It is vital for journalists to protect the media from such self-destructive tendencies. We need guidelines and more training for journalists, both those in the field and those at news desks and studios, to sensitise them to some of these issues.

Sensationalism, trivialisation, gender, caste and class bias are problems inherent in reporting, and exposure to ongoing discourse on these problem areas needs to be built by instituting more training courses and on-the-job refresher courses.

The profession has long held out against any code of conduct or regulatory mechanisms. The Press Council has limited powers and its jurisdiction is restricted to the print media. It is clearly time to amend the Press Council Act, extend it to the electronic media, give it statutory powers and re-name it a Media Council.

Further, there is an urgent need for more media watching, more research and more media studies. This report is only one small attempt in that direction.

We hope that through such critiques of some of the stereotypes that the media perpetuates in society and the overt and covert biases in day-to-day reporting, we will be able to make our co-professionals introspect on these issues. A responsible media is essential for the defence of democracy and the rule of law.

NBA guidelines

The News Broadcasters Association (NBA), which represents 30 channels run by 14 broadcasters, has set up a body to enforce a code of ethics and address public grievances. These are its guidelines

SELF-REGULATION FOR THE BROADCASTING INDUSTRY has finally seen the light of day with the News Broadcasting Standards Disputes Redressal Authority beginning operations on October 2, 2008. Set up by the News Broadcasters Association (NBA), which represents 30 channels run by 14 broadcasters, it is headed by former Chief Justice J S Verma.

News Broadcasters Association guidelines for self-regulation

Background

- 1) The Constitution of India guarantees to all its citizens, the right to free speech, which right has been liberally construed by our Supreme Court as encompassing not just freedom of the press but also the right of the citizen to be informed of matters of public moment and concern.
- 2) The fundamental premise of a democracy is the accountability of all its institutions to the political sovereign, viz the people. It is axiomatic that for democracy to survive and flourish, freedom must live in the hearts of people, and the citizenry must be ever vigilant against all attempts to subvert the rule of law. Democracies have decayed into anarchy not merely on account of major events such as coups, but also by insidious erosion caused by egregious corruption and abuse of power. Exposing the threat within itself has become one of the most important roles of the news media, particularly the electronic media whose reach and penetration has the promise to make democracy a living reality for those who do not have access to the print media for want of literacy or otherwise, and giving them a sense of involvement in the process of governance.
- 3) India is the world's largest democracy, demographically marked by diversity in religion, language and caste, and undoubtedly has problems that are significantly peculiar to it. Yet, at the same time, it shares certain common values with other vibrant democracies, and one of them is balancing freedom of the press with putting in place checks and balances that seek to instil a sense of responsibility and to prevent abuse of this freedom without the “chilling effect” that would impair journalistic freedom.
- 4) It is the duty of the media to keep the citizenry informed of the state of governance, which mostly puts it at odds with the establishment. A media that is meant to expose the lapses in government and in public life cannot obviously be regulated by government — it would lack credibility. It is a fundamental

paradigm of freedom of speech that the media must be free from governmental control in the matter of “content” — censorship and free speech are sworn enemies. It therefore falls upon the journalist profession to evolve institutional checks and safeguards, specific to the electronic media, that can define the path that would conform to the highest standards of rectitude and journalistic ethics and guide the media in the discharge of its solemn constitutional duty.

5) There are models of self-governance evolved in other countries that have seen an evolution of the electronic media, including the news media, much before it developed in India. The remarkable feature of all these models is self-governance and monitoring by a “jury of its peers”.

6) There are undoubtedly limitations in any model of self-governance in which compliance is entirely voluntary. However, this does not suggest that such models are ineffective. Their efficacy flows from the fact that the basic strength of a news channel lies in its credibility, from which flows its ability to influence public opinion. A censure emanating from a jury of its peers would indisputably affect the credibility of a channel. Besides, such a process is not without its legal ramifications. One of the important defences of civil and criminal actions (based on defamation) is “fair comment” and *bona fide* attempts to unravel the truth. The difference between inaccuracy and falsehood lies many a time in the motive. A channel acting in breach of established guidelines could hardly defend its motives or suggest that it was acting fairly if it is censured by a jury of its peers.

7) Interference by the government, however well intentioned, would imperil not just this method of independent journalism but the very process of investigation itself. It therefore has become imperative that the news channels lay down guidelines, procedural safeguards and establish a body that would act as a watchdog and a grievance redressal forum.

Section 1

Fundamental principles

- 1) Professional electronic journalists should accept and understand that they operate as trustees of the public and should, therefore, make it their mission to seek the truth and to report it fairly with integrity and independence. Professional journalists should stand fully accountable

for their actions.

2) The purpose of this code is to document the broad paradigms accepted by the members of the News Broadcasters Association (NBA) as practice and procedures that would help journalists of the electronic media to adhere to the highest possible standards of public service and integrity.

3) News channels recognise that they have a special responsibility in the matter of adhering to high standards of journalism since they have the most potent influence on public opinion. The broad principles on which the news channels should function are, therefore, as stated hereinafter.

4) Broadcasters shall, in particular, ensure that they do not select news for the purpose of either promoting or hindering either side of any controversial public issue. News shall not be selected or designed to promote any particular belief, opinion or desires of any interest group.

5) The fundamental purpose of dissemination of news in a democracy is to educate and inform people of the happenings in the country, so that the people of the country understand significant events and form their own conclusions.

6) Broadcasters shall ensure a full and fair presentation of news, as the same is the fundamental responsibility of each news channel. Realising the importance of presenting all points of view in a democracy, the broadcasters should, therefore, take responsibility in ensuring that controversial subjects are fairly presented, with time being allotted fairly to each point of view. Besides, the selection of items of news shall also be governed by public interest and importance based on the significance of these items of news in a democracy.

Section 2

Principles of self-regulation

The News Broadcasters Association has established commonly accepted content guidelines as a way of practising self-regulation. The purpose is to define editorial principles which are consistent with the tenets of freedom of speech as articulated in the Constitution of India, the regulatory framework, common sensibilities of television viewers.

The purpose of these principles of self-regulation is to serve as an affirmative declaration of understanding of, and compliance with, the basic values and objectives that news channels enshrine. It is to ensure that these principles are observed in spirit, not just in letter.

The purpose of putting together the principles of self-regulation is to avoid compromising the genre of television news by broadcasting content that is malicious, biased, regressive, knowingly inaccurate, hurtful, misleading, or aimed at wilfully concealing a conflict of interest.

The purpose of these principles of self-regulation is to empower the profession of television journalism by an abiding set of values, which will stand the test of time and ensure that

balanced and comprehensive journalism flourishes, to strengthen India's democracy.

Detailed below are some of the areas where the broadcasters seek to self-regulate.

1 Impartiality and objectivity in reporting

Accuracy is at the heart of the news television business. Viewers of 24-hour news channels expect speed, but it is the responsibility of TV news channels to give accuracy and balance precedence over speed. If, despite this, there are errors, channels should be transparent about them. Errors must be corrected promptly and clearly, whether in the use of pictures, a news report, a caption, a graphic or a script. Channels should also strive not to broadcast anything which is obviously defamatory or libellous. Truth will be a defence in all cases where a larger public interest is involved, and in even these cases, equal opportunities will be provided for individuals involved to present their point of view. This also applies in cases where television channels report on those holding public office, though by virtue of doing so no person can claim immunity from scrutiny or criticism by news channels.

2 Ensuring neutrality

TV news channels must provide for neutrality by offering equality for all affected parties, players and actors in any dispute or conflict to present their point of view. Though neutrality does not always come down to giving equal space to all sides (news channels shall strive to give the main viewpoints of the main parties), news channels must strive to ensure that allegations are not portrayed as fact and charges are not conveyed as an act of guilt.

3 Reporting on crime and safeguards to ensure crime and violence are not glorified

Television news has a greater reach and more immediate impact than other forms of media, and this makes it all the more necessary that channels exercise restraint to ensure that any report or visuals broadcast do not induce, glorify, incite, or positively depict violence and its perpetrators, regardless of ideology or context. Specific care must be taken not to broadcast visuals that can be prejudicial or inflammatory. Equally, in the reporting of violence (whether collective or individual), the act of violence must not be glamorised, because it may have a misleading or desensitising impact on viewers. News channels will ensure that such reconstructions will not cross boundaries of good taste and sensibility. This includes taking adequate precaution while showing any visual instance of pain, fear or suffering, and visuals or details of methods of suicide and self-harm of any kind, and will not cross boundaries of good taste and decency.

4 Depiction of violence or intimidation against women and children

As an elaboration of the third point, news channels will ensure that no woman or juvenile who is a victim of sexual violence, aggression, trauma, or has been a witness to the

same, is shown on television without due effort taken to conceal the identity. In reporting all cases of sexual assault, or instances where the personal character or privacy of women is concerned, their names, pictures and other details will not be broadcast/divulged. Similarly, the identity of victims of child abuse and juvenile delinquents will not be revealed, and their pictures will be morphed to conceal their identity.

5 Sex and nudity

News channels will ensure that they do not show, without morphing, nudity of the male or female form. Channels will also not show explicit images of sexual activity or sexual perversions or acts of sexual violence like rape or molestation, or show pornography, or the use of sexually suggestive language. (As a qualifier however, channels are not expected to be moralistic or prudish, and this self-regulation is aimed not at moral policing but rather at ensuring that overtly regressive and explicit acts and visuals do not slip into broadcasts.)

6 Privacy

As a rule, channels must not intrude on the private lives or personal affairs of individuals unless there is a clearly established larger and identifiable public interest for such a broadcast. The underlying principle that news channels abide by is that the intrusion of private spaces, records, transcripts, telephone conversations and any other material will not be for salacious interest but only when warranted in the public interest. However, it is also understood that the pursuit of truth and the news is not possible through the predetermined principle of prior permission; hence, door-stepping individuals or authorities for the purpose of newsgathering may be used only in the larger purpose of public interest. Further, in the case of minors, in any broadcast that intrudes on their privacy, the channel should attempt, where possible, to seek the consent of the parent or legal guardian. However, the defence of the premise of privacy cannot be misconstrued as denial of access, and this applies to all individuals, including those in the public eye and public personalities. It does however apply in its entirety, as per the provisions mentioned above, to their children and kin who are minors.

7 Endangering national security

In the use of any terminology or maps that represent India and Indian strategic interests, all news channels will use specific terminology and maps mandated by law and Indian government rules. (The depiction of a map of the territory of India will reflect official guidelines, as detailed in official literature.) News channels will also refrain from allowing broadcasts that encourage secessionist groups and interests, or reveal information that endangers lives and national security. However, it is in the public interest to broadcast instances of breach of national security and loopholes in national security and reporting these cannot be confused with

endangering national security.

8 Refraining from advocating or encouraging superstition and occultism

News channels will not broadcast any material that glorifies superstition and occultism in any manner. In broadcasting any news about such a genre, news channels will also issue public disclaimers to ensure that viewers are not misled into believing or emulating such beliefs and activity. Therefore, news channels will not broadcast "as fact" myths about "supernatural" acts, apparitions and ghosts, personal or social deviations or deviant behaviour, and re-creations of the same. Wherever references are made to such cases, news channels will issue riders/disclaimers/warnings to ensure that such beliefs or events are not passed off "as fact" since they can hurt rational sensibilities.

9 Sting operations

As a guiding principle, sting and undercover operations should be the last resort of news channels in an attempt to give the viewer comprehensive coverage of any news story. News channels will not allow sex and sleaze as a means to carry out sting operations, the use of narcotics and psychotropic substances, or any act of violence, intimidation, or discrimination as a justifiable means in the recording of any sting operation. Sting operations will also abide by the principles of self-regulation mentioned above, and news channels will ensure that they will be guided, as mentioned above, by an identifiable larger public interest. News channels will, as a ground rule, ensure that sting operations are carried out only as a tool for getting conclusive evidence of wrongdoing or criminality, and that there is no deliberate alteration of visuals, or editing, or interposing done with the raw footage in a way that it also alters or misrepresents the truth or presents only a portion of the truth.

10 Corrigendum

All news channels will, in keeping with the principle of due accuracy and impartiality, ensure that significant mistakes made in the course of any broadcast are acknowledged and corrected on air immediately. Corrections should also be scheduled in such a way that they attract enough viewer attention and are not concealed.

11 Viewer feedback

All news channels will, on their website, create provision to receive consumer feedback. Further, any specific viewer complaints will be responded to. In the event any news channel gets a specific complaint, if found to be true it will admit to the same on air and will respond in fullness and fairness to the viewer. In the event a viewer/body perceives prejudice by any specific report carried by the news channel, it will respond in fullness and without impartiality to the viewer.

This dossier is supported in part by a grant from the Government of India pursuant to an MoU between ICICI Bank and the United States Agency for International Development's TDC programme. The views and information contained herein are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Government of India, ICICI Bank, USAID, or any other grant-making organisation, which assume no liability for the contents of this publication by virtue of the support given



www.infochangeindia.org

Daily updates on human rights, social justice and sustainable development in South Asia

ccds



301, Kanchanjunga Building, Kanchan Lane
Off Law College Road, Pune 411 004

Tel: 91-20-26852845 / 25457371

Email: infochangeindia@dishnetdsl.net

Websites: www.infochangeindia.org / www.ccds.in