

# Kargil: India's first TV war

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Mass Media

**A**ugust 1999 saw the end of India's first TV war. Kargil had been easily the highest point of crafting and exploiting the enemy image to justify an essentially wasteful military effort. The expenditure involved in men and materials far exceeded the objective at stake. Even more than the actual war losses suffered, the post-war tensions created an environment of implacable hostility unseen even after the general wars of 1965 and '71. This had been more true of India with lesser tactical gains made at incomparably greater cost just to recover the vital ground lost even in the initial phase of the episode - May through June/July. The BJP's fragile coalition, just about beginning to find its feet after its political debacles in 1998 and 1997 overreacted to the episode beyond all limits to unleash a war hysteria across the country. It touched off the onset of a bitter psychological warfare without a precedence and an early end in sight.

The Indian media - print/electronic, official/public - went all out to project the brushfire war as a sort of a matter of life and death - a virtual Armageddon. ZTV and Door Darshan plastered the mini screen with live and recorded coverage of the war. Martial music and motifs appeared to have turned India into a sort of a garrison state - a latter-day Sparta or Hitler's Germany - to accord everything else a second or a third place in their footage.

The high-powered Kargil Review Committee (KRCR) comprising four eminent experts namely K. Subrahmanyam (Chairman), retired Lt.-Gen. K.K. Hazari, BG Verghed, and a former High Commissioner to Pakistan, Stish Chandra (Secretary) devoted an entire chapter to the role of media through the war: its successes and failures. The core message of the KRCR was: Information is power, especially in this Information Age. The 'Kargil caper' (an apt description used in the Kargil Review Committee Report) had indeed been the highest point of the media power and the havoc it could play with the minds of millions of its viewers. Some portions of the Report could be appropriately quoted to illustrate the point. Here it goes:

'If the media served the country well, much of the credit goes to the initiative it itself took and to some individuals within the government and the armed forces. The media moulds national and international opinion and can be a potent force multiplier. This was evident at Kargil - India's first television war.'

The following paragraph, quoted in full, would be useful for ISPR to examine and extrapolate carefully:-

'Defence Public Relations is routinely handled by the Ministry of Defence through regular Information Service Cadres. This establishment is not equipped to handle media relations during war or even proxy war. The briefing function during the Kargil crisis was taken over by a triad of senior military and civil spokesmen. Army Headquarters set up an Information and Psychological Warfare Cell under an officer of the rank of Major General with direct access to the Army Chief. This enabled Army Headquarters both

## Brigadier (Retd) A.R. Siddiqi

to monitor and disseminate information in a better calibrated manner than would have been the case otherwise.'

Kargil had been a military trauma and a media blitz for India. The incredible failure of its intelligence agencies through the initial stages of the build up from across the LoC traumatised the Indian civil and military leadership beyond description. Pakistanis - regulars or volunteers (*jehadis* just the same) - had been in effective occupation of their well-prepared positions at the dominating heights when the Indians first located them.

They hastened to scale the soaring heights - 10-15000 feet - to engage the enemy in close face-to-face encounters and throw him out of his strongholds at an enormous loss of men and materials.

It had been at best a Pyrrhic victory, more precisely, a salvage operation where military powers and honour of Indian army were concerned. Much

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of New Delhi and the rest of India went into a state of shock and mourning over the 'sightings' - all the body bags from Kargil. The civil and military top brass faced a shower of slings and arrows from all and sundry. A defeat at the hands of the 'intruders' on their own home ground was looked at as a matter of national shame and humiliation. Already in action ever since the commencement of actual fighting about the middle of June, Indian sky networks came into full swing by the month's end.

Thenceforward, it was Kargil by the day and Kargil by the night - a 24 hour marathon. Except for the snow-capped mountains defining the battlefield and the physical features of the warriors, the war coverage might have been a clip from the CNN/BBC footage of the Desert Storm (1990-1991).

While the sound and fury of the massive assortment and variety of warplanes through Desert Storm, (useless in the mountainous terrain) was missing, the Zee TV Kargil war coverage had all the ninetendo features of the CNN/BBC war. A bold and brave spectacle of the war untainted by the misery, death and devastation accompanying it.

The print media vied with ZTV in projecting a full

colour picture of the war in euphoric write-ups and moving photographs of the young warriors on location. The Bofors howitzers firing ceaselessly with a section of gunners around might have the only lone ranger in an otherwise bustling cameo. The media created a war fever quite unknown in India.

India's 1962 debacle against the Chinese had perhaps occasioned more panic at the highest political level but hardly any talk of yet another war to redeem the lost military honour. Kargil, on the other hand, appeared to have reawakened the war hubris lying dormant in India's collective subconscious thought the better part of the last millennium under foreign rule. The media contrived image of Kargil transformed India from the citadel of Gandhian non-violence into a stronghold of the Sangh Parivar militarism.

The Pakistani media, though bristling with war stories much as India's, were by and large, not as aggressive. Their impact on people, classified as a martial race and used to heroics (and mock-heroics) was not as half as deep as in India. Of course, the *jehadi* theme, returned with a force and a resonance unmet even through or after the wars of 1965 and 1971. And it is there to stay. The Indian media equate the *jehadis* with terrorists and the *jehadi* spirit with terrorism.

By overplaying the theme, however, they are indirectly helping the ideologues and their ideology to become known and recognised as a fact of life, no matter how unpalatable. To every argument there is a counter argument, to every thesis an antithesis and to every action a reaction. Therefore, this kind of one-sided and virulent anti-*jehadi* propaganda, like every such campaign, might also create a pro-*jehadi* lobby, no matter how fractional.

Rather than tar *jehadis* with the same brush might it not be a lot better to take a critical look at them - sift the corn from the chaff, the motivated Mujahid from the mercenary and the soldier of fortune.

There are many a valuable lesson waiting for India and Pakistan to learn from the enthusiastic but largely thoughtless media manipulation of the Kargil episode. It might be a good idea for the media experts of the two countries to put their heads together to see where they went wrong in making a mountain of a mole hill and spawn the monster of war hysteria - the father-and-mother-of the so-called arms race in the Subcontinent.

For two such largely impoverished countries as India and Pakistan, the acquisition of arms only to lose them in yet another unfinished (major/minor) armed conflict (as of 1947-1971) every ten or eleven years, would be materially unaffordable and strategically unsustainable. The tally does not include countless armed encounters along and across the LoC and such war-like operations as the Kargil episode. The losses suffered along the LoC and such largely undemarcated areas as the Rann of Kutch (1965 war - 1999, the *Atlantique* affair) and Siachen (1988) would easily equal if not actually exceed those in the general wars of 1965 and 1971.