

Forbidden curiosities

Anyone who raised issues on Kargil hardly got due share in the coverage and became a suspect, says **N Bhaskara Rao**

IN covering inter-state conflicts as in the case of Kargil, the role and responsibility of the media are more than that of a citizen and it should be concerned with times beyond the crisis. In fact, in the case of TV, it should be conscious of the implications of its coverage. Is Pakistan India's 'enemy' and for ever? Should the next generation Indians continue the same outlook and carry the same stereotypes?

Media coverage cannot be unconcerned with such notions. Basically, such border disputes as in the case of Kashmir are a battle to win the hearts and minds, first of local people and then of global powers. Conflicts of this nature cannot be resolved on the military front or diplomacy without support of mass media in both the countries.

Satellite television channels recently have changed the very scope and scene of news/current affairs in the country. In fact, they have added much-needed competitiveness in their coverage. Round the clock news by TV channels and availability of satellite phones have made all the difference to the very nature and character of coverage as evident in the coverage of the Kargil conflict.

Despite expansion in the infrastructure of All India Radio and Doordarshan in Jammu and Kashmir, their reach remained limited, programmes too few and they lacked the touch and a communication strategy. In fact, India has woefully failed to realise the strategic importance of credible media support to win over the local people. Thanks to independent satellite channels, India today could simultaneously network with global powers and reach out into Pakistan with a lot more credibility. It required a Kargil war for India to realise the neglect. It is good that the ministry of I&B has taken the initiative now, with a Rs 430 crore package. I wonder whether it will be sustained and the proposed Koshur Samachar shall acquire credibility. But what is even more important than budgetary allocation or setting up transmitters is creative response with relevant programming and scheduling strategies.

In this respect, Kargil has a lesson — allow private media to operate freely instead of prolifer-

ating the inane.

Whereas on the other hand, Pakistan has been using its radio and TV for long to reach both the sides of Kashmir, and all along aiming at winning the hearts and minds of Kashmiris. Viewership for Pakistan TV and radio in the Kashmir valley has been significant and far more than AIR and Doordarshan, despite a media boom in India. Pakistan has dovetailed its media operations into its defence and diplomatic strategies. Pakistan's disappointment with media coverage of Kargil conflict by its own media is a realisation that it could not reach out to the global powers as fast as India did.

commendable job despite having no previous experience and, in fact, have set impressive benchmarks. Kargil coverage was a 'daring' and exceptional reporting. However, it cannot be described as brilliant or bold coverage. It also lacked the kind of foresight coverage of such conflicts calls for. But it was truly competitive and enthusiastic rather than over-enthusiastic even if it was aimed at increasing viewership. In the process, private TV channels too served the government and the country and in the process themselves benefited from Kargil conflict. So what if they have added to their viewership and also commercial

brought every one together'.

Also, media coverage of Kargil was as if there were only two viewpoints — one being that of the ruling BJP's. Anyone who raised issues on Kargil hardly got due share in the coverage and in fact became a suspect. In the process, TV has in a way redefined 'patriotism'. Hardly was there any dissent in any of the media during the seven to eight weeks of war, as if they were all echoing the same viewpoint and more of the same as endorsement of the government's stand, as never before, in support of a war. In fact, it was 'illusion of information overload'. Over all, it was a one-sided coverage —



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Instead of banning Pakistan TV, we should compete professionally and creatively. In fact, the need is monitoring and analysing Pakistan media. Nuclear capability without media-reach capability is futile. Deterrence potential of nuclear capability comes from strategic media uses.

Media coverage of Kargil conflict has been appreciated in the country at large. It has done a good job in galvanising the nation and in an unprecedented manner in recent times. Both editors and journalists need to be complimented on the extensive coverage; TV channels in particular did a

revenue!

Overall, newspapers have been more concerned, considerate and farsighted in their coverage of Kargil conflict than the TV channels. However, during the height of Kargil clashes, the media coverage evoked a war hysteria in the country. Certain deception in TV coverage was too glaring because of the extent of repetition, reenacting and presenting headlines.

But then that perhaps is more in the character of TV as a medium. No wonder Sheila Bajpai aptly wrote that TV coverage of Kargil was 'funerals which

dogmatically one-sided by both the countries. It was only in the later part that the Pakistan point of view got some coverage. Some one could have easily said that the media hype on Kargil was meant to cover the 'lapses' of a government.

In situations like this, military can get away with the media's unquestioned praise for its operations. Should an elected government too? Pakistan's newspaper, *Dawn*, has said that 'it is in India now that the military is leading the political government by the nose'. Perhaps the media too!