

Peace is War

The Collateral Damage of Breaking News

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There's been a delicious debate in the Indian press of late. A prominent English daily announced that it would sell space on Page Three (its gossip section) to anyone who was willing to pay to be featured. (The inference is that the rest of the news in the paper is in some way unsponsored, unsullied, 'pure news'.) The announcement provoked a series of responses – most of them outraged – that the proud tradition of impartial journalism could sink to such depths. Personally, I was delighted. For a major mainstream newspaper to introduce the notion of 'paid for' news (Noam Chomsky, Ed Herman and a few others have been going on about it for some years now) is a giant step forward in the project of educating a largely credulous public about how the mass media operates. Once the idea of 'paid for' news has been mooted, once it's been ushered through the portals of popular imagination, it won't be hard for people to work out that if gossip columns in newspapers can be auctioned, why not the rest of the column space? After all, in this age of the 'Market', when everything's up for sale – rivers, forests, freedom, democracy and justice – what's special about news? Sponsored News – what a delectable idea! "This report is brought to you by". There could be a State regulated sliding scale for rates (headlines, pg. 1, pg. 2, sports section etc.) Or on second thought we could leave that to be regulated by the 'Free Market' – as it is now. Why change a winning formula?

The debate about whether mass circulation newspapers and commercial TV channels are finely plotted ideological conspiracies or apolitical, benign anarchies that bumble along as best they can, is an old one and needs no elaboration. After the September 11th attack on the World Trade Centre, the US mainstream media's blatant performance as the government's mouthpiece was the butt of some pretty black humour in the rest of the world. It brought the myth of the 'Free Press' in America crashing down. But before we gloat – the Indian mass media behaved no differently during the Pokhran nuclear tests and the Kargil war. There was no bumbling and very little that was benign in the shameful coverage of the December 13th attack on the Indian Parliament and the trial of S.A.R. Geelani who has been sentenced to death by a sessions court – after having been the subject of a media trial fuelled by a campaign of nationalist hysteria and outright lies. On a more everyday basis, would anybody who depends on the Indian mass media for information know that 80,000 people have been killed in Kashmir since 1989, most of them Muslim, most of them by Indian security forces? Most Indians would be outraged if it were suggested to them that the killings and 'disappearances' in the Kashmir Valley put India on par with any Banana Republic.

Modern democracies have been around for long enough for neo-liberal capitalists to learn how to subvert them. They have mastered the technique of infiltrating the instruments of democracy – the ‘independent’ judiciary, the ‘free’ press, the parliament – and moulding them to their purpose. The project of corporate globalization has cracked the code. Free elections, a free press and an independent judiciary mean little when the free market has reduced them to commodities available on sale to the highest bidder.

To control a democracy, it is becoming more and more vital to control the media. Few know this better than the prime minister of Italy, Silvio Berlusconi. He controls ninety percent of Italy’s TV viewership. The principal media in America is owned by six companies. Four conglomerates are on the verge of controlling ninety percent of America’s terrestrial and cable audience. Even internet websites are being colonized by giant media corporations.

It’s a mistake to think that the corporate media supports the neo-liberal project. It is the neo-liberal project. It is the nexus, the confluence, the convergence, the union, the chosen medium of those who have power and money. As the project of Corporate Globalization increases the disparity between the rich and the poor, as the world grows more and more restive, corporations on the prowl for sweetheart deals need repressive governments to quell the mutinies in the servants’ quarters. And governments, of course, need corporations. This mutual dependency spawns a sort of Corporate Nationalism, or, more accurately, a Corporate/Nationalism – if you can imagine such a thing. Corporate/Nationalism has become the unwavering anthem of the mass media.

One of our main tasks is to expose the complex mess of cables that connect Power to Money to the supposedly ‘neutral’ Free Press.

In the last couple of years, New Media has embarked on just such an enterprise. It has descended on Old Media like an annoying swarm of bees buzzing around an old buffalo, going where it goes, stopping where it stops, commenting on and critiquing its every move. New Media has managed to not transform but to create the possibility of transforming conventional mass media from the sophisticated propaganda machine, that Chomsky and Herman wrote about, into a vast CD Rom. Picture it: the old buffalo is the text, the bees are the hyperlinks that deconstruct it. Click a bee, get the inside story.

Basically, for the lucky few who have access to the internet, the mass media has been contextualized, and shown up for what it really is – an elaborate boardroom bulletin that reports and analyses the concerns of powerful people. For the bees it’s a phenomenal achievement. For the buffalo, obviously, it’s not much fun.

For the bees (the nice, lefty ones) it’s a significant victory, but by no means a conquest. Because it’s still the annoyed buffalo stumbling across the plains, lurching from crisis to crisis, from war to war, who sets the pace. It’s still the buffalo that decides which particular crisis will be the main course on the menu and what’s for dessert. So here we are today, the buffalo and the bees – on the verge of a war that could redraw the political map of the world and alter the course of history. As the US gears up to attack Iraq, the US government’s lies are being amplified, its re-heated doctrine of pre-emptive strike talked up, its war machine deployed. There is still no sign of Iraq’s so-called arsenal of Weapons of Mass Destruction.

Even before the next phase of the war – the American occupation of Iraq – has begun (the war itself is thirteen years old), thanks to the busy bees the extent and scale, the speed and strength of the mobilization against the war has been unprecedented in history. On the 15th of February, in an extraordinary display of public morality, millions of people took to the streets in 750 cities across the world to protest against the invasion of Iraq. If the US government and its Allies choose to ignore this and continue with their plans to invade and occupy Iraq, it could bring about a serious predicament in the modern world's understanding of democracy.

But then again, maybe we'll get used to it. Governments have learned to wait out crises – because they know that crises by definition must be short-lived. They know that a crises-driven media simply cannot afford to hang about in the same place for too long. It must be off for its next appointment with the next crisis. Like business houses need a cash-turnover, the media needs a crisis turnover. The US Government hopes that Iraq can be occupied, as Afghanistan has been. As Tibet has been. As Palestine has been. All the US government needs to do (or so it believes), is hunker down and wait. Once the crisis has been consumed by the media, picked to the bone, its carcass will gradually slip off the best-seller charts. And once the media's attention shifts, it shifts decisively. Whole countries become old news. They cease to exist. And the darkness becomes deeper than it was before the light was shone on them. We saw that in Afghanistan when the Soviets withdrew. We are being given a repeat performance now. Eventually when the buffalo stumbles away, the bees go too.

Crisis Reportage in the twenty-first century has evolved into an independent discipline – almost a science. The money, the technology and the orchestrated mass hysteria that goes into crisis reporting have a curious effect. Crisis reporting isolates the crisis, unmoors it from the particularities of the history, the geography, and the culture that produced it. Eventually it floats free, like a hot-air balloon carrying its cargo of international gladflies – specialists, analysts, foreign correspondents and crises photographers with their enormous telephoto lenses.

Somewhere mid-journey and without prior notice, the gladflies auto-eject, and parachute down to the site of the next crisis, leaving the crestfallen, abandoned balloon drifting aimlessly in the sky, pathetically masquerading as a current event, hoping it will at least make history... There are few things sadder than a consumed, spent crisis. (For field research, look up Afghanistan 2002, Gujarat, India, 2003 A.D.)

Crisis reportage has left us with a double-edged legacy. While governments hone the art of crises management (the art of waiting out a crisis), resistance movements are increasingly being ensnared in a sort of vortex of crisis production. They have to find ways of precipitating crises, of manufacturing them in easily consumable, spectator friendly, formats. We have entered the era of crises as a consumer item, crisis as spectacle, as theatre. It's not new, but it's evolving, morphing, taking on new aspects. Flying planes into buildings is its most modern, most extreme form.

Crisis as Spectacle, as political theatre, has a history. Gandhi's salt march to Dandi is among the most exhilarating examples. But the salt march was not theatre alone. It was the symbolic part of an act of real civil disobedience. As a result of the Dandi March, thousands of Indians across the country began to make their own salt, thereby openly defying Imperial

Britain's salt tax laws. It was a direct strike at the economic underpinning of the British Empire.

The disturbing thing nowadays is that Crisis as Spectacle has cut loose from its origins in genuine, long-term civil disobedience and is gradually becoming an instrument of resistance that is more symbolic than real. Also, it has begun to stray into other territory. Right now, it's blurring the lines that separate resistance movements from campaigns by political parties. I'm thinking here of L.K. Advani's *Rath Yatra*, which eventually led to the demolition of the Babri Masjid, and of the '*kar seva*' campaign for the construction of the Ram Temple at Ayodhya which is brought to a boil by the *Sangh Parivar* each time elections come around.

Both resistance movements and political election campaigns are in search of Spectacle – though, of course, the kind of spectacle they choose differs vastly.

On the occasions when symbolic political theatre shades into action that actually breaks the law – then it is the response of the State which usually provides the clarity to differentiate between a campaign by a political party and an action by a peoples' resistance movement. For instance, the police never opened fire on the rampaging mob that demolished the Babri Masjid, or those who participated in the genocidal campaign by the Congress Party against Sikhs in Delhi in 1984, or the Shiv Sena's massacre of Muslims in Bombay in 1993, or the BJP/VHP/Bajrang Dal's genocide against Muslims in Gujarat in 2002. Neither the police, nor the courts, nor the government has taken action against anybody who participated in this violence.

Yet recently the police has repeatedly opened fire on unarmed people, including women and children, who have protested against the violation of their rights to life and livelihood by the government's 'development projects'.

In this era of crises reportage, if you don't have a crisis to call your own, you're not in the news. And if you're not in the news, you don't exist. It's as though the virtual world constructed in the media has become more real than the real world.

Every self-respecting peoples' movement, every 'issue' needs to have its own hot-air balloon in the sky advertising its brand and purpose. For this reason, starvation deaths are more effective advertisements for drought and skewed Food Distribution than cases of severe malnutrition – which don't quite make the cut. Standing in the rising water of a reservoir for days on end, watching your home and belongings float away to protest against a big dam, used to be an effective strategy, but isn't any more. People resisting dams are expected to either conjure new tricks, or give up the struggle. In the despair created by the Supreme Court's appalling judgement on the Sardar Sarovar Dam, senior activists of the *Narmada Bachao Andolan* began once again to talk of *Jal Samarpan* – drowning themselves in the rising waters. They were mocked for not really meaning what they said.

Crisis as a Blood Sport.

The Indian State and the mass media have shown themselves to be benignly tolerant of the phenomenon of Resistance as a Symbolic Spectacle. (It actually helps them to hold down the country's reputation as the World's Biggest Democracy). But whenever civil resistance has shown the slightest signs of metamorphosing from symbolic acts (*dharnas*, demonstrations, hunger strikes) into anything remotely resembling genuine civil disobedience

(blockading villages, occupying forestland) the State has cracked down mercilessly.

In April 2001 the police opened fire on a peaceful meeting of the *Adivasi Mukti Sangathan* in Mehndi Kheda, Madhya Pradesh; on the 2nd of February 2001 police fired on a peaceful protest of Munda Adivasis in Jharkhand, who were part of the protest against the *Koel Karo* hydroelectric, killing eight people and wounding thirty-six; on the 7th of April 2001, the State Reserve Police *lathi*-charged a peaceful demonstration by the *Kinara Bachao Andolan* against the consortium of NATELCO and UNOCAL who were trying to do a survey for a proposed private port. Lt Col Pratap Salve, one of the main activists, was beaten to death. On the 31st of October 2001, in Rayagada, Orissa, three *adivasis* were killed for protesting a bauxite mining project. On the 11th of November, at a peaceful protest against these killings, two more *adivasis* were killed. In Chilika, police fired on fisherfolk demanding the restoration of their fishing rights. Five people were killed.

The instances of repression go on and on – Jambudweep, Kashipur, Maikanj; the most recent of course is the incident in the Muthanga in Wyanad, Kerala. In February 2003 four thousand displaced *adivasis*, including women and children, occupied a small part of a wild-life sanctuary demanding that they be given the land the government had promised them the previous year. The deadline had come and gone and there had been no sign that the government had any intention of keeping its word. As the tension built up over the days, the Kerala Police surrounded the protestors and opened fire, killing one person and severely injuring several.

Interestingly, when it comes to the poor, and in particular *Dalit* and *Adivasi* communities, they get killed for encroaching on forest land (Muthanga), as well as when they're trying to protect forest land from dams, mining operations, steel plants (*Koel Karo*, Nagarnar).

In almost every instance of police firing, the State's strategy is to say that the firing was provoked by an act of violence. Those who have been fired upon are immediately called militants (PWG, MCC, ISI, LTTE). In Muthanga, the police and the government claimed that the *adivasis* had staged an armed insurrection and attempted to set up a parallel government. The speaker of the Kerala Assembly said that they should have either have been "suppressed or shot".

At the scene of the firing, the police had put together an 'ammunition display'. It consisted of some stones, a couple of sickles and axes, bows and arrows and a few kitchen knives. One of the major weapons used in the uprising was a polythene bag full of bees. (Imagine the young man collecting bees in the forest to protect himself and his little family against the Kerala Police. What a delightful parallel government his would be!)

According to the State, when victims refuse to be victims, they become terrorists and are dealt with as such. They're either killed or arrested under POTA (Prevention of Terrorism Act). In states like Orissa, Bihar and Jharkhand which are rich in mineral resources and therefore vulnerable to ruthless corporations on the hunt, hundreds of villagers, including minors, have been arrested under POTA and are being held in jail without trial. Some states have special police battalions for 'anti-development' activity. This is quite apart from the other use that POTA is being put to – terrorizing Muslims – particularly in states like Jammu & Kashmir and Gujarat. The space for genuine non-violent civil disobedience is atrophying. In the era of Corporate Globalization, poverty is a crime, and protesting against

further impoverishment is terrorism. In the era of the War on Terror, poverty is being slyly conflated with terrorism.

Anyone who protests against the violation of their human and constitutional rights is labelled a terrorist, and this can end up becoming a self-fulfilling accusation. When every avenue of non-violent dissent is closed down, should we really be surprised that the forests are filling up with extremists, insurgents and militants? Vast parts of the country are already more or less beyond the control of the State – Kashmir, the North-east, large parts of Madhya Pradesh, Chattisgarh and Jharkhand.

It is utterly urgent for resistance movements, and those of us who support them, to reclaim the space for civil disobedience. To do this we will have to liberate ourselves from being manipulated, perverted and headed off in the wrong direction by the desire to feed the media's endless appetite for theatre because that saps energy and imagination.

There are signs that the battle has been joined. At a massive rally on the 27th of February the *Nimad Malwa Kisan Mazdoor Sangathan* (Nimad Malwa Farmers and Workers' Organization) in its protest against the privatization of power, declared that farmers and agricultural workers would not pay their electricity bills. The MP government has not yet responded. It will be interesting to see what happens.

We have to find a way of forcing the real issues back into the news. For example, the real issue in the Narmada Valley is not whether people will drown themselves or not. The NBA's strategies, its successes and failures are an issue, but a separate issue from the problem of Big Dams.

The real issue is that the privatization of essential infrastructure is essentially undemocratic. The real issue is the towering mass of incriminating evidence against Big Dams. The real issue is the fact that over the last fifty years in India alone Big Dams have displaced more than 33 million people. The real issue is the fact that Big Dams are obsolete. They're ecologically destructive, economically unviable and politically undemocratic. The real issue is the fact that the Supreme Court of India ordered the construction of the Sardar Sarovar dam to proceed even though it is aware that it violates the fundamental rights to life and livelihood of the citizens of India.

Unfortunately, the mass media, through a combination of ignorance and design, has framed the whole argument as one between those who are pro-development and those who are anti-development. It slyly suggests that the NBA is anti-electricity and anti-irrigation. And of course, anti-Gujarat. This is complete nonsense. The NBA believes that Big Dams are obsolete. They're not just bad for displaced people; they're bad for Gujarat too. They're too expensive, the water will not go where it's supposed to, and eventually, the area that is supposed to 'benefit' will pay a heavy price, like what is happening in the command area of India's favourite dam – the Bhakra Nangal. The NBA believes that there are more local, more democratic, ecologically sustainable, economically viable ways of generating electricity and managing water systems. It is demanding more modernity, not less. More democracy, not less.

After the Supreme Court delivered what is generally considered to be a knockout blow to the most spectacular resistance movement in India, the vultures are back, circling over the kill. The World Bank's new Water Resources Section strategy has announced that it will return to its policy of funding Big Dams. Meanwhile the Indian Government, directed by the

venerable Supreme Court, has trundled out an ancient, hair-brained, Stalinist scheme of linking India's rivers. The order was given based on no real information or research – just on the whim of an ageing judge. The river linking project makes Big Dams look like enlightenment itself. It will become to the Development debate what the *Ram Mandir* (Ram Temple) in Ayodhya is to the communal debate – a venal campaign gimmick that can be rolled out just before every election. It is destructive even if it is never realized. It will be used to block every other more local, more effective, more democratic irrigation project. It will be used to siphon off enormous sums of public money.

Linking India's rivers would lead to massive social upheavals and ecological devastation. Any modern ecologist who hears about this plan bursts out laughing. Yet leading papers and journals like *India Today* and *Indian Express* carry laudatory pieces full of absurd information.

Coming back to the tyranny of crisis reportage – one way to cut loose is to understand that for most people in the world, peace is war: a daily battle against hunger, thirst and the violation of their dignity. Wars are often the end result of a flawed peace, a putative peace. And it is the flaws, the systemic flaws in what is normally considered to be 'peace', that we ought to be writing about. We have to – at least some of us – have to become peace correspondents instead of war correspondents. We have to lose our terror of the mundane. We have to use our skills and imagination and our art to recreate the rhythms of the endless crisis of normality, and in doing so, expose the policies and processes that make ordinary things – food, water, shelter and dignity – such a distant dream for ordinary people.

Most important of all, we have to turn our skills towards understanding and exposing the instruments of the State. In India, for instance, the institution that is least scrutinized and least accountable makes every major political, cultural and executive decision today. The Indian Supreme Court is one of the most powerful courts in the world. It decides whether dams should be built or not, whether slums should be cleared, whether industry should be removed from urban areas. It makes decisions on issues like privatization and disinvestments, on the content of school textbooks. It micro-manages our lives. Its orders affect the lives of millions of people. Whether you agree with the Supreme Court's decisions – all of them, some of them, none of them – or not, as an institution the Supreme Court has to be accountable. In a democracy you have checks and balances, not hierarchies. And yet, because of the Contempt of Court law, we cannot criticize the Supreme Court or call it to account. How can you have an undemocratic institution in a democratic society? It will automatically become a floor trap that accumulates authority, that confers supreme powers on itself. And that's exactly what has happened. We live in a judicial dictatorship. And we don't seem to have even begun to realize it.

The only way to make democracy real is to begin a process of constant questioning, permanent provocation and continuous public conversation between citizens and the State. That conversation is quite different from the conversation between political parties. (Representing the views of rival political parties is what the mass media thinks of as 'balanced' reporting). Patrolling the borders of our liberty is the only way we can guard against the snatching away of our freedoms. All over the world today, freedoms are being curbed in the name of protecting freedom. Once freedoms are surrendered by civil

society, they cannot be retrieved without a struggle. It is so much easier to relinquish them than to recover them.

It is important to remember that our freedoms, such as they are, were never given to us by any government; they have been wrested by us. If we do not use them, if we do not test them from time to time, they atrophy. If we do not guard them constantly, they will be taken away from us. If we do not demand more and more, we will be left with less and less.

Understanding these things and then using them as tools to interrogate what we consider 'normalcy' is a way of subverting the tyranny of crises reportage.

Finally, there's another worrying kind of collateral damage caused by crisis reportage. Crisis reportage flips history over, turns it belly up. It tells stories back to front. So, we begin with the news of a crisis and end (if we're lucky) with an account of the events that led to it. For example, we enter the history of Afghanistan through the debris of the World Trade Centre in New York, the history of Iraq through 'Operation Desert Storm'. We enter the story of the *adivasi* struggle for justice in Kerala through the news of police firing on those who dared to encroach onto a wildlife sanctuary. Crises reportage forces us to view a complex evolving historical process through the distorting prism of a single current event.

Crises polarize people. They hustle us into making uninformed choices: You're either with us with the terrorists. You're either pro-privatization or pro-State. If you're not pro-Bush, you're pro-Saddam Hussein. If you're not good, you're evil.

These are spurious choices. They are not the only ones available to us. But in a crisis, we become like goalkeepers in a penalty shoot-out of a soccer match. We imagine that we have to commit ourselves to one side or another. We have nothing to go on but instinct and social conditioning. And once we're committed, it's hard to re-align oneself. In this process, those who ought to be natural allies become enemies.

For example, when the police fired on the *adivasis* who 'encroached' on the wildlife sanctuary in Muthanga, environmentalists did not come to their defence because they were outraged that the *adivasis* had dared to encroach on a wildlife sanctuary. It was not reported that in actual fact, the 'sanctuary' was actually a eucalyptus plantation. Years ago, old-growth forest had been clear-felled by the government to plant eucalyptus for the Birla's Grasim Rayon Factory set up in 1959. A huge mass of incriminating data accuses the factory of devastating the bamboo forests in the region, polluting the Chaliyar river, emitting toxins into the air and causing a great deal of suffering to a great number of people. In the name of employing 3,000 people, it destroyed the livelihood of what has been estimated to be about 300,000 bamboo-workers, sand-miners and fishermen. The state government did nothing to control the pollution or the destruction of forests and rivers. There was no police firing at the owners or managers of Grasim. But then, they had not committed the crime of being poor, being *adivasi*, or being on the brink of starvation. When the natural resources (bamboo, eucalyptus pulp) ran out, the factory closed down. The workers were never compensated.

Crises reportage elides these facts and forces people to make uniformed choices.

The real crises, the dispossession, the disempowerment, the daily violation of the democratic rights and the dignity of not thousands, but millions of people that has been set

into motion not by accident but by deliberate design, does not fit into the pre-determined format of crisis reporting.

Fifteen years ago, the corrupt, centralized Indian State was too grand, too top-heavy and too far away for its poor to have access to it – to its institutions of education, of health, of water supply and electricity. Even its sewage system was inaccessible, too good for most. Today, the project of Corporate Globalization has increased the distance between those who make the decisions and those who must suffer them even more. For the poor, the uneducated, the displaced and dispossessed, that distance puts justice out of reach.

The unrelenting daily grind of injustice goes unreported and the silent, unformatted battle spreads subcutaneously through our society, ushering us towards a future that doesn't bear thinking about.

But we continue sailing on our Titanic as it tilts slowly into the darkened sea. The deckhands panic. Those with cheaper tickets have begun to be washed away. But in the banquet halls, the music plays on. The only signs of trouble are slightly slanting waiters, the kebabs and canapés sliding to one side of their silver trays, the somewhat exaggerated sloshing of the wine in the crystal wine glasses. The rich are comforted by the knowledge that the lifeboats on the deck are reserved for club class passengers. The tragedy is that they are probably right.

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