

Free media and public opinion

One of the main points made in the International Media Conference held in Islamabad the other day was about improving perceptions, which form the basis of the communication process. Differences in perceptions of the sender and that of the receiver cause serious problems in transmitting messages as well as in interpreting their meaning and feeling.

As long the background and experiences or the frame of reference of the two sides remain different the communication blocks are likely to be there. For effective communication it is necessary to bridge the perception-gap through free flow of information and objective feed-back analysis.

It is also important to remove distortions and to design messages in light of objective reality on ground. This point was successfully made by General Pervez Musharraf while addressing the delegates to the conference and later in the questions-answer session.

Distortions, misunderstanding, and misgivings continue because of the mindset. If no serious efforts are made to get out of this 'mindset' through objective analysis of facts the situation is not likely to improve. This is specially important in the context of Indo-Pak relations and the prolonged tension between the two countries. Effective communication between the

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two newly born nuclear powers and important members of regional co-operation SAARC is vital for the growth and development of the people of the two countries. What this requires is tolerance and positive attitude to resolve major issues.

The purpose of organising the international media conference was of course to promote media relatively free of governmental pressures and to establish high standard and accuracy and objective and unbiased reporting. But have any lessons been learned? The answer perhaps is no. Anyone who attended or viewed the recording of the proceedings on television would endorse this opinion.

The questions put to General Pervez Musharraf were all biased. The style of the questioners did not establish an appropriate tone. All that they conveyed was hostility and non-friendly attitude (in the host country) towards Pakistan, its people, Pakistan Army and person of General Musharraf himself.

The composed, eloquent and knowledgeable Chief Executive of Pakistan did an excellent job in answering questions and clarifying points

raised by Indian journalists and media specialists. The questions-answer session happened to be an excellent exercise that reconfirmed Pakistan's stand on vital issues, on the basis of objective reality. The opportunity helped the Chief Executive in establishing his credibility and sincerity to all causes dear to Pakistan. The session further confirmed the Indian mindset and their persistent hostile attitude towards Pakistan.

The organisers of the conference who had made concerted efforts for a positive outcome would definitely feel discouraged about the negative impact that was observed during and after the conference. The situation calls for a more scientific and unbiased approach in political reporting so as to reduce tension between the two countries.

What the Indian mediemen said during and after the conference is in no way helpful in building bridges between India and Pakistan for a fruitful dialogue on bilateral issues. Well, they have said what Mr Jaswant Singh keeps saying and what the BJP top leaders have always said about Pakistan specially about its Armed Forces.

It is unfortunate that a visiting veteran journalist, Kavel Ram Ratamal Malkani (a member of anti-Pakistan Hindu nationalist organisation, Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and former editor of a BJP weekly) gave statements in Lahore to distort facts about Pakistan Army, the freedom movement in Kashmir and Quaid's statement on the principle guiding the fate of the states, including Kashmir. Mr Malkani did not have the courtesy even to use proper language while talking of the Chief Executive of Pakistan.

In reply to a question he said, "There is no tension. There is something wrong with General Musharraf nothing else". (*General Musharraf ke dimagh mein garmi hey*).

Furthermore, Mr Malkani said, "Pakistan has got an itching. It needs to consult some doctor." Sure no professional would approve of the unethical ways of Mr Malkani. Such anti-Muslim political journalists have not accepted from their heart, the reality of Pakistan as a separate independent homeland for the Muslims. They do not accept what the people of Pakistan want. They wish to im-

pose what is at the back of their mind. They adopt such principles that suit their bosses (BJP in this case). It should therefore be clear as to why the India mediemen such as Mr Malkani speak against the Pakistan Army with contempt.

However, Mr Malkani's approach should not upset us in Pakistan. There are all kinds of mediemen in India — hawks and doves as Mr Vinod Mehta, a senior Indian journalist, would call them. Media is divided on the issue of Indo-Pak relations. Much of this depends on Indian world view which gives priority to Indo-US relations now.

Facts-oriented journalists, like Mr Mehta do not admit of Indian atrocities in Kashmir, things which are a matter of shame. Journalists with professional scientific approach do admit the inevitability of Indo-Pak talks and the need to resolve all issues including Kashmir through dialogue. They also agree that tendency to give hostile coverage to other country should be discouraged.

Not much can be expected from the media. But free media can be a great support in leading public opinion and in analyzing important national and international issues. All efforts should be made to save media from becoming a tool in the hands of politicians and government functionaries.

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