

Role of South Asian Free Media Association (SAFMA) in Indo-Pak Peace Building

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Abstract: *The prevailing situation in sub-continent demands that media in both India and Pakistan to move away from “war journalism” to “peace journalism”, from a dichotomous perspective rooted in a zero-sum game expressed through personalization and dramatization of the new to a de-polarization of the regional understanding. For its part, the media in sub-continent needs to commit to news coverage that is framed in a context of engagement, not disengagement, with society across the border in educational, cultural, commercial, diplomatic, scientific, and artistic pursuits. This involves a conscious and conscientious move away from making the adversary a different entity through de-humanization. This needs journalists on both sides to adopt a strategy that moves from “arming” themselves by the conflict discourse to “disarming” others across the fence through construct communication. This requires a decisive shift from the gladiator syndrome of the projection of power in the conflict to a quest for the common ground, underscored by “de-demonization”. In other words, the coverage of conflict must not become an abetment of conflict. The sports-oriented coverage of conflict conceived in terms of victory and defeat represents lopsided truth by taking out a few selected slices of the visible reality on the ground, leaving a grand, invisible, infrastructural but non-earthshaking reality. This paper aims to present the view that India and Pakistan can take the initiative in establishing dialogue across the border beyond the “classical indexing model” whereby the media merely reflects the elitist discourse rooted in a combative framework of policy and profile. In this context, the paper tries to locate the role of South Asian Free Media Association (SAFMA) as a platform and agency of free media as a bridge to this process.*

Keywords: India, Media, Pakistan, Peace-building, SAFMA

1. INTRODUCTION

Social scientists are grappling with the role of media in social cohesion and national and regional integration for a long time. The proponents of the limited effect-models may not agree, but many critics share the view that media can help free the people of a country or region from mutual hostility and help achieving national and regional integration. Needless to say that such cooperation removes insecurity from neighbouring states and acts as a barrier towards arms race or any type of conflict between and among them. In South Asia, such supporting role of the media has always been coveted various multilateral fora. The first SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) information ministers' meeting held in Dhaka in April 1998 emphasized the need for greater flow of information among member states to promote peace and harmony in the region (US Rana, 2008).

The prevailing situation in sub-continent demands that media in both India and Pakistan to move away from "war journalism" to "peace journalism", from a dichotomous perspective rooted in a zero-sum game expressed through personalization and dramatization of the new to a de-polarization of the regional understanding. For its part, the media in sub-continent needs to commit to news coverage that is framed in a context of engagement, not disengagement, with society across the border in educational, cultural, commercial, diplomatic, scientific, and artistic pursuits. This involves a conscious and conscientious move away from 'Arena-ization', i.e., considering the sub-continent an arena for a fight-out, and 'Other-ization', i.e., making the adversary into a different pieces through de-humanization, or 'Predestination-ism', i.e., believing that one's nation is on its way to becoming a formidable actor on the international stage in political economic, or civilizational terms.

All this needs journalists on both sides to adopt a strategy that moves from "arming" themselves by the conflict discourse to "disarming" others across the fence through constructive communication. This requires a decisive shift from the gladiator syndrome of the projection of power in the conflict to a quest for the common ground, underscored by "de-demonization". In other words, the coverage of conflict must not become an abetment of conflict. The sports-oriented coverage of conflict conceived in terms of victory and defeat represents a of the truth by taking out a few selected slices of the visible reality on the ground, leaving a grand, invisible, infrastructural but non-earthshaking reality. The big question is whether journalists in India and Pakistan can take the initiative in establishing dialogue across the border beyond the classical "indexing model" whereby the media merely reflected the elitist discourse rooted in a combative framework of policy and profile.

In this context, South Asian Free Media Association (SAFMA) as a platform and agency of free media can step in and act as a bridge to this process.

SAFMA is one in a big crowd of media organisations devoted to freedom of expression, access to information and media workers' rights. Still, SAFMA is a unique media body.

SAFMA's double track approach, combing its free media endeavours and its efforts in peacemaking and confidence building, first and foremost as peace maker in the India- Pakistani relationship, is unprecedented within the international family of press freedom campaigners.

SAFMA seems also unique in a South Asian context, due to its ability to deliver according to plans. During SAFMA's first 4-5 years of active operations, it has produced remarkable results. These include organising a number of high level conferences throughout the region, initiatives in order to bring key players together across national, political and professional borders, running a website with comprehensive regional news and background coverage, issuing books, journals and documents and organising a think-tank covering a wide range of subjects, undertaking fact finding missions in order to defend press freedom, lobbying governments in order to improve media laws and journalists' freedom.

Even if SAFMA's most visionary dreams still have not come through, the drive and enthusiasm of SAFMA appears significantly in contrast to a widespread bureaucracy and lack of momentum in the region. That is, beside its idealistic aims, a major reason why so many eminent people within and outside the media community are attracted to SAFMA.

SAFMA's role in peace and confidence building is as a catalyst and a facilitator. SAFMA's most important capital is its credibility. SAFMA is widely respected as politically and ideologically unbiased, committed to peace, understanding and press freedom. It has no hidden agenda beyond these objectives. As SAFMA has a record for succeeding in bringing even high level Indian and Pakistani politicians together for dialogue, SAFMA is facing expectations in order to provide bridges in a number of sectors.

SAFMA's impact in easing the tension between India and Pakistan is difficult to measure in exact terms. The former Indian prime minister, Late I. K. Gurjal, told the RT that SAFMA made remarkable contributions to an improved relationship between India and Pakistan, "Development would not have been as positive without SAFMA" (M Akram, 2010).

However, the blast in Mumbai July 11th 2006, was a serious setback in the India-Pakistan relationship, affecting SAFMA's activities as well. Even if impact in peace and confidence building is more a matter of quality than of quantity, SAFMA has a potential in order to improve its monitoring mechanisms. Today, there is still a mission mood prevailing, where every SAFMA conference or initiative are labelled as "highly successful", without parameters sufficient for assessing the real effects.

As SAFMA's diplomatic efforts take a lot in terms of lobbying the political and social elite, warnings emerge that SAFMA should not forget its roots and core activities as primarily a media body. Even if SAFMA is not a trade union, a lot remains to be done in order to increase SAFMA's appeal among rank and file journalists. There is so far a newspaper bias, while electronic media, especially radio, seem underrated in SAFMA's activities, considering their important role as mass media in the region. However, the electronic media conference in Karachi has reinforced SAFMA's ranks with members from television and radio (Alf Skjeseth, Masood Hayat, Cyril Raphael, (2006).

2. RATIONALE

The media is widely seen as an institution that thrives on exacerbating conflict-whether in the domestic or international sphere, feeding on tension between individuals, political groups, and nations. The usual response to such an assessment depends on whether one is inside the newsroom or a practitioner of peace. Newsrooms abound with slogans such as 'if it bleeds it leads', while a peace practitioner's view is usually 'no news is good news'.

Attempts to involve media in 'peace building' are often centred on the need for media to adopt an ethical position, play an advocacy role in peace building, and work for the greater good. Media representatives routinely promise to fulfil such a role, but nothing changes. At most, a media organisation may carry out a campaign for peace, devote a couple of stories to the feel-good factor, and then move on. For every story on 'peace', there will be a hundred on war. The cycle seems never-ending. So what does one do to change this? Where the media and peace is concerned, we appear to be talking the same talk over and over again and wondering why we are not getting anywhere.

The fact is that rather than asking the media to rise above itself and become holier than it is, we should simply ask the media to fulfill its mandate-that of "informed journalism". Rather than advocating peace, the media should, first of all, be asked to report with some degree of accuracy, knowledge, and complexity on issues of concern, whether they are about tension, peace talks, or even issues related to commerce, livelihood, and social security, which often underlie conflict. This by itself will go a long way toward deconstructing the building blocks of conflict and enabling peace. SAFMA as a watchdog can be instrumental in initiating this type of discourse and help restoring some kind of norm to this profession in the sub-continent.

3. INDO-PAK PEACE PROCESS

Pakistan and India have been adversaries to each other since their independence. Besides having shared borders, both the countries have a number of things common to share; like religion, culture, language and holy places in either country. Media has become a driving force in opinion making and shaping of perceptions. It plays an important role in conveying information, forming opinions and setting of trends. It even affects social behaviour. Media's role in influencing national and international public opinion through round the clock coverage of worldwide events has grown immensely in today's ever more connected world. This phenomenon has led the media practitioners to play even greater role in influencing high-level international decision making. It can also help curbing social evils prevailing in the society (M Akram, 2010). Media is greatly promoting trade, business and cultural activities across the globe. Similarly, it can also help harmonize relations between Pakistan and India. South Asian Free Media Association (SAFMA) and *Jang Group* of Pakistan and *Times of India* are the media organizations working for the promotion of understanding between India and Pakistan to maintain durable peace and tranquility in South Asia.

4. SOUTH ASIAN FREE MEDIA ASSOCIATION (SAFMA)

SAFMA and its Indian and Pakistani chapters have, in addition, undertaken several exercises to connect Indian and Pakistani cities and regions, notably the Mumbai-Karachi-Mumbai exchange between the commercial capitals, the Punjab-Punjab exchange, and historical initiatives in order to bring journalists together across the LoC (Line of Control) in Kashmir. The conflict in the sub-continent could be explained in terms of missed opportunities, errors of judgment and the colonial overhang in policy making – victims of a system adopted in 1947 without much thought, Indian and Pakistanis need to break free (US Rana, 2008).

SAFMA feels that the best approach is to simultaneously tackle disputes without making regional/bi-lateral economic cooperation a hostage to the disputes. Conflict management, confidence-building and resolution of auxiliary issues will create necessary conditions to settle the major disputes among and within the states. Indo-Pak peace process will not move forward without replacing the respective nationalist ideologies of enmity with a new Paradigm of Detente that view bi-lateralism as mutually re-enforcing and equally rewarding. It is just not Indo-Pak relations that are vital to South Asian progress towards an economic union, relations between India and other neighbors are also very crucial for regional amity.

The Indian chapter of SAFMA is especially aware of India's special position in the region, bordering to all the SAARC countries, except Afghanistan. The Indian chapter takes on special assignments in order to assist media colleagues in troubled neighbouring countries.

For over four years, Pakistan and India have been engaged in a Composite Dialogue process. Discussions have been held on eight segments ranging from cooperation in bilateral trade to people to people contacts to addressing all outstanding issues including Kashmir. The overall objective has been to construct multi-faceted good neighborly relationship with India and build durable peace in the region. Consequently, there has been significant improvement in the atmospherics between the two countries. Until February 1994, India and Pakistan were engaged in sporadic dialogues that always ended with zero progress. This is why both countries formally suspended dialogue in 1994. Islamabad's approach was to settle the Kashmir issue first, after which the other problems would get settled almost automatically, whereas India was interested in dilating first on other issues, such as trade and travel. Eventually, to bridge the gap between the two positions, both governments agreed to address all political and territorial issues simultaneously, including Kashmir. Consequently, the foreign secretaries of the two countries met in Islamabad and resumed the stalled dialogue process in June 1997. They institutionalized the process by identifying eight areas to deliberate upon and established working groups to make progress on each issue separately but simultaneously. This entire process was called off when the Kargil confrontation occurred. Later, in 2004, India and Pakistan launched a renewed peace process aimed at resolving all their longstanding disputes (N Gul - 2007)

5. AMAN KI ASHA

Jang Group and *Times of India* have launched a comprehensive drive aimed at bringing peace between the two neighbours, which is a noteworthy effort on the part of media. Both the media houses have arranged a number of programmes to promote mutual trust between Pakistan and India in the sectors of culture, trade and commerce and education.

PEACE EFFORTS UNDER AMAN KI ASHA

Starting with a series of cross-border cultural interactions, business seminars, music and literary festivals and citizens meet that will give the bonds of humanity a chance to survive outside the battlefields of politics, terrorism and fundamentalism.

The world has entered the 21st century with lots of hope and expectation of progress and prosperity. Unfortunately, South Asia continues to remain the least developed region with the expected 'destiny' of rampant corruption, unemployment, poverty, illiteracy, economic fragility and political instability. The leadership of the respective countries has even failed to give its people any hope for a better future. The abysmal economic situation of the South Asian region can be seen from the fact that it "generates less than 2 per cent of world income, but it has 22 per cent of world's population, whereas 44 per cent of the world's poor live in this region."

With huge natural and human resources, the South Asian region has a potential to progress at a rapid speed. The only thing which is lacking is the political will among the respective countries to take bold decisions to resolve inter-state disputes, which have hindered the prospects for peace in the region. The most important challenge for both India and Pakistan is how to continue and sustain the dialogue process, which could lead to the establishment of perpetual peace between the two belligerents. Although both India and Pakistan have several times initiated talks on various contentious issues, including Kashmir, they failed to materialize them because of the deep element of mistrust. As a result of their failed ventures, the extremist tendencies on both sides of the border have strengthened. These extremist tendencies have not only caused the rise of terrorism, but also marginalized the saner elements on both sides of the border. It is, therefore, a high time to invite a third party for mediation in order to evolve a workable strategy for the resolution of the most pressing conflict, i.e., Kashmir, which has the potential to cause another war between India and Pakistan. In this regard, the US may be a suitable option because of its interests in the South Asian region in the wake of the GWOT.

6. SAFMA AND THE INDIA PAKISTAN RELATIONSHIP

SAFMA's untiring attempts towards establishing a dialogue on inter-state and intrastate conflicts and its contribution to the SAARC processes came of age in the "Pakistan – India Parliamentarians, Journalists and Experts Conference in Islamabad in August 2003." It was not an easy job to bring together the elected leadership of all major political parties of the subcontinent while involving the leading media persons and experts. The timing of the conference was quite hostile to the SAFMA initiative, yet it was able to surmount the difficulties and broke the ice for dialogue and confidence building measures to be announced in the aftermath of the conference. The chapters of Pakistan and India took the responsibility to organize this conference proposed by the SAFMA Secretariat. This became possible due to the support from the political leadership across all divides, besides the facilitation provided by the establishment Pakistan (Alf Skjeseth, Masood Hayat, Cyril Raphael, (2006).

The objective was to build support for the peace process across the party/country divides, develop understanding among the elected representatives of the people, explore areas of confidence-building and evaluate different options for conflict-management and conflict resolution. The whole exercise was designed to bring the peace question on the agenda of mainstream politics and the mainstream media that was, in fact, overwhelmingly achieved, given the level of participation, massive media coverage and response from the people. This was first of its kind of parliamentarians' conference with a mix of leading journalists and experts. With such a broad and all-sided representation of almost all parliamentary parties, represented in both the houses of two parliaments, the conference assumed the significance of an Indo-Pak parliament. Successfully held on August 10-11, 2003, at Islamabad, participation came from 30 members of Indian Parliament, officially representing 15 parties, and 35 leading editors/journalists and experts, 62 members of Pakistan's National Assembly and the Senate, representing almost all parties in the parliament, and 75 Pakistani journalists and experts. The total number of delegates was 202, whereas the observers in the opening and closing ceremonies crossed 250 participants.

In 2005, convening the 'South Asian Parliament' was not a small initiative that SAFMA undertook. A lot of research, analytical work and networking had to be undertaken and, above all, the political leadership across various divides in each country had to be taken into confidence. 83 members of parliament from almost all parliamentary parties represented in the legislatures of Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, with the approval of their party leadership, besides 68 leading journalists and experts. Representing all shades of opinion in each parliament and comprising 26 leading parliamentary parties, this was undoubtedly the first authentic and representative assembly of South Asia that met for six days in Islamabad and Bhurban, Pakistan, from May 15 to 20, 2005 (*ibid*).

SAFMA Parliamentary Forum deliberated upon major policy areas of regional cooperation and addressed most pivotal issues in its eight marathon sessions. A South Asian Vision, Economic Cooperation in South Asia, Water Issues and the Energy Grid, South Asian Parliament,

South Asian Human Rights Code, Cooperative Security in South Asia, Right to Know and Independence of Media and Bhurban Declaration on Evolving South Asian Fraternity.

SAFMA and its Indian and Pakistani chapters have, in addition, undertaken several exercises to connect Indian and Pakistani cities and regions, notably the Mumbai-Karachi-Mumbai exchange between the commercial capitals, the Punjab-Punjab exchange, and historical initiatives in order to bring journalists together across the LoC (Line of Control) in Kashmir.

The first ever visit of journalists from Pakistan to Jammu and Kashmir (Indian side of the LoC) is recalled as a moving event. The visiting journalists, who till then had to depend on indirect sources of information, were able to have a first-hand impression of the situation. Their encounter with the representatives of various groups was marked by warmth and candid exchanges. Likewise, a return visit by Indian journalists to the Pakistani side created the same emotions (M Akram, 2010). The conflict in the sub-continent could be explained in terms of missed opportunities, errors of judgment and the colonial overhang in policy making – victims of a system adopted in 1947 without much thought, Indian and Pakistan need to break the ice.

SAFMA feels that the best approach is to simultaneously tackle disputes without making regional/bi-lateral economic cooperation a hostage to the disputes. Conflict management, confidence-building and resolution of auxiliary issues will create necessary conditions to settle the major disputes among and within the states. SAFMA believes that Indo-Pak peace process will not move forward without replacing the respective nationalist ideologies of enmity with a new Paradigm of Detente that view bi-lateralism as mutually re-enforcing and equally rewarding (*ibid*).

7. INDIA'S POSITION

It is just not Indo-Pak relations that are vital to South Asian progress towards an economic union, relations between India and other neighbors are also very crucial for regional amity. The Indian chapter of SAFMA is especially aware of India's special position in the region, bordering to all the SAARC countries. The Indian chapter is prepared to take on special assignments in order to assist media colleagues in troubled neighboring countries. Indo-Bangladesh relations are passing through yet another uneasy phase of tension. It seems that New Delhi's complaints of Dhaka's alleged 'help' to militants from India's north-east and Bangladesh's concern over India's 'refusal' to correct the trade imbalance and differences over the river-linking project by New Delhi have strained their relations (Alf Skjeseth, Masood Hayat, Cyril Raphael, (2006).

SAFMA's achievements in bringing journalists together across all the divides are important symbolic gestures, even if the political impact is limited so far. Almost the whole of South Asia awaits solutions to disputes in order to tackle the real ailments. The pretext of inter or intrastate conflicts or 'war against terrorism' is being used to clip civil liberties, introduce draconian laws and suppress democratic aspirations of the people. Economic development through closer integration is not the chant of a few, it is admitting that South Asia can prosper together, as it is one geopolitical region, a region of extraordinary and interwoven cultures, languages and lifestyle.

The media has a twin task. It needs to nurture the spirit of cooperation and at the same time counter negative perceptions. This can only be achieved by operating within a framework of empathy, and by looking at issues with the sensibilities of the other. A responsible projection of issues which avoids dramatization and rejects stereotypes is an essential requirement of this process (*ibid*).

SAFMA can play a seminal role. SAFMA is a forum that provides an opportunity for close interaction in a cooperative framework between media persons of diverse political cultures, varied economics and societies. With such an array of peace building effort over past few years, pose new challenges for SAFMA, and opportunities to cement their relevance in the region.

The impact achieved by SAFMA's peace building initiatives comes by posing another question – what impact would there be in the region of South Asia, if no initiatives, such as SAFMA's, were taken?

8. CONCLUSION

Peace building between India-Pakistan remains an important mission for all the stakeholders in both countries, from politicians to media and civil society groups. No gain saying that in South Asia, where the state often acts as a closed, impermeable entity, it is quite difficult to create the space for dialogue and co-operation. After years of dormancy, both India and Pakistan have experienced a substantial growth. Unfortunately, these enormous socio-politico-cultural transformations are repeatedly captured by the rising rates of consumption, population, unemployment, aspiration, urbanization, inequality and conflict within the two countries.

In this context, South Asian Free Media Association (SAFMA) as a platform and agency of free media has attempted to step in and act as a bridge to this process. SAFMA has contributed to exchange of media personnel within the region and exchange of views among the members of the media community in the region. It arranges regular interaction between the media communities from across South Asia in a quest to identify common themes and positions that could enhance cooperation among regional countries.

Attempts to involve media in 'peace building' are often centered on the need for media to adopt an ethical position, play an advocacy role in peace building, and work for the greater good. Media representatives routinely promise to fulfill such a role, but nothing changes. At most, a media organisation may carry out a campaign for peace, devote a couple of stories to the feel-good factor, and then move on. For every story on 'peace', there will be a hundred on war. The cycle seems never-ending. So what needs to be done? Where the media and peace is concerned, it appears to be talking the same talk over and over again. Rather than asking the media to rise above itself and become holier than it is, the media to fulfill its mandate of 'informed journalism'. Rather than advocating peace, the media should, first of all, be asked to report with some degree of accuracy, knowledge, and complexity on issues of concern, whether they are about tension, peace talks, or even issues related to commerce, livelihood, and social security, which often underlie conflict. This by itself will go a long way toward deconstructing the building blocks of conflict and enabling peace.

Of course, media plays an increasingly important role in propagating mass wakefulness by shaping public opinion day in and day out. The cultural significance and value attached to Indo-Pak media, whether it's the print or audio-visual media, to the social and political life of people presents itself for greater understanding of shared history of India and Pakistan.

The media houses in India and Pakistan have played a commendable role in at least trying to bring these two countries together through their initiative of *Aman ki Asha* by SAFMA. The joint editorial statement of the *Jang* group in Pakistan and the *Times* group in India on the *Aman ki Asha* website reads: "This vast subcontinent senses the bounties a peace dividend can deliver to its people yet it recoils from claiming a share.

The natural impulse would be to break out of the straitjacket of stated positions and embrace an ideal that promises sustained prosperity to the region...”

It is true that media in both India and Pakistan is not value neutral. Media houses have economic interests run as corporate concerns. Therefore, media is vulnerable to pressures from power sections in the government and feel obliged to pursue official line. It is equally true that there are corporate houses opposed to government policies who through their media outlets propagate a totally contrarian perspective on the way the government functions. The media, thus, becomes a powerful tool in the domestic political context by propagating a particular view point it considers profitable and serves its business interests.

While the media has taken centre stage, the countries like India and Pakistan are yet to learn how to strike a balance between the people's right to know and the foreign policy compulsion that focuses on improving relations with its neighbours. The media has been provoking public emotions and has continuously fed itself on these emotions. The end result is a pervasive conspiratorial mind-set, emotionalism and negativity across the two countries.

Adding to this dilemma is the mushrooming of social media over which the governments of these countries have little control even as they contemplate measures to gag the media and stifle freedom of speech and expression. Besides, the media across the border is also severely constrained by government laws promulgated from time to time to have a control over the media.

In such a scenario, the role of SAFMA gets restricted. As expected, SAFMA is facing many bottlenecks in building a consistent and conducive atmosphere between the two countries. In spite of venturing out on various initiatives and plans, not much could be seen working on the ground. As long as chronic bilateral issues between India and Pakistan are not resolved through consistent political efforts, there is limited scope for SAFMA to chip in and aid in such process.

9. RECOMMENDATIONS

- Greater people to people contacts, connectivity across the borders, free movement of media persons without visas and media products across the Indo-Pak border.
- Stress upon governments of India and Pakistan to ensure access to information by adopting effective laws and regulations, ensure freedom of expression and protect mediapersons while performing their professional duties.
- India and Pakistan should evolve a consensus on isolating religious extremism, and SAFMA can take a lead role in initiating it.
- While SAFMA is focused on conflict and media, it should expand its role in the greater agenda of transforming and humanizing relations across India-Pakistan so that clouds of suspicion and hatred are eradicated.

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