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<th>Communication ethics in South Asia: social and cultural dimensions.</th>
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Paper No. 8
The last week of the holy month of Ramadan this year witnessed the massacre of about 20 worshippers in a Shia Mosque in Karachi. While the funeral arrangements were in progress, a section of the agitated mob thronged the offices of daily Nawa-i-Waqt (and The Nation), destroyed office furniture and fittings, manhandled the employees and finally set the premises to fire. Many of the employees suffered injuries and mental shock.

The attack on the Press is not an unusual event in the scenario which has evolved during the last 15 years or so, marked by proliferation of smuggled arms from Afghanistan, political turmoil, ethnic violence and the emergence of drug mafia. In this particular case the Nawa-i-Waqt Group was targeted not because it had taken any partisan line in the sectarian problem. However, the Group represents major opposition viewpoint in the country and, according to some observers, the incident may have been initiated at the government's behest.

The attack has been vehemently condemned by eminent political leaders of both sides including the Prime Minister Ms. Benazir Bhutto and Mr. Nawaz Sharif, Leader of the Opposition (and President of Pakistan Muslim League) as well as by media organizations all over the country. The event symbolizes the environment in which the media,
specially the Press has to function. It is symbolic of the political development of the country which does not readily admit free functioning of the media.

The situation in Pakistan does have certain unique features but, in general, the entire sub-continent is faced with identical problems of political development. The legacy of the British rule has been perceived and practiced in various degrees in the countries of South Asia. In the case of Pakistan, the British rule lasted hardly a century so the British institutions and traditions have not been able to gain deep roots in its culture.

Beginning with the problems of State structure and consolidation the country continues to be plagued by political instability, vendetta and victimization, lack of party organization, loyalty and administration, degradation and breakdown of law and order. Authoritarian and monopolistic tendencies mark the emergence of a participatory politics, accentuating and sustaining ethnic strife and separatist inclinations of certain communities. The situation speaks of the absence of ethics of good governance.

While the political situation in Pakistan is indeed volatile and depressing, the circumstances in other countries of the region are also not too promising. They are also faced with varying degrees of political instability, separatist movements, ethnic and sectarian violence, breakdown of law and order and infringement of human rights. Such a situation promotes increasing state control and manipulation of national affairs and institutions including the mass media. As a result formulation and practice of a Code of Ethics, meant for normal situations becomes a pious wish.
Political independence from Britain also fanned the movements for cultural renaissance and religious revivalism all over South Asia causing severe setback to the evolution of national firmament. Visions of past glory are giving rise to the emergence of militant sects and groups which are unwilling to practice tolerance and accommodation. Political elites find it expedient to appeal to religious emotions and exploit sectarian feelings with the result that outbreak of communal violence has become a common occurrence. Many foreign countries and groups have also tried to fish in troubled waters and encourage and sponsor one religious sect / group or the other to serve their political interests.

South Asia, in addition to being citadel of three great religions of the world -- Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam -- also has a large number of followers of Christianity, Sikhism, Zoroastrianism and other religious denominations. Ideally, all governments in the region should have promoted the sublime spiritual values underlining mutual tolerance and accommodation, respect for humanity and cooperation for collective good. Unfortunately, such a polity has been missing and the rage for religious excluvism and confrontation continues unabated.

It is noteworthy that mass media, in the public as well as private sector, have been freely used in the propagation of religious ideologies, some times even for promoting religious fanaticism and intolerance. Attempts at inter-faith understanding and accord have been very rare. No doubt even religious dialogue can take place in an environment of free expression and exchange of ideas. There is little evidence, in the South Asian setting, that any religious sect or grouping is prepared to allow others to freely propagate and practice their creed and beliefs.
One noteworthy development by General Zia-ul-Haq was to introduce Shariat (religious) Courts which were charged with the responsibility of scanning the country's laws to determine whether they were in consonance with the dictates of Islam and to declare null and void any law or its parts if determined un-Islamic by the Court. In 1988, the Federal Shariat Court acting on a reference regarding some provisions of the Press and Publications Ordinance held several sections to be repugnant to Islam and asked the government to accordingly amend the Ordinance within six months. As a result, the revised Registration of the Printing Presses and Publications Ordinance (RPPPO) was promulgated to replace the old Ordinance. The RPPPO understandably deprived the government of many arbitrary powers and facilitated the starting of a new publication almost without intervention from the government. Consequently, there has been a flood of newspapers and periodicals in Pakistan enjoying unbridled freedom hitherto unknown. Here is a case where reference to religious injunctions was instrumental in extending horizons of freedom.

However, the followers of Islamic ideology of journalism feel that the Western concepts of democracy and media freedom are not in accordance with the teachings of Islam asserting that the concepts of freedom and responsibility in Islam are different than those generally understood in the West. They emphasize the values of truth and accuracy, fair play and impartiality and integrity of source (journalist). One particular point stressed by writers on Islamic approach to communication requires the reporter not to publish any story or article unless and until its veracity is established. Adherence to this particular requirement would render reporting in Pakistan colourless and almost impossible because there is hardly time
available to the reporter to wait for access to news story
and its verification from other independent sources.

As for economic development, South Asia continues to be
one of the poorest regions of the world with more than
one-third of its populace living below the poverty line.
Governments of the region do claim substantial economic
progress in statistical terms but the region lags behind
other parts of Asia and the developing world, barring
Africa. Ever increasing defence budgets, population
explosion and frequent breach of economic peace have
marred the march toward fast development of the economy
of the region. SAARC, established to promote economic
and social cooperation and development in the region, has
proved to be a non-starter. Chronic disputes between
various countries have often led to military adventurism
thus forestalling the advent of mutual cooperation and
inter-dependence. The situation in Afghanistan, Kashmir
and Sri Lanka epitomizes the inter-play of all these factors.

In the above socio-cultural context, the development of
mass media has also experienced many viscititudes.
Political development, economic progress, urban
expansion and mass literacy -- pre-requisites for speedy
expansion of mass communication -- have moved rather
slowly, the penny Press still seems far away for South
Asia. Excepting a few, daily newspapers can hardly claim
circulation of over one hundred thousand. The two
parallel streams of elite and sober English Press and the
popular and sensational language Press continue to cater to
their respective audiences; many a time causing clash
between the perceptions of the readers of the two media.

Similarly, radio and TV continue to be state monopoly.
Their credibility, poor as always in no way contributes to
the nurturing of public opinion along healthy lines.
Despite this lop-sided development, the question of media ethics has received attention of the government and media professionals. The government action is embodied in the corpus of law relating to the newspapers, printing presses, telecommunications, postal services, copyright, liable, advertising and the service conditions of media personnel, etc. On the other hand, professional organizations of mass media such as publishers societies, editors councils, unions of working journalists and Press workers represented by voluntary bodies have from time to time endeavoured to evolve their own codes of ethics.

While the government-controlled media specially radio and television establishments do claim to have their own codes of conduct, they are often found wanting in living up to the spirit of their implementation. Mass media in the private sector especially the newspapers and magazines have their own codes but their violation is very rarely taken note of. Evolution and adoption of a single code for all media still remains an ideal; in any case self policing by the media is the cardinal principle of all pursuits leading to this goal and any assignment of a special role to the government is resisted.

Press Code of Ethics:

Negotiations between the government and media organizations, especially newspaper publishers and editors, have been held during the recent past on the adoption of an agreed Press Code of Ethics which should be applicable both to the government-controlled media (radio, television and National Press Trust newspapers) and the independent media. One of such drafts presented by the Council of Newspapers Editors of Pakistan is being circulated. Also, draft of an Information Act is being presented.