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<th>Separatist movements and terrorism : role of the press</th>
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Paper No. 6
SEPARATIST MOVEMENTS AND TERRORISM:

ROLE OF THE PRESS

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SEPARATIST MOVEMENTS AND TERRORISM:
ROLE OF THE PRESS

India is one of the few countries in the world today which is facing secessionism and the resulting terrorism on a large scale and in various forms. Despite the fact that the secessionist problem is almost as old as free India, there has not been adequate study of the problem in the Indian context.

The conflict in the North-East began simultaneously with India's independence. Twenty four hours before the country achieved freedom, the Nagas declared themselves independent. A decade later, the Mizos rose in armed revolt against the Union and about this time the Meitei Hindus of Manipur, so far living on the fringes, suddenly became important—they wanted a separate state, since they were ethnically different to their Hindu brethren in the plains of India. In Tripura, the Tribal National Volunteers carried on an insurgent/terrorist campaign for over a decade and it appears to have ended with the signing of the accord with the Central Government in August 1988. Thus, the battle to liberate Nagaland, that began on 14 August 1947, has in four decades grown to encompass the entire North-East, with signs of unrest and discontest simmering frequently in one part of the region or the other.

The current situation in Punjab, with its continued killings and destruction involving huge cost for this country in terms of human, organisational and financial resources is not much different from other socio-political group conflicts and other movements that India has faced so far in its political development. In Punjab, not a day passes when innocent lives are not lost to the terrorists whose main aim is to terrorise the people by resorting to indiscriminate killings of men, women and children. Their professed aim is certainly secessionist in nature as they are asking for the creation of Khalistan. For achieving this end the terrorists in Punjab, as elsewhere also, are resorting to systematic, unpredictable, indiscriminate, arbitrary killings to increase the shock effect of their work.
Besides Punjab, secessionist movement in Jammu and Kashmir is rather more grim with increasing terrorist killings by JKLF activists with support from across the border. In Assam, the movement led by United Liberation Front of Assam is also a matter of serious concern. In all these separatists movements, terrorism is an integral part and most of the efforts of the government are directed against curbing terrorism.

For terrorism, political scientists and experts have found it difficult to arrive at an agreed definition, though it is recognised that the phenomenon occurs at two levels, political and criminal. Secondly, it is also generally agreed that the essential difference between insurgency and terrorism is while the former aims at using violence against adversarial state machinery such as police, para-military and military forces, the latter aims at a target the violence against which will have maximum impact in terms of "publicity" and strike fear and concern in a wider audience and intimidate the public in general. Groups motivated by political ideology (such as Naxalites, JKLF, Khalistanis, ULFA and various Sri Lankan Tamil militant groups) have resorted to terrorism. Political terrorism is different from criminal terrorism, the later leads groups to kidnap innocent people for ransom, to intergang rivalries in Bihar and other areas, internecine wars among smugglers and narcotic traders.

Often there is an overlap between political and criminal terrorism. Political terrorists resort to criminal terrorist acts in order to raise funds and procure arms. Conversely criminal terrorists attempt to portray themselves as political ones in order to have a more respectable front. For instance, many, not all, of the criminal gangs of smugglers and narco-terrorists may roam about as 'Khalistanis' or 'JKLF' etc. to cover themselves with greater responsibility. In sum, the problem of separatist movements and its associated terrorism was never so grave in the past in India as it is now. In fact, terrorism has
become the main activity of all separatist movements. As such, if we have to deal with such movements, the first task is to deal with political terrorism first.

Political terrorism is coercive intimidation with a systematic use of murder and destruction and the threat of murder and destruction in order to terrorise individuals, groups, communities or governments into conceding to terrorists' political demands. The victim or victims may not be the primary target and aim in fact may be, "Kill one, frighten ten thousand." The terrorist wants a lot of people "watching" rather than a lot of people "dead."

POLITICAL TERRORISM AND MEDIA:

It is beyond any doubt that there is a link between propaganda and political terrorism. Propaganda has been defined as any information, ideas, doctrines or special appeals disseminated to influence the opinion, emotions, attitudes or behaviour of any special group in order to benefit the sponsor either directly or indirectly.

An important factor in the development of political violence and terrorism is information. Changes in technology have increased the speed and ease of communication. Information that once influenced only a limited area now affects societies throughout the world.

The media consisting of the press, radio, television and even films is an indispensable communications link of modern industrial society. The media serves economic and socio-political interests in the collection and dissemination of information. Emergence of electronic technology makes the diffusion of information more extensive and faster than ever before. This fact has not escaped the attention of separatists movements' activists and their resorting to terrorism to obtain
media coverage. The separatists' terrorist activities rely on the media to further their terror inspiring goals and the media use terrorist acts as "necessary" or rewarding news items. For the terrorists the media is the indispensable carrier of "message".

The connection between Terrorism and the Media, has perhaps not been fully appreciated in our country either by the media or the government. The implications of the connection need to be understood also by the public. At any rate, there has been no serious discussion on this topic. What is the connection?

Terrorists rely on the media to further their goals. The media presentation of acts of violence committed by the terrorists attract attention and, thus, help the terrorists to establish their capability to openly challenge the authority. Also, through creating panic among the people, the terrorists are able to expand their influence, frightening and browbeating the law-abiding citizens, thus, forcing them to extend support to their actions. A more serious consequence is that the media projection of their successes help the terrorists to broadcast their support from a somewhat sympathetic section of the people, particularly the impressionable younger generation and to demoralise many of those who are engaged in suppressing terrorism.

Thus, the media have the potential to help spread terrorism, to create fear and panic among the people and to weaken the morale of official and non-official persons and agencies involved in meeting the challenge of terrorism. But, can the media ignore senseless killings of innocent people, destruction of national or individual property or disruption of the normal life of the people? The answer obviously is No. Such events are too big to be ignored. Secondly, even if the media were to deliberately play down the gravity of acts of terrorism, the rumours are bound to take over and cause greater damage to the morale of the people and to the credibility of the media.
Thirdly, people who are victims of acts of terrorism can feel alienated if their sufferings are not adequately covered by the media. And fourthly, those responsible for safeguarding security of life and property are likely to escape their accountability.

What then is the role of Media in the face of spreading terrorism in our country? Clearly, there can be no code. But can there be a set of guidelines or do's or don'ts? It will obviously be difficult to prescribe a line of action.

ROLE OF THE PRESS:

The Press in our country is free from government control. Also, the newspapers have their own perceptions in covering acts of terrorism in their news reporting and in offering comments, etc. The interest of the readers, as perceived by a newspaper, may be another factor determining the display of such news-items or the treatment of acts of violence in editorials and comments. It is also possible to imagine that the view held by a newspaper about government's policy and its ability to eliminate terrorism may influence the coverage as well as comments.

What kind of coverage terrorism receives in the newspapers of the country? How do the newspapers project the incidents and with what details? What are the sources of information -- the newsagency, the official channels or on-the-spot investigations by staff correspondents? Is there any follow-up through reporting, news-analyses, articles or editorials? Do the newspapers suggest any course of action? In other words, do the editorials or opinions expressed by public figures give a new direction to the thinking about dealing with terrorism? What is the role of the Central or State Governments in
disseminating information either to restore confidence among the people or even to remove any exaggerations or distortions in reporting?

In order to examine some of the points raised above, a study was conducted by the author sometimes ago (August 1987) on the topic of terrorism in Punjab and coverage given by the press. The findings of this study are still relevant for two reasons. Firstly, terrorism in Punjab is still unabated. And secondly, there appears to be no perceptible change in newspapers' coverage of terrorism in Punjab, or elsewhere in the country.

The study pertained to coverage given to gruesome killings of some 72 bus passengers on July 6 & 7, 1987 (within 24 hours) in Lalru in Punjab and Fatehabad in Haryana. An attempt was made to analyse, qualitatively and quantitatively the news and views in 14 dailies (in English and Hindi) during the week from July 7 to 13, 1987. Some of the results from this study are given in this paper.
CONTENT OF COVERAGE:

(Observations on Table 1):

1. Among the dailies covered, the Tribune (Chandigarh), quite predictably, gave the maximum coverage. The Hindustan Times and the Times of India, the Indian Express and Jansatta, which have substantial circulations came next in number of items and space devoted.

2. There was no clear pattern among the other dailies. While the Telegraph (Calcutta) and the Hindu (Madras) gave adequate coverage, the Punjab Kesari (surprisingly), and the Rajasthan Patrika (Jaipur) did not give enough importance in terms of space. Newspapers like the Amrit Bazar Patrika (Calcutta) and the Assam Tribune (Guwahati) did not appear to be much concerned.

3. The questions raised are: What are the criteria? National concern or lack of it? Interest of the readership? Distance from Punjab and Haryana? Or that a section of the Press has already started treating these happenings as of "less" news-value?
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>No. of Space covered</th>
<th>Items (in Col.cms.)</th>
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</thead>
</table>

**I. Regional Dailies**

(a) **English Daily**

1. The Tribune (Chandigarh) 65 2559
2. Deccan Herald (Bangalore) 19 754
3. The Hindu (Madras) 26 1307
4. Newstime (Hyderabad) 13 988
5. The Telegraph (Calcutta) 52 1722
6. Amrita Bazar Patrika (Calcutta) 18 788
7. The Assam Tribune (Guwahati) 12 386
8. Free Press Journal (Gauhati) 17 816

(b) **Hindi Dailies**

9. Punjab Kesari (Jallandhar) 34 1243
10. Rajasthan Patrika (Jaipur) 29 842

**II. National Dailies**

(a) **English Daily**

1. The Hindustan Times (Delhi) 65 2013
2. The Times of India (Delhi) 58 2103
3. Indian Express (Delhi) 44 2372

(b) **Hindi Daily**

4. Jansatta (Delhi) 35 2408
TYPE OF COVERAGE:

Observations on Table II:

1. Most of the dailies concentrated on providing details of killings during the first 2/3 days after the incidents. But, there was wide variation in the number of stories on killings among the dailies scrutinised for the study. For instance, the Tribune carried 21 items on this aspect and the Punjab Kesari and the Telegraph carried 17 items each, the dailies like Deccan Herald, Newstime, the Assam Tribune and Rajasthan Patrika carried just two items each on the theme.

2. Another noteworthy point is that the bandhs which were organised in different parts of the country were more extensively covered by all dailies, whether in English or in other languages. An inference can be drawn that once the bandh came into the news, the entire focus of the Press shifted from the human tragedy to the bandh. Does it mean that the bandh could supersede the unprecedented barbaric killings in news-value, worse still, that the media are so much desensitised about acts of terrorism that there would have been no follow-up of the tragedies after a day or two.

3. Condemnation of killings by various political parties, persons and organisations and the comments and views of political leaders were adequately covered. But did this coverage serve any useful purpose?

4. Items pertaining to appeal for amity and brotherhood were, by and large, ignored by most of the dailies barring the Telegraph, the Hindustan Times, the Times of India and Jansatta which carried an item or two each on this aspect.

5. Steps for controlling terrorism received adequate attention in both the national and the regional dailies.
### Table II

**CATEGORY-WISE NUMBER OF ITEMS COVERED ON JULY 6-7, 1987**  
**KILLINGS IN PUNJAB AND HARYANA**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dailies</th>
<th>Details/ facts on killings</th>
<th>Condemnation of killings (parties and organisations)</th>
<th>Leaders Comments/ views</th>
<th>Items on the Bandhs</th>
<th>Arson/ Looting in Reaction</th>
<th>Criticism of Govt./ Law and Order Machinery</th>
<th>Appeal for amity and brotherhood</th>
<th>Steps for controlling brother-Terrorism</th>
<th>Arrests</th>
<th>Others</th>
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<td>2. Deccan Herald</td>
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<td>3. The Hindu, (Madras)</td>
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<td>4. Newtime</td>
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<td>5. The Telegraph</td>
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<td>6. AmritBazar</td>
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<td>7. The Assam Tribune</td>
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<td>8. Free Press Journal</td>
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<td><strong>NATIONAL DAILIES</strong></td>
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POINTS FOR CONSIDERATION BY THE PRESS:

Some broad questions concerning the role of the press in reporting terrorism need attention. These questions include:

1. What should be the criteria of reporting? What are the considerations to be taken into account? Is the Press Council's Code being adhered to?

2. There are conflicting views being expressed by persons in authority on the state of terrorism in Punjab, J&K or elsewhere. For instance in Punjab, it has quite often been suggested that the number of terrorists or of terrorist-groups is dwindling. The figures put out earlier and on different occasions have been inconsistent. On the other hand, it has also been mentioned that eradication of terrorism is a long-drawn battle or that we may have to live with terrorism for quite some time. How can the Media function either in clarifying such contradictions, alerting the authorities for a more realistic and meaningful assessment of the situation or more importantly to help create a sense of security among the people?

3. By and large, it appears that the reporting on incidents is confined to the numbers (in killings) or arrests. Even the placing and display of items in newspapers is guided by such numbers. Their interpretation or impact on the life of the community is missed. Similarly, the performance of law and order machinery is not adequately examined. Even the agony and extent of human suffering, which could help creating strong resentment against acts of terrorism (and also terrorists) is reported only by some papers. Would this not lead to the conclusion that we are already becoming insensitive to acts of violence, killings, etc.?
4. It seems, the initial reporting on such incidents is mostly based on information from official channels. In view of the unpredictibility of acts of terrorism, it is not possible for the Press reporters to give a first-hand account of the incidents, in the first instance. But, should it not be incumbent on the Press to undertake an immediate follow-up for a comprehensive reporting?

More than the professional considerations in reporting, the effect of reporting, reliance on official agencies, the credibility of the Press all need to be examined. There appears to be a feeling that the bare facts (given officially) do not give essential information nor do they project the sufferings of the people.

5. This leads to the examination of responsibility of official sources or of news-agencies which put out the news-item in the first instance. What is or should be the approach of the officials, who receive the information of an occurrence? How far is the information given by them reliable? Are the officials at different levels sensitive to the role of Press or they only perform their duty, which would normally be to underplay an act of terrorism? Finally, at what level should the government give briefing to the media and how far should the government take the media into confidence?

6. Then, there is the question of media role in influencing public opinion through editorials, special articles, news analysis, etc. So far, the newspapers have not attached much importance to this aspect. Barring a few exceptions, the incidents of terrorism do not provoke any fresh thinking. It is possible to argue that new suggestions or comments are not always possible in an on-going situation of this type. But many of the incidents are not "ordinary" happenings and, therefore, call for a deeper understanding
and interpretation not only for the affected people, but also for the rest of the country.

Even the reference to lapses on the part of the government has become one of a repetititive kind.

7. It is not clear whether opinion-makers, even at local levels, are being encouraged to support anti-terrorism measures and people's resistance/morale. Their role in urban and particularly in rural areas cannot be missed. But how is that to be achieved?

8. The newspapers have been ignoring, entirely or largely, the positive and encouraging aspects of the happenings. A large number of events of mutual goodwill and help, sometimes at the cost of personal safety, are not reported. For instance, in Punjab some such incidents were:

(a) Amidst all the "bloody" killings, there were instances of Sikhs protecting Hindus from mob fury and vice versa, with Hindus harbouring Sikhs in their homes.

(b) There were peaceful jathas that travelled through the worst affected areas, even when their leaders (as in the case of the Left parties) were under threat of personal safety.

(c) When a boy discovered a "time bomb" ticking away and reported in time to get it defused - and he was rewarded also - the item went into the inside pages and not on the front pages.

(d) Expressions of solidarity with values of sanity, which were some positive happenings emerging from the otherwise foul and murky atmosphere were not adequately highlighted.
COVERAGE OF TERRORISM: PROBLEMS FOR THE PRESS:
There are, however, several problems involved at various levels in reporting terrorists' activities which also need to be kept in mind while looking into the role of the press.

1. The unpredictability of events itself leads to a near total reliance, at least initially, on the official sources. Often for spot-reporting, reporters come into the picture at a later stage. Then, there are the gate-keepers, who decide where and how the items should be displayed, front-page or inside. Finally, come the editorial writers, who comment on the incidents. News-analyses, photographs, etc. are all dependent on their decisions. Therefore, sensitisation about media responsibility in terrorism has to take care of professionals at all levels.

2. The reporters are always faced with hazards in reporting terrorism events. The sources they have to depend upon are not always reliable or responsive. Official sources do not give all facts which they should, if they want to establish credibility with the public and wish to influence public opinion through the media.

3. The reporter's profession is fraught with hazards, physical and otherwise. In fact, for that reason, elsewhere they have sought special insurance. Some reporters do acquire personal contacts with terrorists, but their leaders dictate terms. It is not so much a question of reporters choosing the terrorists as the terrorists choosing the reporters. Terrorists have also known to demand credits and to insist on prominent displays. It then becomes a question of quid pro quo. The intimidation is often extended by terrorists to gate-keepers and even editors. Therefore, terrorists as a source of information, are extremely risky. It is under these circumstances that professional ethics have to be maintained and "newsiness" of the items has to be determined and dealt with.
4. The problem of "sources" of information is of a major concern. For instance, under President's rule in J&K now and Punjab earlier, there is only an "abyss of officialdom." The media have to rely on the State Government officials. No authoritative information is available even from the Central Government set-up in Delhi. Then, there are confusing terms often used by the official agencies such as "hard core" and "A&B" categories -- or even "dreadest" -- category of terrorists.

The release of figures of killings or arrests is a case in point. Besides being often contradictory, the figures do not separate the ordinary criminals from the terrorists. There is need to streamline the entire system of collecting and release of information in order to show awareness of the dangers of "misinformation" and "disinformation."