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Keynote Address

By

Javed Jabbar
Media and pluralism in South Asia

seminar organized in Kathmandu, Nepal

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by the

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Elements of the keynote address in the inaugural session by
Mr Javed Jabbar,
Chairman,
South Asian Media Association
This paper is predicated on the following premises:

1. that the absence of explicit and comprehensive communication policies in South Asian countries is a reflection of the reluctance of the political parties and the establishment even in multi-party democracies to fully absorb the principles of pluralism and facilitate their application to the media.

2. that the scale and speed of change in media are making many policies obsolete and frameworks redundant and that therefore it is perhaps better that national communication policies and legal frameworks affecting pluralism evolve and formulate and re-formulate themselves continuously, so as to be flexible and pertinent to reality rather than be rigid and irrelevant.

3. that there is a fairly widespread prevalence of the perception in South Asia that the official nation-State structures have failed to be fair to the diversity and decency of the people for the past 46 years, and that official State structures are repressive. The existence of virtually parallel unofficial nation-State systems in these countries may be a partial compensation. The unofficial nation-State manifests itself in forms as different as large-scale free trade through smuggling or a pirated video
tape network operating at the grass-roots level or a substantial volume of unreported and unregulated economic activity. Such phenomena make up for the lack of a meaningful official practice of pluralism by enabling the spectrum of contrasts that exist in societies to express themselves.

4. that there is an inherently conflictual relationship between political stability and pluralism and that in applying the concept of pluralism, nations in South Asia should design policies and frameworks that are indigenous and innovative rather than ostensibly universal and classical.
Pluralism is virtually congenital and intrinsic to human society itself. Divergence is derived from:

i) Identity ii) Articulation iii) Degree of freedom to express identity.

There are at least six basic categories of pluralism.

i) ethnic ii) linguistic iii) religious iv) economic v) political vi) ideological/intellectual.

Yet within each category there are further divergencies. For example, tribes in Arabia 2000 years ago shared the Arabic language yet differed on rituals and mores. In Hinduism, castes set people in separate classes.

Political systems in history have lived well with pluralism. For example, in South Asia, kings from religious minorites have ruled for hundreds of years over majorites of another religion. Adherents and places of worship of diametrically opposed faiths have lived side by side in peace.

However, in the past, free speech in a pluralistic context questioning authority was punished with death.

In the 20th century, two major factors have impinged upon pluralism.

A: Nationalism has engendered, contrived, forced and superimposed a unity over pluralism in order to expel colonialism.

B: Democracy and adult franchise have become global norms which have legitimized free speech about pluralism and reduced the hazardous consequence of death for dissent.

In S. Asia, pluralism must be firmly rooted in singularism, i.e. the indivisibility of the State. Or else there will be disintegration and chaos.

Singularism as a value should not sideline unresolved issues of self determination. Singularism must be based on morality and fairness otherwise States could collapse inwards.

It is pertinent to ponder over whether pluralism is a new western norm being promoted by the idle rich after they have secured their State security to keep the third world off balance. Thus is it a cacophony of discordance or --- could it be a concert, a genuine fusion of elements into a symphony?

Economic justice and advancement tend to homogenize and create new commonalities of interest, diffusing negative pluralist tendencies.
With some of the lowest levels in the world of access to mass media, the South Asian region's predominantly rural and illiterate or semi-literate features mean that the part of mass media that is authentically independent, i.e., the privately owned press, is unable to be truly pluralist in broad as well as a deep sense. There certainly is diversity and range in the Press in South Asia in general in most countries but such variety is limited and fragmented in view of the size and segmentation of the population.

The nation-State structure in South Asia may present an image of homogeneity and may even represent an unspoken yet real consensus amongst tens of millions to live together in a single nation-State system. But this apparent compact between people is just about barely concealed under a singular official identity which conceals the multi-faceted, kaleidoscopic character of each country where dozens of communities with differing, even adversarial relationships barely manage to co-exist, sometimes by the sheer skin of their teeth.

Even in countries in South Asia where multi-party democracies have been sustained for over four decades after the end of colonialism, the numerical preponderance of a particular linguistic, ethnic or religious identity has led to a sup-
pression of articulation by large minorities. In some instances, where such articulation does take place, there is a tokenism to such articulation which fulfills the formality of pluralism but is devoid of authenticity.

Apart from considering pluralism within countries, some consideration needs also to be given to pluralism across frontiers, whether pluralism is a good traveller in the region, to whether the Press and media as a whole accurately reflect the divergent nature of inter-State and inter-nation relations. Regrettably, when the Press and the media operate across borders or transmit on a regional basis, they tend to regress from humane liberalism to crude jingoism espousing a narrowly nationalistic chauvinism while propagating a contrived singularism, making this synonymous with loyalty and patriotism.
Two ironies are evident.

When a country’s Press is undeniably plural as it is in the case of Pakistan, specially in the context of linguistic, ethnic and political plurality, the Press either consciously or inadvertently creates compartments within the communications process by which each reader-group is virtually entrapped in its own communal psychosis: Instead of promoting pluralism across social schisms, the Press reinforces isolation of groups and classes by excessive concentration on the real and imagined fears of its loyal reader-groups, pandering to their paranoia. A "singularism" is fostered in the midst of pluralism!

Access to media is not by itself a guarantee of pluralism. The Soviet Union had some of the highest levels of media access in the world and some of the lowest levels of pluralism. The abundance of media in North America has engendered an introspective narcissism that, for the most part, excludes the pluralism of the planet outside North America.
Theoretically and operationally the State possesses vast discretionary powers to curb, or permit, as the case may be, the expression of pluralism in direct and in oblique yet effective ways. In most countries this is an inevitable adjunct of the State structure that even large and consistent democracies are unwilling to cede, specially in the case of electronic media.

The powers of the State and the Government to curtail or encourage pluralism are not used negatively by countries like Pakistan alone.

In "advanced" industrial democracies there are examples such as in the USA where consent is "manufactured" as Noam Chomsky has well analyzed about how ostensibly free journals and media are actually manipulated so as to project only the majoritarian view on vital issues to the deliberate exclusion of other dissenting views, specially in the mainstream media.

Another example is the fact that the Broadcasting Act in the United Kingdom empowers the Minister responsible to prevent the telecast of any material that, in his opinion, is against the public interest. This power is used wherever, for example, the BBC/ITV networks want to show an interview with an IRA leader. The original voice of the representative is not allowed to be broadcast.
National communication policies and legal frameworks affecting pluralism emerge from conditions where sharp disparities and distortions mark the social landscape. In a country where a particular religion is the very basis for the State, sectarian divisions and feudal systems may prevent peaceful pluralism. In a country where secularism is avowed and feudalism abolished, polarities of caste and persecution of minorities may prevent the practice of pluralism. In a country where literacy is almost as high as European levels and where therefore the expectations may be that tolerance and peaceful co-existence are natural concomitants, there may be a persistence of violence that negates the benefits of the universalization of education.
In such a miasma of tensions and imbalance, in South Asia, it is heartening that the foundation of laws and policies which is the constitution of a country, in virtually every instance, espouses pluralism and tolerance.

The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, the basic document for a country established on the basis of Islam, categorically enshrines foundational principles of equality and non-discrimination in all respects with specific references to non-discrimination on the basis of religion. In its chapter on Principles of Policy and in its articles on fundamental rights the equitable, even-handed dimensions of the State’s attitudinal relationship with all citizens, irrespective of race, sex, creed and language is repeatedly stressed and reinforced.

This emphasis which represents a moral, conceptual guarantee of pluralism is of particular significance because it is part of a country where the overwhelming majority of the people are Muslim. The solemn promise of a plural society encompassing aspects of the original concept of the Pakistani nation-State as visualized by the founder, Quaid-e-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah who, on more than once occasion, while explaining the ethos and the direction of the Pakistan movement, stressed its commitment to tolerance and to re-
spect for all faiths and opinions even as the imperatives were espoused for a separate State for Muslims in South Asia.

As in many countries, ideals defined by the Constitution have remained mirages or become illusions. Laws and policies required to improve conditions so as to narrow the gap between rhetoric and reality have either been inadequate or misdirected while the enforcement of laws has swung from one extreme of harshness to another extreme of ineffective laxity.

At the same time, a disproportionate volume of laws and rules framed by the colonial power has been retained after independence. Originally framed to suppress or discourage the freedom struggle, they have now been diverted and directed at suppressing dissent and divergencies from the mainstream and the majority view.

The country’s encounter with martial law and authoritarianism retarded and delayed the process of rationalizing and rectifying laws, policies, conditions and situations which originally enabled repression so as to replace them with or at least partially improve upon them to encourage the practice of pluralism in society and in the Press.
1988 is a water-shed year in the history of pluralism in the media in Pakistan.

While marking the violent end of the authoritarian rule of a military dictator, two specific events occurred to significantly advance pluralism.

The first event was the repeal of the Press and Publications Ordinance of 1963 which took place in September 1988 with its replacement by the Registration of Printing Presses Ordinance. In place of a blanket law that gave excessive discretionary power to the Government to prevent the launch of new newspapers and magazines and arbitrary powers to raid offices of media and to prohibit publications, there was now introduced a law that significantly reduced discretionary powers and made it abundantly easy and safe for the press to publish in freedom.

The second event was the introduction for the first time on a daily basis of regular and balanced coverage to the views of the Opposition on Government-controlled radio and TV in December 1988. Though this policy lasted only 4 months, it demonstrated that, despite being Government-controlled, electronic media in South Asia could nevertheless be credible, plural and powerfully effective in promoting democratic values.
In recent years in Pakistan, partly as a result of the struggle against martial law in the 1980's and partly as a consequence of the restoration and practice of a multi-party democracy, the ideals of pluralism have been espoused vigorously by:

a. liberal, progressive political parties;

b. Council of Pakistan Newspaper Editors,

c. Human rights bodies;

d. Women's rights groups.

In some cases, ethnic groups and movements have protested at an alleged lack of fair representation in the independent press by using violence against the press as an articulation of their anger, often with grievous and painful consequences.
The elements that help shape national communication policies and legal frameworks with regard to pluralism have a direct formal entity as in the shape of specific legislation which are the outcome of general, indirect trends and forces that characterize a society.

These elements could include the following:

A: Historical and cultural features of a country

i. ethnic composition,
ii. linguistic segmentation,
iii. economic structures, inherited and traditional,
iv. religious identity/ies,
v. levels of tolerance.

B: Specific media-related laws

i. to regulate the Press,
ii. to regulate the electronic media,
iii. to regulate the cinema,
iv. to regulate freedom of expression
C: Specialist functional laws & systems

i. to administer telecommunications,

ii. to optimize literacy, and electricity and the,
    to media.

D: General laws

i. the penal codes that prohibit defamation, incitement to
    violence, hatred;

ii. provisions to prevent threats to the security of the
    State, to law and order;

iii. to prevent blasphemy.

Such factors taken together represent, in de facto terms, a
"national communications policy and legal framework for
pluralism". Often in South Asia there is an absence of
policy and framework exclusively about pluralism.

E: Institutions and organizations

i. Editors Councils, publishers bodies;

ii. other representative bodies concerned with issues of
    free speech;

iii. Human Rights organizations;

There are 5 ways to promote pluralism in media in South Asia:

1. Narrow the gap between the constitutions of South Asian countries which espouse pluralist principles and actual media laws which prevent pluralism eg. Radio & T.V.

2. Frame and enact new, innovative laws to keep pace with rapid technological advancements in media to replace or amend outdated laws inherited from colonial times or laws that are inadequate.

3. Promote regular contact between editors and leaders of indigenous media eg. newspapers of Urdu, Hindi, Nepali, Bengali, etc. to foster regional pluralism.

4. Improve internal professional standards in media and facilitate accountability of the press and media.

5. Ensure increased participation of women in media and in media workshops so as to correct the present gender imbalance in media.