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<th>Facilitating Asian media in promoting a culture of peace: the Pakistani perspective.</th>
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Facilitating Asian media in promoting a culture of peace: the Pakistani perspective.

Ghazi Salahuddin

Before we set down to analyze the role of the Pakistani media in reporting about peace and promoting the culture of peace, it should be useful to look at the nature of the media itself and try to understand its interface with the state of the Pakistani society. This should provide us with the necessary backdrop against which we may explore the issues that are relevant to our discourse in this symposium.

In the first place, the role as well as the reach of the media in Pakistan is conditioned by the low levels of literacy. This has not only restricted the circulation and impact of the print media but, as would be expected, it has also inhibited a proper appreciation of the major issues at the popular level. It has almost subverted the scope for an informed debate on specific causes of conflict in society. An additional barrier is raised by poor reading habits and a paucity of research and discussion in the country’s institutions of higher learning. As a working journalist in the print media, I have constantly agonized over the fact that the circulation of our newspapers is very small, even in relation to our literacy levels. At one level, this situation is further complicated by the different voices in which the newspapers in the English language and those in the indigenous languages speak. At another, the electronic media in Pakistan, that is television and radio, is under direct control of the government. This remains so even after the overwhelming invasion of satellite television and the internet has inundated our lives.

I would like to dwell a bit on the dualism that exists in the print media. This situation may not be unfamiliar to some other Asian societies or more specifically the South Asian societies. English is the language of empowerment in Pakistan and is retained as the official language. It naturally serves as a bridge to modern ideas. Hence, the English language press is more liberal in its approach towards social issues. It also has a professional edge over the Urdu press, Urdu being our national language. There are regional languages but only Sindhi has a viable print media. Now, the English newspapers, read by the intelligentsia and the decision-makers, have a very limited circulation. The largely circulated Urdu newspapers, however, cater to a different readership and since the use of English has an elitist bias, the non-English community tends to be de-intellectualized. Consequently, the Urdu press has acquired features which are associated with the tabloids in, for example, Britain and other western countries. It generally advocates conservative and religious, right-wing sentiments. You would find some intimations of this dissension in the country report presented by Prof. Nisar Ahmed Zuberi.

We should also remember that the press in Pakistan was born with the freedom movement launched during the days of the British rule in the subcontinent. But that
was a partisan struggle and it is now a congenital weakness of the media that it
gives too much prominence to political statements and the hard news is often not
projected in a proper manner. This is also a reflection of the poor standards of
professionalism. Because circulations are not large and competition not intense,
there is very little compulsion for newspapers to explore new territories. One
measure of this relative loss of interest in search for excellence is that many
revolutionary developments in the region were reported in the national media
through western news agency dispatches. Because of its proximity to the arena of
action and its deep understanding of the situation on the ground, Pakistan would be
expected to explain to the world such historic events as the revolution in Iran and
the civil war in Afghanistan. But this did not happen and the Pakistani media did
not go out of its way to send its newsmen to do an exclusive coverage. Many
Pakistanis who were on the scene were reporting for foreign agencies, publications
or networks. Another measure of the professional deficiencies of the media is that
there is yet no institutionally authorized code of conduct for the media and it was
only on November 30, 2000, barely four days ago, that Pakistan’s publishers,
editors and the Information Ministry officials agreed on a draft for the establishment
of a Press Council. It would still take some time to provide an easy recourse to
those who may have some complaints against the press.

Without any doubt, the electronic media plays the most dominant role in society and
it is controlled by the government. Even when a private channel was allowed in
recent years, it was not permitted to broadcast news or current affairs programmes
and the entertainment and educational presentations were to be censored. When the
present government was formed after the coup of October 12, 1999, Chief
Executive General Pervez Musharraf expressed his resolve to allow the press
complete freedom and said that he would welcome the establishment of private
television and radio channels. A new law to govern the establishment of such
channels has been drafted but has not so far been enforced.

It might seem a little odd to an outside observer, given the saga of military
interventions and the waywardness of elected politicians in Pakistan, that the print
media at this time is almost totally free and under no ostensible pressure from the
government. But there is a historical perspective to this freedom. Newspapers had
waged a sustained struggle for this freedom during the previous military rule of
General Zia-ul-Haq, who was at the helm for about a decade, until 1988. It would
be very difficult for any administration to roll back this hard-earned and
passionately guarded freedom. However, the rulers have repeatedly expressed their
disapproval of the manner in which the newspapers are seen to report and comment
on national events.

One may have some serious doubts about the uses of the freedom that newspapers
enjoy in Pakistan when the electronic media is under direct control of the
government. It is truly ironic that the same authorities who demand credit for
allowing the newspapers to operate in an unfettered environment have placed very
stringent restrictions on the coverage of the electronic media. The country report has underlined the selectivity of the news that is broadcast, particularly in the context of social conflicts and violence. Views that are opposed to the ruling ideas are not allowed to be aired. There is no sense of a legitimate debate on some very vital issues of national importance. This has been the same during successive regimes and the broadcast media did not have any credibility even during our democratic dispensation. Likewise, the government has traditionally acted in a very arbitrary fashion when it comes to allowing free debate even on the campuses of the public universities. This would be one of the many reasons why the culture of a rational debate has not taken roots in Pakistan, which is a very significant point in the present discussion.

At this point, we may reflect a bit on the state of the Pakistani society. An almost antagonistic contradiction has for some time been building up between what may be described as modern and liberal elements and the religious and militant forces. Incidentally, the national security policies as defined by the ruling elite have a direct bearing on this division. Because of Pakistan’s stance on the Kashmir dispute and its relations with India and also because of the role that Pakistan has played in Afghanistan and the emergence of the Taliban, there is a perception that the growth of extremism in the country is officially sponsored. We talk a lot about the threat of the Talibanisation of Pakistan. This threat has also galvanized the social activists and it is becoming clear that the destiny of Pakistan would depend on the outcome of this struggle.

We must recognize the media’s limitations in being able to report this struggle in an objective manner and to enlighten the public opinion on the issues that are involved. With the electronic media out of the game, the positive role that the print media could play has been undermined by the polarization between the English and the Urdu newspapers. In addition, the overall social environment is detrimental to a forceful advocacy on behalf of an enlightened and pluralistic stance. A high degree of intolerance permeates the entire society. It would be instructive to mention here the three important books that have chronicled the history of the media in Pakistan, the focus obviously being on the print media. These books were written by Zamir Niazi, who is himself a known peace activist and has diligently pursued media issues. The first book, published in the eighties, was titled: “Press in Chains” and it recorded all the attempts made by the establishment to control the media since the birth of the nation in 1947. His second book was “Press in Siege” and it underlined the threat to press freedom from organized and armed groups of ethnic, religious-sectarian and regional orientations. Coming from Karachi, I can recall the dark days of early nineties when it was simply not possible to take on certain groups. Another book by the same writer was titled “The Web of Censorship” and it recorded a dark period during the Martial Law of General Zia-ul-Haq when pre-publication censorship was imposed in Pakistan. It has collected all the advices that were issued during that period and that makes a very interesting reading.
What is relevant here is to portray the environment in which the media has evolved in Pakistan. One impact of the harsh measures that were adopted during the military regime of the eighties was that professionalism suffered and many sections of the media were, in a sense, de-politicized. Another consequence of that phase was the tendency to resort to self-censorship. When censorship was lifted, the authorities cleverly said that the laws governing censorship would remain intact and that the journalists themselves would be required to be mindful of them. This curbed the initiative of many journalists and some of the bright ones were tempted to move on to other professions, though some other factors also contributed to this drift.

This self-censorship syndrome has another dimension. In a country like Pakistan where one is frequently reminded of the burdens of being a patriot, certain issues of national defence are taken as sacred. In Pakistan, the Kashmir issue and relations with India have this status. It would be very interesting to make a detailed study of how the nuclearisation of South Asia was reported in both India and Pakistan and how this coverage inspired chauvinistic, even xenophobic sentiments. At the same time, there were peace activists and civil society groups which attempted to oppose the nuclear explosion in Pakistan and raised the issue of peace versus militarisation of the state. But this debate remained restricted to the English-language press. After the Indian explosion, Pakistan had some time to decide whether it would do the same and this was a very good opportunity for the media to raise and debate pertinent questions. There was even a semblance of debate on television. But the entire issue was camouflaged into emotionalism and national pride.

As a print journalist, I recall that occasion as an evidence of my helplessness in being able to convey my thoughts to a larger public and to try and influence the public opinion --- something which is inherently the purpose of the media. I wrote my columns in the English newspaper and they obviously did not create any ripples. There were some solitary voices against the nuclear option in the Urdu press, too, but these faint voices were drowned in the loud chorus of support from the militant factions. The pity is that if the electronic media had been free, that was an ideal time to prompt a discussion on the trade-off between the nuclear device and facilities like schools and hospitals for the deprived people. The fact remains that South Asia is now almost the most deprived region in the whole world in terms of its social development, looking at certified statistics regarding such areas as literacy, provision of health care, status of women, supply of safe drinking water and electricity and per capita expenditure on defence. On the face of it, the ordinary people applauded the decision to go nuclear in a tit-for-tat action and to establish some kind of a parity with India. But the threat of a nuclear holocaust in a region that has traditionally lacked a rational response to situations of conflict is something that has not been adequately contemplated.

Unfortunately, the nuclear explosions tended to reverse a trend which had been activated by the media and which had the beginnings of a movement for peace and sustainable development. Many observers saw this trend to have been provoked by
the golden jubilee celebrations of the country’s independence. This was in 1997. Incidentally, both Pakistan and India celebrated this event at the same time, because of their historical bondage. At the official level, this was an excuse to blow the trumpet of the progress that supposedly was made during the previous fifty years of independence. But the simple question of what Pakistan had made of its freedom during a period in which so many other countries had recorded phenomenal progress was hard to avoid. It was an opportune time for the Human Development Centre of Islamabad, founded by the late Dr Mahbubul Haq, to publish its report on South Asia’s social development.

One could make out, again mainly in the English language press, a new awakening at least among the intelligentsia for the imperative of raising the economic and social standards of the lives of the ordinary people. And this concern naturally underlined the need to resolve the Kashmir dispute through peaceful means and to normalize relations with India. While on this issue, it is appropriate to refer to what is known as the second or parallel track diplomacy in South Asia. A large number of initiatives have been made to establish people-to-people contacts and also meetings among civil society groups to promote the cause of peace and launch confidence building measures. There was also an element of secret diplomacy in this regard and that was how the Indian prime minister’s journey to Lahore by bus was planned. That the curse with which South Asia is apparently afflicted manifested itself again is another story.

Where, then, is the silver lining? This is an important question for the media in Pakistan where many observers, because of how they judge the national sense of direction, often feel that there is no light at the end of the tunnel. One silver lining is the assertion of the civil society through non-governmental organizations working in such areas as human rights, gender sensitivity, education and policy dialogue with the government. The policy of the international donor agencies in supporting these NGOs has contributed to their importance. It you follow the Pakistani media, you will discern a rising confrontation between the religious militants and the NGOs. The role of the government in this contention is, however, very confusing. The present government is seen both as NGO-friendly and a supporter of the militancy which is largely put to use in Kashmir and Afghanistan. Gradually, the media is also reporting about the efforts that community-based organizations are making to launch self-help projects. The media has certainly helped improve an awareness about the critical situation that exists in Pakistan.

It was in recent months that the media has started to comment on increasing poverty in the country. This is a positive development. Similarly, there is more emphasis on reporting suicides and this naturally projects the prevailing social conditions. But one has to be aware of a paradox in this respect. For instance, if media does a better job in tracking the cases of suicides and reporting them, an impression would be created that suicides have suddenly increased and this may not be totally accurate. A more dramatic example of this is what is known as honour killing. It was entirely
because of the media and some human rights organizations that the issue came to the fore and became, almost, an international story. What this exposure has done to the primitive customs and to the process of social change in the rural and tribal areas is something which needs to be carefully studied. But the media, including this time the Urdu and the Sindhi press, has done a lot to report the incidents of honour killings, though sometimes in a careless sensational manner.

There is also a silver lining in Kashmir and this time a touching story of love, worthy of a Shakespeare, has stimulated some hope in a very dismal scene. This story-book love blossomed, outside the confines of South Asia, of course, between the daughter of a Kashmiri leader from the Pakistan side and the son of a leader from the Indian side. The wedding took place in Pakistan recently and the father of the groom was allowed to travel to Pakistan with a delegation, including some leading newsmen of the disputed territory. This was perhaps the first time that the Kashmiri leaders from across the Line of Control were able to meet. The Ramazan ceasefire announced by the Indian prime minister may have been the follow-up of an unlikely wedding.

Finally, the message that only a peaceful resolution of conflicts, within and between countries, can pave the way for economic and social development of a society is bound to be asserted again and again. The media has to learn to serve as a catalyst for a change that is dictated by history.