

The media and conflicts

The Nation
3.7.00

Ikram Sehgal

South Asia was a region of endless conflicts between the various configurations of races and religions before the British started their rule in India after the Battle of Plassey 1757. And that is to be understood because two great religions struggled for living space. Intercine conflicts continued during the minority rule of the British period, local animosity was mostly focused on the British Raj, symbolizing the third great religions stamp on South Asia. Since the British departed in 1947, the conflicts have been more defined, some have even gone beyond the South Asian parameters, for example, the border problem between India and Burma as well as Burma and Bangladesh, etc.

The Indian occupation of Hyderabad, Junagadh, and Manawadar in September 1947 caused the first conflict, these were Hindu-majority areas with Muslim rulers. While the Nizam of Hyderabad had not sought accession to Pakistan, the Nawab of Junagadh did so. The media in India almost unanimously supported the military takeover termed as a "police action" as being a manifestation of the democratic right of the people, the media in Pakistan opposed the Indian initiative, the Sri Lankan and Nepalese media made no comment except to report. Bangladesh did not exist in 1947 and the Press in Bhutan and the Maldives was non-existent. The electronic media had still had some time before its arrival in the region.

The second major conflict was between India and Pakistan over Kashmir was also in 1947. In this case, a Muslim majority area was being ruled over by Maharajah Hari Singh, a Dogra. The Indian Press went *volte-face* on their arguments about "democratic rights". Suspicions about the Maharajah's intentions (and that of the Indian government) provoked a revolt among the mainly Muslim populace. When partitioning Punjab the Radcliffe Award gave the Muslim majority district of Gurdaspur to India, thus not only ensuring a passage to Kashmir from India from the railhead at Pathankot but also a festering dispute that rages even today. Quite contrary to what happened in Hyderabad and Junagadh, the Indian now held aloft on "Instrument of Accession", a 180 degree turnaround from its earlier position of "democratic right of the people" only a month earlier in Hyderabad. The Press in both India and Pakistan failed to look at the issues objectively and went on supporting, in jingoistic language, the viewpoint of their own countries till the UN-mandated ceasefire in 1948.

I am not going to count Goa and

Army in various functions including managing a PW Camp at Panagarh in West Bengal much before the outbreak of actual hostilities in Dec 1971. Alongwith a 1000 others including a dozen or so officers, I was incarcerated in Apartal Jail for some time.

The seventh major conflict took place on the island of Sri Lanka in the early 80s. It was preceded by an internal revolt by leftists in 1971 but was overshadowed by the greater India - Pakistan conflict on the mainland. Even though the conflict was of ethnic nature, the Indians were deeply involved in destabilising Sri Lanka, turning it from a Paradise into hell. The Tamils are in majority in South India but are a minority in Sri Lanka. With support from RAW and sympathizers in Tamil Nadu, etc. Sri Lankan Tamils set up training camps for various insurgency groups in Tamil Nadu. The insurrection came to a head in 1984 with the Indians imposing a pax-Rajiv on the Sri Lankans, troops of the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) landing on the Jaffna Peninsula even before the agreement allowing them to come to Sri Lanka was inked. Predictably the South Indian press was almost ecstatic, the rest of the Press in India was every supportive of the IPKF which treated Sri Lanka as an occupied land, controlling its airspace and sea lanes as well as most of the North of Sri Lanka. It was only when the IPKF and LTTE fell apart and came to blows, that LTTE started to get a bad Press, that is, except in Tamil Nadu. RAW's role in the conflict, before and during, gets scarce mention anywhere.

In Pakistan, the insurgencies that really count were in East Pakistan (1971) and Balochistan (1974). During 1971 in West Pakistan the Press kept the people in the dark as to what was happening, the result was that people later tended to accept even what was blatantly untrue. Balochistan, was not well reported by the Pakistan Press with the result that the wrongs that took place got embellished by rumours in the vacuum of actual knowledge.

The Tamil revolt in Sri Lanka has very good coverage in India, specially in Tamil Nadu and adjacent regions, the Press in the rest of India seldom tries to display the Sinhalese viewpoint except during a brief period when Rajiv Gandhi was assassinated by LTTE cadres and there was a backlash against Prabhakaran.

What about the many ongoing conflicts within India, presently the only country when there is insurrection of any kind? Is there any coverage at all in India? For responsible Indians it can even be a joke. When I explained to Ms. Tavlin Singh a few years ago why normal commerce could not take

dia, thus not only ensuring a passage to Kashmir from India from the railhead at Pathankot but also a festering dispute that rages even today. Quite contrary to what happened in Hyderabad and Junagadh, the Indian now held aloft on "Instrument of Accession", a 180 degree turnaround from its earlier position of "democratic right of the people" only a month earlier in Hyderabad. The Press in both India and Pakistan failed to look at the issues objectively and went on supporting, in jingoistic language, the viewpoint of their own countries till the UN-mandated ceasefire in 1948.

I am not going to count Goa and Pondichery in early 1960 as conflicts because those were imperial Portuguese aberrations which India corrected by force of arms. The swift invasion gave wrong signal about their military prowess to the Indian leaders, with tragic consequences in the third major conflict in the region, between India and China in 1962.

It was only when western analysts started to sift through the wreckage of the Hindi-Chini Bhai Bhai edifice that it transpired that it was India which started the conflict by trying to correct border anomalies, thus inviting massive Chinese retaliation. Pre-empting the Indians, seizing large areas of North East Frontier Agency (NEFA) and Aksai Chin in Ladakh in a swift operation, China unilaterally then proceeded to pull back to its side of the McMahon Line, handing back all the captured Indian weapons and equipment as well as Indian PWs in their custody. Even today the Indian Press does not accept reality and goes on and on of being stabbed in the back.

The fourth major conflict in the region was in 1965, the opening round being fought in April in Kutch. Thereafter Operation Gibraltar was launched from the Pakistan in early August. However it was when Operation Grand Slam was launched at Chamb-Akhnur that decided the Indians to cross the international border at Lahore on Sept 6, 1965. Obviously both the sides took their own respective official positions and quite a lot was lost in the fog of war. As the Pakistani Press became free over the years, both the genesis and conduct of Operation Gibraltar came under severe criticism by print media persons of both civilian and service origins. From the Indian side, objective war analysis was done to a small extent by defence analysts of military origin. However the vernacular Press on both the sides still maintain the strident propaganda unleashed in 1965.

The fifth and sixth major conflicts are inexorably intertwined. In 1971, the Pakistan Army launched a pre-emptive strike in East Pakistan to crush a possible uprising, at that time the province was in virtual revolt. However it was the pre-emptive action against units having majority of

The Tamil revolt in Sri Lanka has very good coverage in India, specially in Tamil Nadu and adjacent regions, the Press in the rest of India seldom tries to display the Sinhalese viewpoint except during a brief period when Rajiv Gandhi was assassinated by LTTE cadres and there was a backlash against Prabhakaran.

What about the many ongoing conflicts within India, presently the only country when there is insurrection of any kind? Is there any coverage at all in India? For responsible Indians it can even be a joke. When I explained to Ms. Tavlin Singh a few years ago why normal commerce could not take place without a solution of the Kashmir problem, she commented sarcastically: "So we should give you Kashmir and you will buy Bajaj scooters?" What about the atrocities being committed in Kashmir? What about the 50-year old insurrection in Mizoram, Manipur, and Nagaland? What about the more recent ones in Assam, Tripura, Bodoland, etc? What about the takeover of Sikkim and the Balkanization of Bhutan?

But let's not put all the blame on India. Putting it bluntly, the Press in South Asia, be it Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, etc. only follows the official line where regional conflicts are concerned. However the great paradox is that in the largest democracy of the world the media has imposed a self-restraint that makes it far less free than in Pakistan which today boasts a very free Press despite being under military rule.

In all countries except India, the electronic media is firmly in official hands. In addition to the official channel there are private channels such as Zee TV, Sony TV, etc. Let's take the recent hijack incident. Zee TV went way beyond Doodarshan in putting the blame on Pakistan. Why did the aircraft take off from Amritsar? The Indian authorities had no choice. Why did the aircraft take off from Lahore? It was pre-planned by the ISI. Why did the Dubai authorities allow the aircraft to take off from a Dubai military airport? Because of reasons of humanity. What about the ogres in Kandhar called Taliban? Why did they not have horns on their head? Why did they behave like decent human beings? Even Goebbels must have turned over in his grave at the virulent propaganda being dished out. The Indian Press blames any problem on the ISI, much before even the Indian officials get around to it.

In 1994, in the Asia meeting of the World Economic Forum in Singapore, the official Indian delegation lambasted the ISI for blasting bombs from Madras to Srinagar, for terrorist activity from Punjab to Assam, etc. When it was my turn to rebut, I asked them tongue-in-cheek why were they not giving credit to the ISI for the rat