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The Media As Avenues For Conflict Resolution
In Pluralistic Societies

By
Ibad Rashdi
October 31, 1992

"The Media as Avenues for Conflict Resolution in Pluralistic Societies"

by Prof Ibad Rashdi

"Where there is no democracy the editors of those nations should be hanged"

One of the basic functions of mass media is to function as 'free market place of ideas'. It means that the media should be equally accessible to majority and minority viewpoints. While this would be an ideal situation, encompassing the expression of a variety of opinions and viewpoints, it is generally found to be against the reality on the ground. Most often we see that the mass media succumb to the majority viewpoint and the minority viewpoint is rarely allowed to be projected.

In the case of South Asia, expression of minority opinion becomes further difficult as the State control over electronic media projects, and quite brazenly and brutally so, only the majority opinion as the national opinion. Therefore, the credibility of national electronic media is always questionable. Only the print media, where minority and small groups can have their own feeble voices heard, functions as carriers of dissent opinions and thus perform a legitimate function of the mass media.
But, unfortunately, most of the so-called national newspapers in the South Asia are predominantly urban-centred and what is worse, urban-oriented. They are obsessed with majority viewpoints and are indifferent to the minority viewpoints because of vast gulf separating them. However, I must submit that many national newspapers are not solely devoted to majority viewpoints but they are doing as good a job as circumstances would permit them. Several editors are not always machines to their paymasters but often men of conscience, if sometime ill-directed or ill-advised. However, this function is properly formed by regional, or vernacular press. In South Asia, because of tight government control on the bait of advertising revenue the regional press has to give due coverage to the government and majority viewpoints, so as to balance against the national or metropolitan press. In fact it is regional (vernacular) press which comes closer to the concept of free market place of ideas.

The case of Sindhi Press in Pakistan is thus of great interest from this standpoint. Historically, speaking it was Sindhi Press which moved Sindhi masses and politician to opt for Pakistan, thus giving practical shape to a dream.
Sindhi press was in the vanguard of freedom movement and functioned as a crusading agent against the British overlords.

Sindhi Press has played a significant role in the awakening of Sindhi masses. In fact the history of freedom movement and of the press in Sindh are inextricably woven with each other. During the dark years of martial laws and one-unit the Sindhi journalists fully supported the masses and faced trials at kangaroo courts, intimidation, imprisonment, whipping and what not.

The foregoing brief introduction of Sindhi Press is meant to illustrate that it does function within the parameters of the nation-state interests and ethos. It accommodates the viewpoint of the majority of Pakistan, but at the same time it tries to project the genuine feelings and grievances of the Sindhis.

What major issues or problems has the Sindhi Press highlighted over the years? If the projection of these issues had been left out to English and Urdu press which represents the majority viewpoints the Sindhi interests would have suffered a set-back. With the espousal of issues like One-Unit, Kalabagh Dam, human rights violation, census, etc. The Sindhi press has highlighted the grave danger to
the interests of Sindhis and tried to strike a balance between Sindhi interests and interests of other communities in Pakistan.

Does this situation illustrate the case of media as a conflict resolving institution.

I think, viable regional press does act as a counterweight to the national press and help to balance public opinion on a given issue. Thus multiplicity of languages and their press should not be viewed as an impediment to the growth of democratic institutions. But as a necessary factor in development of real federalism.

The problem of centre-provinces relationship is crucial one to the future of democratic South Asia. Unless institutions like regional (vernacular) press are perceived to be contributing to national viability and recognized as such in terms of their genuine needs and facilities, the mechanisms of conflict resolving will receive a severe blow.