<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>The role of the media in a national crisis.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Author(s)</td>
<td>Singh, S Nihal.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>1991</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>URL</td>
<td><a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10220/2684">http://hdl.handle.net/10220/2684</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rights</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Role Of The Media In A National Crisis

By

S Nihal Singh
THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA IN A NATIONAL CRISIS

BY S. NIHAL SINGH

I

First, one must define the setting of the media in Asia. The degrees of freedom for the media vary from country to country. In India, for instance, the print media are relatively free while the electronic media are government-controlled and run. And India's case is not unique in this respect. But media in other Asian countries are by no means free or are, in some cases, less free than in India.

I shall confine myself to the print media in India because an analysis of the role of the media in a national crisis can have little meaning, in terms of the journalist's tasks and responsibilities, if they are subjected, partially or wholly, to official control. For instance, the role of the electronic media in India in reporting crises would run into altogether different problems in which the professional's responsibilities would be greatly circumscribed.

Beyond these distinctions lie a number of similarities. These are countries that have been ruled by colonial powers, overtly or covertly, until the end of the last World War. They are undergoing a process of economic and political transformation in often painful circumstances even as their leaderships strive to harness people's energies by building up a new nationalism.

Problems abound in the economic field in bringing the benefits of freedom to the poor and the deprived. In the political arena, inter-religious conflict or the lure of subnationalism create serious problems. Often, national consensus breaks down as problems become vitiated and more complex.

In the independence movements, journalists in these countries faced few ethical or moral problems. The bulk of them identified itself with the freedom fighters, popular leaders in their own right. Most journalists, therefore, felt that they were performing their tasks for the higher goal of independence because there can be no freedom of the media in a slave nation.

The legacy of those years has spilled over into the independent states of Asia. Although it is waning, there are
fields, particularly in foreign policy, where there is still a tendency among journalists to identify themselves uncritically with the attitudes and postures of the authorities.

II

I shall illustrate the problems, dilemmas and pitfalls of reporting crises by taking three Indian examples.

The Indian subcontinent was partitioned on the basis of religion and the Muslims formed their separate state of Pakistan. The painful process of partition was accompanied by much bloodshed and the shifting of populations from one new nation to another.

The leaders of the Indian National Congress, which provided the leadership for the independence movement, continued to subscribe to the secular creed. But the wounds of the partition and the level of animosities it raised on both sides meant that India has been subject to a rash of Hindu-Muslim riots which keep erupting in different parts of the country.

An effort to challenge the secularism of the Congress propounded by Jawaharlal Nehru was made in those early years of independence, and it was no coincidence that Mahatma Gandhi was assassinated by a Hindu fanatic. But Nehru's own and his party's prestige was such that secularism became the accepted goal of Indian polity.

In recent years, however, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the new incarnation of the old Hindu right-wing Jan Sangh, has reopened the debate on secularism by seeking to build a new nationalism around the concept of a Hindu state. The BJP's tactic was, in part, determined by a world trend towards religiosity--witness the Islamic revolution in Iran--a more overt Islamisation of Pakistan under the Zia-ul-Haq regime and its inevitable backlash in India and the decline and gradual disintegration of the Congress, the mother party.

In part, the more aggressive adoption of the Hindu state theme by the BJP was determined by its leadership's assessment that it could be the one route to power in New Delhi. Thus far, with a percentage of roughly 11 per cent votes, it has been able to rule in only some states. But the defeat of the Congress in the 1989 elections--only for the second time in four decades--saw a phenomenal rise of BJP seats in the Lower House from 2 to 86, partly because of the opposition parties' success in forging an anti-Congress coalition.
The details of the fall-out between the BJP and the National Front government of Vishwanath Pratap Singh need not detain us here. The essential point is that the BJP saw a bonanza in a dispute dormant but simmering for long over the Babri Masjid at Ayodhya in U.P. The mosque, it was suggested, had been built some four centuries earlier by Babar after he had demolished a temple. It was the demand of the BJP and allied Hindu organisations that the mosque be demolished and the temple built.

The Ayodhya controversy had harmed the prospects of the Congress in the 1989 elections because it prevaricated and sought to please both sides and ended up annoying both. Feeling that the BJP was being marginalised by V.P. Singh, the then party president, L.K. Advani, hit upon the idea of undertaking a car journey across the breadth of the country to Ayodhya. His lead car, in fact a van, was dressed up as a chariot and the strident Hindu theme was supplemented by the BJP election symbol, the lotus.

Advani was ultimately arrested, the BJP withdrew its support to the V.P. Singh government and it fell. But this religious-political Odyssey had a bloody ending in a confrontation between frenzied volunteers of the BJP and allied organisations and the authorities at Ayodhya. In two rounds of confrontation, several of the volunteers were killed as they tried to storm the mosque.

Here then was a national crisis, with passions roused to fever pitch over an issue that had a deep and painful past and a disturbing present in the form of recurring Hindu-Muslim riots. How did the press report the crisis?

We must distinguish between the roles played by the major metropolitan press and newspapers published in Hindi and Urdu languages. Taking the latter first, they were, as a rule, totally partisan for the Hindu and Muslim causes respectively as Advani's cavalcade of cars and vans wound its way across India and the confrontation between the pro-temple volunteers and the authorities at Ayodhya.

Much of the reporting on either side of the Hindu-Muslim divide was tendentious, some of it highly exaggerated, and it seemed that protagonists on both sides were only too eager to fan the flames of communal fire. Some of these erring newspapers later won the rebuke of the Press Council of India.

The bulk of the major newspapers published in the English language behaved responsibly although in some instances the perception of the reporters seemed to be coloured to an extent by their religion. But reporters on the spot faced another kind of problem: the authorities were seeking to
spread disinformation in an effort to calm communal passions.

The problem was that some of the pro-temple volunteers succeeded in climbing on top of the domes of the Babri mosque and damaged them. The damage was mercifully minor, but official sources were suggesting at the time that the police and paramilitary forces had succeeded in preventing the frenzied masses of volunteers from getting near the mosque.

But by and large, the metropolitan press published in the English language went about its task of trying to present a reasonably fair picture, with most newspapers plastering their front pages with photographs of pro-temple volunteers atop the mosque.

III

Take Example Two.

In acknowledgement of the fact that positive discrimination needed to be exercised in favour of the most underprivileged in Indian society, the framers of the Constitution decreed that a temporary dispensation should be made to reserve jobs and give other benefits to what are called the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. The reservations of jobs and placements in universities on the basis of caste had been prevailing in the southern states in varying degrees for some time. It was, in part, a revolt against the highest Brahmin caste; in part, it was the assertion of power of the lower castes on the strength of their numbers.

Over the decades, the constitutional reservation for the SCs and STs became an almost permanent feature as successive Congress governments felt it expedient to continue the reservations. In political terms, they constituted useful vote banks, and the more affluent and influential of the SC and ST families became a new aristocracy among the underprivileged.

In 1977, the first time a non-Congress government came to power at the Centre, it appointed a commission to go into the question of reserving jobs, places in universities and other benefits for the underprivileged. But by the time the report was submitted and could be considered, the Congress was back in power, and successive Congress governments thought it wise to let the report gather dust, in view of the potentially explosive nature of the problem.

Several parties, including the Janata Dal of V.P. Singh which was the nucleus of the National Front, routinely paid
obeisance to the Mandal report, as it came to be known after the name of the commission chairman. No party felt it wise to tackle the subject head-on because of the passions the caste issue raises. Some of the state governments in the North, it is true, had made ad hoc reservations for certain castes.

V.P. Singh's short 11-month reign as Prime Minister was beset with intra-party struggles and muscle-flexing by his deputy, Devi Lal, the acknowledged leader of the Jat peasants in the northern belt. Tensions between V.P. Singh and Devi Lal finally came to a head and the latter announced the holding of a peasants' rally in the capital as a show of strength.

V.P. Singh panicked and made the surprise announcement that he was implementing part of the Mandal report by reserving 27 per cent of jobs for the lower castes in the government and public enterprises. It was a tactical ploy for V.P. Singh to protect his political flank in the face of the challenge posed by Devi Lal. But all hell broke loose.

There were large-scale protests in many parts of North India, with students in the forefront. And then one witnessed the tragic phenomenon of dozens of students immolate themselves. Jobs, particularly in government outfits, are prized commodities in India as in other developing countries, and the sudden announcement of shutting off a percentage of jobs seemed to many students the closing of the limited options for employment they had.

V.P. Singh was surprised by the scale and intensity of the protests his decision provoked. He tried to limit the damage by suggesting that the reservations would apply only to central government undertakings; that it would be open to the states not to implement them. Such temporising did not help. A mass hysteria seemed to have overtaken the student world, and the doleful news of new immolation attempts continued to pour in.

How did the press report this phenomenon? By and large, the newspapers were plastered with photographs and reports of immolations and students' protests. Editorially, most newspapers berated V.P. Singh for what many considered a cynical game of politics. Newspapers in the South, on the other hand, were less emotional, used as they were to the phenomenon of reservations, in some cases for more than half a century.

Press coverage in the major newspapers invited two kinds of criticism. Groups of academics and concerned citizens felt that the press was unwittingly inciting the students to commit immolation by the headline coverage it was giving to the story. The second group consisted largely of leftists
who said that the reaction of the major newspapers was largely determined by the fact that senior staff men on them were almost entirely of the upper castes.

Two professional points were raised here. One was the familiar charge against the free press around the world that it was helping bad and disruptive forces by glorifying the wrongdoers or the misled. The other concerned the somewhat unique Indian problem of the hold of caste on people's sensibilities.

The first charge raises larger issues, but in relation to the second, there could have been an element of truth in the fact that much of the critical reporting and comment came to be written by persons belonging to the higher castes with an empathy for the feelings of those protesting against V.P. Singh's action. Equally, any dispassionate analysis of the former Prime Minister's action would suggest that it was a cynical move with an eye on the intra-party problems he was facing.

The Mandal report was arbitrary and somewhat unscientific in deciding upon the lower castes to be benefited. And in view of the nature of the issue, it was incumbent on the leadership to prepare the political ground for it if V.P. Singh was really convinced that that was the way to bring about social equity.

IV

Now let us take Example Three.

India, together with much of the world, was hoping that the Gulf crisis would not culminate in a war. Even before war broke out, the weak minority government of Vishwanath Pratap Singh was faced with several dilemmas.

India has had traditionally close relations with Iraq and New Delhi appreciated Baghdad's approach to such Indo-Pakistani disputes as Kashmir as also its generally secular line in a region that increasingly looked at issues through Islamic glasses.

There were strong economic reasons as well for the Indo-Iraqi relationship. India had been undertaking a large number of projects in Iraq while Kuwait provided employment to a great number of Indians. And the two countries together were responsible for 40 per cent of India's oil imports; there was a three-cornered deal with Iraq under which it supplied India with 5 million tons a year in a swap with the Soviet Union. In addition, any sharp increase in the price of oil would adversely affect India and strain its hard
These problems, taken together, seemed to have overwhelmed the V.P. Singh government. It concentrated its attention on the Indians in Kuwait and Iraq while mildly criticising Iraq for invading Kuwait. The then External Affairs Minister, I.K. Gujral, went to Iraq and Iraqi-occupied Kuwait in his effort to get most of the 170,000 Indians in Kuwait out. There were, besides, about 10,000 Indians in Iraq.

The Gulf crisis, and later the war, became a domestic political issue because, in view of India's Muslim population of around 100 million, and the inevitable early elections to come, the Muslim vote became an important factor. The V.P. Singh government, meanwhile, fell and was replaced by Chandra Shekhar's miniscule faction of the Janata Dal on the strength of the support of the Congress, which however did not join the government.

Generally, Indian sympathies were with Iraq because of the traditionally close relations with that country and the popular view of the United States as a hegemonic power out to enforce its writ on the world. In the case of the Muslim population, it was overwhelmingly for Iraq's Saddam Hussein, in view of his description of the struggle as one between Islam and the Satan United States. And Saddam in addition threw the evocative Palestinian issue into the pot.

The great majority of Indians who wanted to leave Iraq and Kuwait was taken out in a massive Indian airlift operation that cost the government a pretty penny. The Chandra Shekhar government adopted a careful policy approach to the Gulf crisis and the war, bearing in mind the country's interests.

But as the air war over Iraq and Kuwait began, news leaked out that fleets of American warplanes were regularly being refuelled at Indian airports. The Iraqis protested, and it created a domestic storm. Apart from the expected opposition of the communists, the National Front of V.P. Singh jumped into the fray. But above all it was Rajiv Gandhi and the Congress who became the most vociferous opponents of the government on the refuelling issue.

Chandra Shekhar was painfully conscious of the fact that his government was entirely dependent upon the Congress for its survival. But as the decibel level of the Congress campaign rose, stopping just short of threatening to bring down the government, Chandra Shekhar stood his ground for a considerable time. In the end he conceded that he would stop the refuelling of American warplanes if public opinion was overwhelmingly against it. The refuelling came to an end just before the Parliament session was to meet; in fact, the United States made Chandra Shekhar's job a little easier by
offering to divert the planes elsewhere.

The level of Rajiv Gandhi's rhetoric against the United States, in particular for allegedly not giving peace a chance, was somewhat surprising, given his contribution to improving New Delhi's relations with Washington during his five years as Prime Minister. For their part, Americans did not take kindly to Gandhi's newly-expressed animosity towards the United States, whatever his motivation.

The reason for Gandhi's behaviour was no mystery. Muslim voters, the traditional supporters of the Congress, had become alienated from the party over the years, particularly after Rajiv Gandhi's vain attempt to please both Hindus and Muslims on the Ayodhya controversy had ended in a fiasco just before the 1989 elections. And now, with early elections on the horizon, he felt that he would use the Gulf crisis to win back the favour of the Muslim constituency.

There was a second reason. Gandhi thought that by berating the United States, he could woo the communists and place a hurdle in their alignment with the National Front in the approaching election.

How did the press react to it? By and large, it reflected the general Indian sympathy for Iraq and latent suspicions of the United States. The Urdu press, reflecting Muslim opinion, lined itself entirely on Saddam's side. Other newspapers showed various degrees of enthusiasm for the Iraqi view while acknowledging the fact, often in an undertone, that the Iraqi invasion and occupation of Kuwait were entirely wrong.

Among the major English-language newspapers, the Indian Express stood apart in refusing to be swayed by popular sentiment. Other newspapers showed hostility to Americans' aims. But the surprise was the totally emotional approach adopted by The Times of India to the Gulf war. It went overboard in a front-page editorial headlined "Pax Americana", and a series of biting articles on the United States' alleged hegemonic designs on the region and the world made their appearance in quick succession.

Significantly, only two newspapers, The Times of India and The Hindustan Times, thought it fit to send men to Iraq to wait out the United Nations-imposed January 15 deadline in Baghdad. (I was commissioned by The Hindustan Times to go to Baghdad and spent four nights in hotel bomb shelters at the beginning of the war until I was thrown out, together with the international press.)

Although Indian newspapers carry more foreign news than they used to, they are generally chary of sending their men to the world's trouble spots because of the expense involved.
Thus we saw the sad spectacle of Gulf developments taking several pages of major newspapers, but they contained either agency copy or pieces lifted from major Western newspapers by arrangement.

The Gulf crisis was to prove yet again that even major Indian newspapers had not got out of the habit of adopting an emotional approach to a question concerning the United States—the only super power, as some would say. There were few attempts at rational analysis and the kind of role the United States can play in the future, given the birth of the economic super powers, Germany and Japan, and the American compulsion to pass the hat around for more than $50 billion to enable it to fight a brief war.

What lessons do we draw from the behaviour of the Indian press in coping with national crises, as illustrated in the three above examples?

Although the Indian press often draws a flattering picture of itself in the amount of freedom it enjoys and the kind of criticism it often aims at the authorities, it suffers from many inadequacies. Some of these inadequacies flow from the hangover of the colonial legacy and would apply in varying degrees to other Asian countries. But others are peculiar to the Indian situation.

The press cannot be an island unto itself and must reflect the mores of the society it lives and functions in. Thus caste and religious affiliations still exercise a powerful influence on journalists as on other members of society. In the field of foreign policy, the tendency remains uncritically to accept the government line and be swayed by the emotional and ideological approaches of a bygone era.

These problems have been exacerbated by a phenomenon of the last 15 years. A boom in magazine publication, coupled with modern printing technology, has made publishing a somewhat glamorous and often profitable enterprise. Thus any number of bright young men and women are attracted to newspapers and magazines. They often learn on the job, and since the brighter ones are in great demand, they are inclined to move up fast in their parent or another publication.

These new journalists have not had sufficient grounding or training in the rigours of journalism. With newspapers and magazines being increasingly generous in giving personal bylines—unlike in the tradition-bound old days—the young become stars almost overnight.
There is thus less of an attempt among journalists to apply the lessons they would have learnt in a good newspaper or journalism school in their long years of apprenticeship in the face of national crises. Accuracy in reporting has become the exception, rather than the rule, in Indian newspapers. Nor have newspapers and magazines distinguished themselves lately for trying to be scrupulously fair in reporting both sides of a story.

As socio-economic tensions rise and events lead to a national crisis, journalists today tend to be sucked in more easily as participants, rather than non-partisan observers, in the emerging drama.

In foreign reporting, the fault would seem to lie more with newspaper managements, rather than journalists. Even the most affluent newspapers, for instance, fight shy of posting reporters in major world capitals or sending them to trouble spots to give their readers first-hand accounts.

In fact, the amount of money an Indian newspaper spends on news gathering would, in most instances, amount to a minute fraction of what their counterparts in the West would spend. Two of the most important world capitals, from India's point of view, are Moscow and Beijing. But no mainstream newspaper has thought it fit to post full-time staff men in these capitals. It is, of course, cheaper to rely on news agency copy or use Western newspaper reports.

The picture I have painted may look unduly harsh against the background of the reputation of the Indian press. We have some good and trenchant writing; the accuracy of The Hindu's reporting is worthy of note; and there are magazines like India Today which dare to send reporters to trouble spots, whatever the expense involved, although the magazine tends to be Indo-centric.

But in discussing and analysing the role of the media in a national crisis, we must look at the warts. Only thus can we be aware of the pitfalls and seek to correct our failings. And this exercise may be of some value to Indian journalists' counterparts in other Asian countries.