

The Media in Crises

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The US campaign of bombing erstwhile Taliban positions in Afghanistan had not been on for 10 days, and our experts began pronouncing it a failure: ‘Osama bin Laden is still at large, the Taliban have just dispersed into the hills, the Northern Alliance is stuck where it was, Bush’s Grand Alliance is coming apart... The winter is about to set in,’ they said. ‘The Afghan is a hardy fighter, they said. He will just tie an onion and a *roti* (bread), fling his blanket over his shoulder, and disappear into the nearest mountain; and these American GIs – they cannot fight without their Coca Colas, their hot meals... Just look at them on TV – they are loaded with so much equipment, they have difficulty just walking. These jokers are going to fight the Taliban? Secure on the mountaintop, the Taliban *Jehadi* will pick them one by one as they try to clamber up the mountain. Remember Kargil? These slopes in the Afghan mountains are even steeper than the ones our soldiers had to scale.’

‘And remember: this is *Afghanistan* – no foreigner has been able to rule the country. *Ever*. The British in the 19th century, the Russians in the 1980s – each one of them was thrown out by the indomitable Afghans... And this generation of Afghans is even more battle-hardened than the average Afghan: the country has been at war continuously for 20 years. In contrast, the Americans

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who will be lumbering out of their helicopters against them have not seen action at all.’

‘And you do not understand the difference motivation makes: on the one side there are *jehadis* fired up with religion, ready to embrace *shahadat* (martyrdom); on the other, gum-chewing Americans dying to get back to their girl friends... Bush has ignited the entire Muslim world. Protests in Indonesia... Twenty thousand *Mujahideen* are crossing over from Pakistan....’

What happened in fact? The Taliban did not just collapse, they fled. The Pakistanis fled faster. As for being fired up with the narcotic of *shahadat*, should our experts not have wondered how being fired up by prospects of *houries* in *jannat* would make one invulnerable to bombs? As for history – from Greeks to the Kushans, from Kanishka to Maharaja Ranjit Singh... As many ‘outsiders’ had ruled Afghanistan as northern India. The Bamiyan Buddhas – whose destruction was so recent that even our ‘experts’ could not have forgotten it – were themselves reminders of the time when Afghanistan was under the sway of the Buddhist rulers of India! As for the indomitable spirit and fighting qualities of the Afghan, should our experts and commentators have so swiftly forgotten that the Taliban had acquired most of its sway without any fighting at all? The silver bullet had worked the magic. Should that not have led them to wonder whether the same sequence could not be repeated in reverse this time round?

Exactly the same sort of ‘analyses’ had been the order of the day during the Gulf War: ‘battle-hardened troops of Saddam Hussein, the inhospitable desert, ‘General Desert Storm’ which blows around this time of the year and will blind the American GIs... Have you forgotten Vietnam? The Americans cannot stand the sight of body-bags...’

‘General Desert Storm’ failed to turn up. The hardening that the troops of Saddam Hussein had gone through did not make them invulnerable to bombs, to gigantic war machines that just buried thousands alive. True, the Americans cannot stand the sight of bodies being brought home. But, while we were basking in vicarious memories of Vietnam, American war strategists and technologists had fashioned weapons and devised an entire war strategy that minimized the commitment of American troops. We

were exulting in the last war; they had devised ways and means to make the next one an entirely different one.

In one sense, of course, this conformed to the standard of the Cold War days: the costless fashion of being anti-American. But, there is something deeper that accounted for the ‘analyses’: *a defeatism so ingrained that by now it has become part of the nature of the Indian literati.*

The proximate manifestation of this is the conviction that the government – which government is in office makes little difference – will not be able to handle the crisis. Yashwant Sinha had gone to Ottawa, Canada, to attend a meeting of Finance Ministers in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks.¹ At the meeting, Sinha recounted, speaker after speaker lauded India for maintaining a 4.8 per cent growth rate when the richer countries other than China were struggling at growth rates of 1 to 3 per cent. Talking of the prospects for the coming months, speaker after speaker had maintained that two countries would help pull the world out of the recession: China and India. And here, in India, the refrain is the opposite, Sinha said. Here, the refrain is that *if* the September 11 attacks had occurred in India, the government would not have been able to handle the situation; therefore, it is *nikammi* (useless); therefore, it must go!

But even this particular species – this pessimism about the governments we have – is just the immediate manifestation of defeatism. The conviction is not just that the government will not be able to handle the crisis. We seem convinced that whatever the government is doing will in fact boomerang and recoil on India. Indeed, even that too is just the second layer of defeatism. Beneath that layer is the conviction that whatever is happening – not just what the government is doing, but events in general – will in fact turn against India.

‘But should Jaswant Singh have rushed into announcing support for the Americans?’ people asked – within government as much as outside. ‘That is bound to enrage the Taliban. We have unnecessarily made ourselves a target.’

¹ A meeting of G-20 Finance Ministers and Central Bank Governors took place on November 16-17, 2001 in Ottawa.

Days had not passed, and the refrain became the opposite: 'But Pakistan has stolen a march over us again. They offered support, and see how the Americans are wooing them. They are going to give them billions of dollars. Military aid too is being resumed. And Pakistan is sure as hell going to use it against India.'

But on the logic of a few days earlier, by announcing that it was joining the international coalition against terrorism, was Pakistan not enraging the Taliban? Would the Taliban not target *Pakistan* rather than India? True, Pakistan was trying to extract a few extra dollars: but the very effort was bound to deepen distrust in the US and Europe, it was bound to confirm apprehensions about its nature. Bartering the very ones in whom it had taken so much pride, the Taliban, for dollars was bound to corrode the psyche of its people, to demean them in their own eyes. Dollars or no dollars, Pakistan was inviting the recoil of a defeated Taliban within Pakistan. All this was obvious, it was elementary, yet it was completely buried under our pessimism about what events – *any set of events* – are liable to entail for India.

Events had so conspired that the US and other countries were at last joining the war we in India have been fighting for two decades. For 15 years, as our people were being mowed down by terrorists trained, equipped and indoctrinated by Pakistan, the US had asked us, 'But where is the evidence?' That very country had been awakened. Was that not the opportunity that we ought to grab? It was no one's case that the US or any other country is going to solve our problem for us. Nor that any new bond that may be forged because of the events that had shaken the US was going to last forever. The premise underlying the Indian government's response was merely that the events had provided a moment of congruence.

Consider the alternative. Supposing the response had been ambiguous, supposing we had delayed the announcement of support. Within days, scores and scores of countries, specifically including China and Pakistan, had announced that they would be part of the coalition to fight terrorism. Supposing we had announced our support for the American campaign *after* these other countries had signed up. Would the critics not have fumed

that the government had humiliated India – that it had reduced the country to being just the tail of even Pakistan?

Even a fool could have seen the reason for which the US and others were paying attention to Pakistan: it was not just its geographical position; the real ‘asset’ Pakistan had was that its intelligence agencies and Army are the ones that had the closest links with the Taliban. To secure vital information about the disposition of Taliban troops, their arsenal, to learn who among them could be weaned away by bribes and through whom – for all this the government that could help most and in the least possible time was that of Pervez Musharraf. And just as obvious were the effects that signing up in the campaign to destroy the Taliban regime in Afghanistan would inflict on Pakistan.

After all, till the other day, Pakistan had been preening itself on how, by installing the Taliban, it had acquired ‘strategic depth’ vis-à-vis India. It had been projecting itself in the Islamic world as the country whose guidance, support and patronage had rid the area of the godless government of the atheist Communists; it had been projecting itself as the country which had helped usher in ‘the rule of the pure.’ Till recently, it had been insisting, its intellectuals had been declaiming about, how popular the Taliban were with the people of Afghanistan – the Taliban have brought peace, they said, they have purged society of what the people realised were the decadent values of the Christian West. . . . And now, suddenly, the success of Pakistan was that it had positioned itself among those who were destroying the same Taliban. Would that not delegitimize the religious rationale itself? Would that delegitimization in turn not gravely affect Pakistan’s self-perception? Of its being the ‘fortress of Islam’? Of its being an Islamic state? Indeed, would it not undermine the religious underpinning of Pakistan – its *raison d’être*, the very basis of its self-definition as the country that is the “Not-*Hindustan*”?

All of this was elementary. Yet, none of it was allowed to dilute pessimism.

“But they have not banned the Jaish-e-Mohammed [JeM] and other organisations operating in India as yet.” And then, the day after a news report that the US had in fact moved to proscribe some of these, *The Indian Express* lead story was, “Ban to have little effect on the ground.” This was followed with some glee by

stories to the effect that while one part of the US Administration had proposed the ban, the ban had yet to be formalised. And if the US had banned them? Without a doubt, we would have been back to, “But what difference will that make on the ground? After all, these organisations do not use banking channels. Their members do not wait to get visas. In any case, they have had so much warning time, by now they must have moved their finances to safer havens.” Soon, the opposite became the subject to beat our chests about:

“Isn’t it a humiliation? We offered help, but no one is taking us up on the offer? Yes, there is a war on terrorism, *but where are we in that war?*” In fact, there was active co-operation: intelligence sharing, access to many in the Northern Alliance with whom India had been in close touch for years.

And soon, just ten-twelve days into the bombing campaign: “The campaign is a failure, bin Laden is still at large, the Taliban have just scattered into the hills, the Northern Alliance is stuck where it was. Bush’s Grand Alliance is coming apart...”

By now more than a habit, our very nature

During the days he spent in India, the then US President, Bill Clinton made several statements which went in favour of the Indian position. In the hours that he spent on his way through Pakistan, Clinton addressed the people of that country directly, and delivered a hiding that no self-respecting country can possibly stomach. “But these are just statements,” said some about the statements that underscored the Indian position: when some secondary official like Robin Raphael used to say a few words – “Kashmir is disputed territory”² – these very persons used to scare us, “See, the US has come out so decisively in favour of the Pakistani position.” Now, when *the President* of that very country was so decisively and so many times speaking

² She declared the whole of Kashmir as "disputed" with three contending parties-India, Pakistan and Kashmir. See Parama Sinha Palit, “The Kashmir Policy of the United States: A Study of the Perceptions, Conflicts and Dilemmas”, *Strategic Analysis*, New Delhi, vol. XXV, no. 6, September 2001, p. 791.

against the Pakistani position, “So what? These are just statements.” During a discussion on Clinton’s visit, a *Star News* anchorperson went a step further. The very fact that the statements were so strongly in favour of Indian perceptions and the Indian position, she saw working *against* India! “But don’t you think that such statements may anger Pakistan so much that it adopts an even more aggressive posture?,” she asked. I had to ask in turn, “Why have we got into such a negative mould? What if even one of the statements had been in favour of the Pakistani position? Would we not have been shouting, “See, the US has endorsed the Pakistani position. . . . A colossal failure for Indian diplomacy?” She merely smiled.

When all else fails there is always China to enable us to hold on to dependence. And so it was during Clinton’s visit: “But his real motive is to use us to counter China,” went the argument. Till the other day, the lament had been, “See, the US is out to undermine us. On the one side it is doing everything possible to ignore what Pakistan is doing – in exporting terrorism, in building up its nuclear arsenal, its missile capability; in particular what it is doing in developing missiles, atomic weapons – with the help of China, in manifest violation of international agreements, what the two together are doing in manifest disregard of the US’ own laws and admonitions. On the other, the US is bending backwards to deepen its links with China.” Suddenly, that the refrain became, “But Clinton’s real intention is to use India to counter China.”

Is it not *up to us* to ensure that we get the best out of an arrangement, to ensure that the other country is not able to use us? Of course, in Afghanistan, the US is acting in its own interest. But so would we, indeed so *are* we.

So pervasive has this habit become that the fact that the replacement of the Taliban regime would be a boon for us – one factory manufacturing terrorists less, a major defeat for militant Islam, the patrons and guides of the terrorists either crushed or made busy protecting themselves, fissures in Pakistani society widened – all this was all but obscured in the anxiety to discover the latest shred by which the government could be pilloried, or the gloominess confirmed.

Nor is this phenomenon limited to foreign or security affairs. Over the decades, an entire industry has grown up whose sole

function is to frighten us about the future. I well remember the seemingly learned essays that the *Economic and Political Weekly* used to carry during the Green Revolution days. They were written by prominent economists and we had to mug them up for our exams. The new seed varieties will increase productivity per acre, the argument went. That will make land more valuable. The rich *kulaks*’ – a much favoured term then – will buy up the holdings of small and marginal farmers. The latter will sink into being landless labourers... Progressive immiserisation of the masses... The Green Revolution will turn red... What happened in fact? Productivity *did* increase. Land *did* become more valuable. So valuable that no one would sell it. . . .

The ‘Dunkel Draft’, the new regime on Intellectual Property Rights, allowing foreign investment in the insurance sector, the much-denounced ‘terminator seeds’... The ‘debate’ on each has followed the identical course.

Bleakness is deduced whichever of the opposites comes to pass. If the West gives aid; ‘It is trying to entangle us in the coils of international capitalism.’ If it does not, “It is heartless, to say nothing of access to its markets, it is denying us even aid.” If the multinationals invest, ‘They are taking over.’ If they do not, ‘But where is the investment?’ If caps for foreign investment are raised, ‘Multinationals will swallow us up.’ When evidence suggests that they are themselves on the run – that these companies are being threatened by newcomers every other day, ‘But all the more reason for them to invade territories in which they can establish themselves more easily.’ If fertiliser subsidies are lowered, ‘This is an anti-farmer Government.’ If they are not, ‘Chemical fertilisers and pesticides are poisoning our land, our rivers, our bodies. The Government is subsidising cancer.’

For years, papers had been writing about the pollution that Delhi Transport Corporation (DTC) buses had been causing. As the Delhi Administration had done little in the matter other than keep asking for time, the Supreme Court eventually ordered that a class of the worst polluters be taken off the road. *The Hindustan Times* story now was, “School children to be affected by SC order”!

Dr. A P J Abdul Kalam was delivering the first lecture in the *Ideas that have worked* series that I had started under the auspices

of the Administrative Reforms Department.³ He had just given a gripping account of what it had been to work under prominent scientists Vikram Sarabhai, Satish Dhawan and Brahmaprakash; of what it had been to participate in projects to build rockets that would carry satellites into space; of what it had been to be present at the launching of those satellites, of being present for Pokharan-II. “So, we have a rocket,” a member of the audience began. “But what has that done for the common man?” Kalam had to justify rocket research by recalling how it had helped develop the Reddy-Kalam stent for heart patients!

Ever so often, the gloom is induced by utter misrepresentation. If you take a twig from the *neem*-tree, you will have to pay royalty to the multinationals, it was said at the height of the propaganda against the ‘Dunkel Draft.’ The reader will recall the pamphlet that was put out over the signatures of the formidable Dattopant Thengdi⁴ denouncing the *Sankhya Vahini* proposal.⁵ Who is Dr. Raj Reddy? it asked – actually he was But the Carnegie Mellon University has little standing in information technology, it declared - in fact, And the clincher, ‘Is the project not a violation of the Indian Telegraph Act?’ A project in the year 2000, a project in a sphere in which a new

³ Dr. Kalam, the then Principal Scientific Advisor to the Government of India, delivered the first lecture on March 11, 2000 in New Delhi. It was organised by the Department of Administrative Reforms and Public Grievances in collaboration with the Civil Services Officers’ Institute (CSOI) and the Government of Andhra Pradesh. See “India Needs Double Digit GDP to Remove Poverty : Dr. Kalam”, <http://pib.nic.in/archieve/lreleng/lvr2000/rmar2000/r11032000.html>

⁴ Thengdi is the chief of Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (BMS), a trade union affiliated to the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh.

⁵ *Sankhya Vahini* was a joint venture project that envisages a high-speed data communication network to serve as India’s high bandwidth Internet backbone. Sankhya Vahini India Limited (SVIL), with an authorised share capital of Rs.1,000 crores, is a collaborative venture between the Department of Telecommunications/Department of Telecom Services (DoT/DTS), some premier educational institutions, the Department of Electronics (DoE), the Ministry of Information Technology (MIT) and the Carnegie Mellon University (CMU) of the United States, through a U.S.-based company called IUNet Inc. The Memorandum of Understanding was signed on October 16, 1998. Dr. V S Arunachalam and Dr. Raj Reddy, both attached to the CMU, are principle designers of the network. See, for instance, “Sankhya Vahini and some questions,” *Frontline*, Chennai, vol. 17, no. 11, May 27 – June 09, 2000. <http://www.flonnet.com/fl1711/17110950.htm>.

product is overtaken within 12 to 18 months, in which entire technologies are overtaken in 24 to 36 months, a project in such an area was being criticised on the ground that it was in violation of a law passed in 1885!

As the controversy built up, I studied the proposal. The case against it was patently a contrivance. I took up the matter with a prominent ideologue of such critiques. "There has been a mistake," he said. "It was thought that this was a project of Pramod Mahajan [Union Minister for Information Technology, Communications and Parliamentary Affairs]. That is why the RSS [Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh] decided that it must not go through." It had turned out that the sponsor of the project had actually been some other minister – indeed, one who was in the very good books of the RSS. But, supposing the *Sankhya Vahini* had in fact been Mahajan's project. Was that a good enough reason to kill it? "In any case, the pamphlet was not written by anyone in the RSS," the person explained. "It was written by an ex-civil servant." But the high personage had lent his name to the specious argumentation. It is precisely because Dattopant Thengdi had lent his name to the critique that it had been so consequential. "I am myself going to write a note to Dattopantji on this pamphlet," the person said. "Send me the points that strike you." *But the controversy killed the project.*

In 1993, Motorola had approached India with a proposal to set up a plant to produce computer chips. They wanted some facilities. We spurned them. They packed their bags and went over to Malaysia. Today, Malaysia is the world's leading exporter of computer chips⁶, and we are importers... Our activists drove out Monsanto, and its experiments on genetically modified cotton.⁷ Today, 40 per cent of China's cotton is produced from those seeds. They have obviated the need for pesticides. Productivity per acre is almost 35-40 per cent higher than the varieties we use, with the result that our textile industry is at an even greater handicap.

⁶ See "Developing SE Asia: Singapore and Malaysia", http://maps.unomaha.edu/Peterson/funda/Notes/Notes_Exam3/MalaysiaSingapore.html.

⁷ "Indian peasants torch crops amid fear of losing home-grown seed", *The Guardian*, London, October 6, 1999.

Such prophecies fulfil themselves. We frighten ourselves about the future. As a result, we are less able to focus on the task at hand. And, so the prophecy comes true. In India, being in the World Trade Organisation (WTO) has become yet another occasion for us to frighten ourselves and to accuse each other of selling the country's interests down the drain. In China, the prospect of joining WTO was converted into a timetable – for implementing reforms.

Respective tasks

It is nobody's case that the Press should not be critical. Criticising a government and pillorying it is most certainly not 'anti-national'. It is the media's job to keep governments on their toes. But, at the same time, it is an error to mistake contrariness for independence. Correspondingly, it is the job of governments to explain the reasons that have led them to a policy or measure. But, that done, it is the duty of governments to go ahead – in the face of criticism if necessary. Waiting for a consensus to emerge will be to wait forever – specially in view of what being out of office has come to mean in India today: that because the person or group is in the Opposition, its job is to denounce, it is to block everything anyone in office proposes to do; even the things that the person was doing when he was in office; in fact, even the things that he is doing where he is in office *today*. In a word, governments must explain, but, having set out the facts and reasons, it is their duty to do what the country requires. They must proceed in the confidence that 10 years later there *will* be a consensus around the new configuration that would have come about because of the measures that are being taken now.

As far as the media are concerned, the point is not that they must support what some government is doing. The point is about *presumption*. The *presumption* that an Indian government just will not be able to handle a situation.

The *presumption* has meant that, for the media, India cannot be in the right – whether on terrorism in Punjab, or in combating the assault on Kashmir, or with regard to the demographic invasion from Bangladesh. The *presumption* that leads commentators to see virtue in someone else doing something and

when India does the same thing – when it even attempts to do same thing – it makes our commentators detect fascism, communalism and evil. Indian liberals are awe struck when they see Muslims go through the postures of *namaz*: ‘What devotion, what surrender,’ they exclaim as ten thousand Muslims in the local Jama Masjid bend and rise in unison. But, when Hindus flock to their temples in thousands, or when thirty million of them gather at the *sangam* for the Kumbh *mela*, the very persons sneer, ‘Look at those ignoramuses, steeped neck deep in superstition. How will you ever get these people to develop?’ When Bill Clinton was not able to get two of his nominees to be appointed as Attorneys General because they had employed an unregistered alien for the briefest of times, that was taken as evidence of the great respect the American system has for law. Here, whenever a government has made some effort – however small – to send Bangladeshis back, a howl has been raised, so great a howl that governments have given up making even an effort to deport illegal immigrants.

As India cannot be right, the *presumption* that everyone who speaks up for the country, everyone who stands up for it, who risks his life for it, also cannot be right. Recall the total fabrications that were put out about ‘atrocities committed by the Army’ in Kashmir – fabrications nailed in the Press Council report, *Crisis and Credibility*.⁸ Recall the way self-serving, backdated letters of a Brigadier were used by the press to put the armed forces in the wrong during the Kargil war.

The *presumption* finally that every development is liable to work against India.

This addiction to the negative is compounded by laziness. *Anyone* can say *anything*. So long as it is negative, it will get him headlines in the media. A natural disaster occurs – an earthquake

⁸ *Crisis and Credibility, Report of the Press Council of India, January and July 1991, Lancer Paper 4* New Delhi: Lancer International, 1991. In December 1990, the Press Council of India (PCI) appointed a Committee to study the role of the press and its functioning in Jammu and Kashmir, as well as the alleged reports of excesses by the armed forces against civilians of the State. The Committee paid a visit to the State and its report was adopted by the PCI in July 1991. The findings indicated that reports of excesses “have been 'grossly exaggerated or invented.'” The Committee consisted of B G Verghese, K Vikram Rao and Jamna Das Akhtar.

in the Kumaon hills or Gujarat, a cyclone tears a region apart in Orissa or Gujarat, and Sonia Gandhi is sure to arrive. And on each occasion, she has the same comment: the government has completely failed to provide adequate relief to the victims. On not a single occasion has she documented her charge. But each time she gets headlines, 'Sonia blasts Government.' Natwar Singh and other spokespersons of the Congress, after the May 1998 atomic tests – condemning the Government one day for betraying the traditions of Buddha, Ashoka and Gandhi, and the next on the ground that it had not yet taken the requisite steps for 'atomic weaponisation': headlines on both days. The drivel of Kapil Sibal and others during the Kargil war...

On December 13, 2001, terrorists entered the premises of Parliament. Guns, grenades, RDX – it was a huge assault. The next day, *The Hindu* carried on its front page, in bold type, the statement of Syed Salahuddin, chief of the Hizb-ul-Mujahideen (HM) from Pakistan: the attack has been engineered by Indian intelligence agencies, the paper reported him saying, so as to pressurise Parliament into passing the anti-terrorist ordinance, and to pressurise the international alliance against terrorism "to bracket the Kashmir freedom struggle with terrorism"! The same day, opposite the edit-page that paper carried a dispatch – again in bold type – from a conspicuous commentator-correspondent: 'Who called in the Army?' he asked; had the "well established procedures" been followed for this "entirely irregular requisitioning of Army units?" he wanted to know. What an occasion for Constitutionalism!

It is as if press persons and others in the media feel that, by printing something negative – even if it be drivel of this kind – they prove that they are independent; that, conversely, were they to say, or even report anything positive they would be damned as having 'sold themselves', as having become *chamchas*. Indeed, so pervasive is this habit that it seems that they are afraid not just that *others* will conclude that they have 'sold out', but that *in their own eyes* they would have done so.

There is thus, first the laziness – anything anyone says is just swallowed and vomited; specially if what that person says casts doubt, specially if he hurls an allegation. Recall the play that Ajit Jogi's calumny got: "Three officers – one in the Prime Minister's

Office, one in the Disinvestment Department, one in my Government – have pocketed Rs. one hundred crore in the [Bharat Aluminium Company] BALCO disinvestment.”⁹ In no country would that kind of calumny, especially when made by that kind of a person, be reproduced – here it became headline news. Where is that calumny today? Actually, we know where it is; “...the facts herein show that a fair, just and equitable procedure has been followed in carrying out this disinvestment,” the Supreme Court has held in its judgement on the BALCO case. “The allegations of lack of transparency or that the decision was taken in a hurry or that there has been an arbitrary exercise of power are without any basis. We strongly deprecate such unfounded averments which have been made by an officer of the State....” But what is the remedy for the immense harm that was done by those who broadcast those allegations – without the slightest examination?

Next, there is the sudden switch. A dacoit is caught; suddenly, he becomes an ‘under-trial’ – till yesterday the Press was full of jeers about the government’s ham-handedness because of which it was not being able to apprehend him; the moment he is caught, the same Press is after the police and jail officials for not respecting his rights.

One day the question is, “But why are you not talking to Pakistan? After all, what is the harm in just talking?” The moment a step is taken to talk, suddenly the question becomes, “You had said you won’t talk to Pakistan so long as cross-border terrorism continues. It has not stopped. Why are you thinking of talking to Musharraf now? In any case, what has come out of your talks in the past?”

⁹ Ajit Jogi, Chief Minister of Chhatisgarh, had alleged that a bribe of Rs 100 crore was paid to the officers in the Bharat Aluminium Company (BALCO) disinvestment case. See “Shourie asks Jogi to come out with proof of corruption charges”, *Daily Excelsior*, Jammu, March 11, 2001. Also see “Jogi says there is massive corruption in Balco deal”, *The Financial Express*, New Delhi, March 19, 2001.

When the hijacked Indian air craft IC-814¹⁰ was in Kandahar, Afghanistan, media were full of the shouting of the relatives of the passengers. This barrage, I can testify from personal knowledge, weighed heavily on the key decision-makers. It was one of the main factors that led them to decide that there was no alternative but to accept the demands of the hijackers and to release the Pakistani terrorists that the hijackers had demanded. The moment the terrorists were released, the same newspapers were pontificating about the ‘abject surrender to terrorism’, they were contrasting the pusillanimity of the Indian government with the example of Israel, they were lecturing the same government they had, by their selective coverage, pressurised with reminders of the policy of the US – ‘No negotiations with terrorists.’

The moment there is some massacre by terrorists, our papers are full of pictures of corpses. But I heard some of the same editors remark with admiration at the way the American media had covered the attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon: ‘Not one gory scene, not one image that could dishearten the people.... Look at the way they are building up Bush. After all, his IQ could not have shot up all of a sudden. They were making fun of him till yesterday, and suddenly he is being made to come across as such a decisive, knowledgeable leader, as one in full control...’

Socialism for the masses. Patriotism for other countries! As in government so in media: there is paralysis by analysis. Recall, China during the Gulf War: it quietly got the post-Tiananmen sanctions lifted; here in India we encoiled ourselves in acrimonious accusations about whether we should give America refuelling facilities. The accusations about offering to assist in the campaign against the Taliban regime ended only because the Taliban collapsed so soon, and so ignominiously. In a word, while other countries get down to doing what their interest requires, we debate the alternatives to death even before we have chosen one of them.

¹⁰ The Indian Airlines flight IC-814 was hijacked from Kathmandu, Nepal on December 24, 1999. The incident culminated with the terrorists-for-hostages swap on December 31, 1999 at Kandahar, Afghanistan.

Two basic factors

Beyond these proximate factors are two. First, by now the notion that a newspaper is 'a product', like soap, the notion that media persons are in the 'infotainment business', not in public service, has indeed triumphed. Superciliousness has become the reigning ideology. Being bothered about the country is to be hysterical. Examining a matter in depth is to be a bore. So, on the one hand, the smart question, and on the other the 'sound-byte' is all.

Every event, every situation – war as much as some development project – is yet another spectator sport. Media do not feel that they have any responsibility at all for helping find a solution: it is satiated when, in its own view, it has punctured any and every proposal that has been put forward by others. And when, on the rare occasion, a 'solution' is urged, it is simplicity itself: 'Advani must go,' 'Fernandes should resign,' 'The Government should...'

But the fundamental cause is deeper. Beneath the presumptions that we have noticed, lies indoctrination of a hundred and fifty years: the notions that we have taken in from the elder Mill, Macaulay, Marx, and the missionaries. Our commentators are hybrids of these forbears. India is not a country, Indians are not a nation. It is a zoo, to recall Girilal Jain's description of their view. There are monkeys in it, zebras, elephants, the whole lot. But each of these is a separate species. When a Vivekananda or a Gandhi looks at the people, what strikes him are the myriad common elements. But when these persons see the very same people, what strikes them on the other hand is what is different! India is not real, they declare, it is but a geographical expression. It was never one country. It was put together only recently – and that too by the British. Not one country? Ever heard of a group of pilgrims being stopped as they crossed from one 'kingdom' into the next one? India is not real, they declare; caste is real, being Hindu or Muslim, being Tamil or Bengali – *that* is what is real.

As India is not one, it is not entitled to defend its position in Kashmir, it has no right to throw out Bangladeshis on the ground that they are 'outsiders'. When the Pakistani government, having

financed, patronised and controlled *madrasas* (seminaries) for decades, at last announces moves to regulate them, that announcement, though just an announcement, becomes proof positive that the government is taking a giant step towards secularism, that it is taking a bold step towards modernising that country, that it is giving up the past and is ready to establish peace with India – and if peace does not come about, that is only because the Indian Government, indeed India itself has not liberated itself from phobias it has conjured up about the past.

This disengagement from our past, from our country, from our people, from our very being, has become so extreme that anything alien is the fashion of choice. And the more alien, the more fashionable. A singer from Pakistan, even when he or she is little above the mediocre; even better, a couple of singers from Pakistan singing ‘Sufi music’, when neither the singers nor their caveman-like braying has the remotest link with Sufis – what a fashion it is to swoon over them! Advocating what in fact is the Pakistani line on an issue – even when that issue is one that concerns our defence forces, even when it concerns our territorial integrity – doing so establishes the commentator’s ‘independence.’ “I am,” a well-known editor said as he met Musharraf at Agra for that breakfast meeting, adding with evident and defiant pride, “In India I am known as a Pakistani agent, and I am proud of that.”

When he was the Pakistani Ambassador in Delhi, Riaz Khokhar was in effect editing three of Delhi's dailies without using newsprint – so easily was he able to get the Pakistani slant into reports and editorial comments on Kashmir and the rest. Having made nationalism a dirty word, having made it synonymous with ‘fascism’, the media has altered its reflexes. Its natural reaction is to strike a pose – and *that* pose which will advertise the fact that it is not ‘fascist’!