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# Pakistan Media Sphere and Public Sphere Negotiating the Concept of Taliban

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The concept of bourgeoisie public sphere was aspiring for enlightenment and a rational discourse in the domains of arts and sciences. Print media and interpersonal communications at clubs and coffee houses helped to flourish that public sphere. However, the development and growth of electronic media and its extension beyond the geographical boundaries blurred the demarcations and the new information and communication technologies tried to bridge the 'private' and the 'proletariat'. From print to electronic global systems, communication media have created a new form of 'publicness' to the extent where individuals are networked across radically different spatial-temporal locales. Taliban, through the annals of history, have been receiving different discourses. Dictatorial/Military regime of Zia-ul-Haq that popularized itself around the discourses of Islam and Islamization process legitimized the idea of Taliban through state controlled media and tried to win the popular consent of people. Repressive State Apparatuses (RSAs) were equally used along with Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) to disseminate and popularize the 'Islamization' idea of power elite as the ruling idea for winning the consent. Now, in the channel and choice oriented society, formalism and realism are used to construct the face of enemy. That enemy is 'Taliban' who are suppressing women rights, trying to impose Sharia Laws, and challenging the writ of the state. Contrapuntal texts can help to formulate a balanced, informed,

mature and solid public opinion. Projection and promotion of contrapuntal texts through information and communication technologies can rescue us from traps.

## **Media Sphere and Public Sphere Negotiating the Concept of Taliban**

The term 'media sphere' is a synthesis of two spheres; public sphere, and semiosphere. The concept of public sphere given by Habermas is historical. He indicated a community of diplomats, lawyers, scholars, doctors, pastors, teachers, manufacturers, merchants as 'bourgeoisie public sphere.' In the late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century that community was engaged in rational discourses and aspiring for enlightenment. Journalists were the members of that community. Social interactions of the community members at clubs and coffee houses helped to flourish that public sphere. However, the development and growth of electronic media and its extension beyond the geographical boundaries blurred the demarcations and the new information and communication technologies tried to facilitate the local and the global; private and the public; bourgeoisie and the proletariat. Thus 'media sphere' synthesized 'public sphere' and the 'semiosphere'. The concept of 'semiosphere' pertains to semiotic spaces and cultural landscape. Lotman (1990) explains how stories and other narrative forms are organized within the semiotic spaces. It deals with mass culture production and administration by corporations and dominant elites as well as its mass consumptions. Cultural industries are a major tool to facilitate political and ideological dimensions of semiosphere. Many studies about media contents corroborate this argument for example Jack Shaheen's study about the images of Arab Muslims in the Hollywood movies deals with the same issue.

According to John Thompson<sup>1</sup> (1994) communication media have created a new form of 'publicness' for print as well as electronic media systems that have a global reach. Electronic media has rubbed the boundaries to the extent that individuals are

networked across radically different spatial-temporal locales. In a channel and choice oriented media, "all the world can learn about world events is what New York, London, or Paris chooses to tell them" (Farrar, 1997, p. 38). That is how ideas getting consent at global level, effectively becoming the ruling ideas and transgressing the state boundaries. This phenomenon is facilitating developed world to control and rule developing countries through 'electronic colonialism' because developing countries are dependant on developed world for media hardware as well as software. Media conglomeration trends are practically giving this power to few people/groups whose majority belongs to America. So, the 'publicness' created through the prevailing media is indirectly controlled and maneuvered by conglomerate media owners and stakeholders.

Taliban's literal meaning is 'students.' Talibans have been projected and perceived in different and drastic ways through the annals of media voices and semio-sphere. Before the demise of communism, Taliban were getting a positive treatment in the international media. During the General Zia-ul-Haq's military regime, Pakistani media served to facilitate the repressive state apparatuses and became a mouthpiece of ruling class. At that time media was controlled by the then praetorian government. Television and radio were particularly run by the state. That's how Zia-ul-Haq's idea of Islamization became the ruling idea because the dominant public discourses were 'Orthodox Islam'. Afghan Taliban were not framed in terms of 'the Other' and the voiced public opinion was favoring them. Due to financial constraints and profit maximization, Pakistani print media were relying on international news agencies for news coverage. They were publishing the 'pre-framed' image of Taliban constructed and maneuvered by the west. International news agencies were exporting such ideas throughout the world. At that time media were not framing a negative image of 'Afghan Taliban'. That's why many Pakistanis wanted to support Taliban and took part in 'Jihad'. As the American interests vanished from the region after

the demise of Soviet Union, Taliban's image started changing gradually. 'Good guys' were changed into 'bad guys' in media sphere that affected both semiosphere and public sphere. After 9/11 all the dominant discourses were presenting Taliban as 'bad guys', viewed as fundamentalists and orthodox who wanted to grab powers from the 'moderate' Muslims. They got the labels of 'Terrorists' and 'extremists' from the International as well as Pakistani media.

Tellis (2008), a senior associate at Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, submitted report to U.S. House of Foreign Affairs subcommittee about five distinct categories of terrorist groups in Pakistan including sectarian, anti-Indian, Afghan Taliban, Al-Qaeda and its affiliates, and The Pakistani Taliban. The definitions and discourses about the term terrorist are relative and described by the West that is why all the research and reports about Talibans are formulated in those dominant and prevailing discourses set by the West. The word 'Taliban' has been used for those trained in the *medresses* established by power axis. According to Mark Zepezauer:

In 1983, Reagan created the National Endowment for Democracy to channel funds from government grants to the Afghanistan Information Center and the American Friends of Afghanistan in support of media projections to promote Taliban. A \$500,000 federally funded Afghan Media Project administered through AID, was created because the world press was not reporting "the truth" about conditions in the Afghan war. (On-line article)

It is no secret, especially in the region, that the United States, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia have been supporting the fundamentalist Taliban in their war for control of Afghanistan for some time. In the past, US never openly acknowledged this connection but it is confirmed by both intelligence sources and charitable institutions in Pakistan" (Schumann, 1997).

According to Greg Bruno *medresses* were set up to create resistance (labeled as Jihad) against Soviet occupation of Afghanistan by United States, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. Billions of dollars were allocated for this mission. On 24<sup>th</sup> April 2009, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton admitted the role of America in creating Taliban which was reported in many newspapers including Pakistani dailies; *The Nation, Dawn*, Indian dailies; *Times of India, Thaindian News* etc. Pakistani newspaper daily *Dawn* covered it under the headline 'US created Taliban and abandoned Pakistan: Clinton'. Daily *The Nation* reported her saying about Taliban "the people we are fighting today, we funded 20 years ago." She said that America was quite apprehensive about the Soviet Union's intentions to control Central Asia after its invasion on Afghanistan.

In the first week of May 2009, a meeting took place among the presidents of America, Pakistan and Afghanistan in Washington regarding the Taliban. President of Pakistan Mr. Asif Ali Zardari in an interview to the NBC's programme 'Meet the Press' on May 7<sup>th</sup> 2009, admitted that CIA and ISI created Taliban.

It is a known fact that Pakistan's foreign policy has been designed under the influence of America. Even the Pakistani media, due to its dependence on the West for foreign news, borrowed the 'imported' image of the Taliban. The Taliban ruled over Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001 when the US attacked Afghanistan. Taliban during their rule implemented Islamic *Sharia* and completely uprooted the cultivation of poppy seed. Until 2001, Pakistan was amongst the three countries that officially recognized the Taliban government in Afghanistan. It was after the attack on Afghanistan by the United States that Musharraf's government changed its stance and Pakistan became United States' active ally in war against terrorism (Asar, F). Pakistan's nurturing and sponsoring Taliban was abandoned as Pakistani military

conducted raids into the tribal areas to combat Afghan Taliban spilling across the Afghan border. Small militant tribes who were opposing the federal government's control began to coordinate and formed Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) in 2002. TTP has nothing to do with Afghan Taliban as they have also denied any link with them. Naturally the question arises why they are labeled as 'Taliban'? Mariam Ridley, a British journalist who worked in Afghanistan during Taliban's regime embraced Islam. She authored a book about her experiences in Afghanistan. She was very much impressed with Taliban's dealings in all spheres of life. The image of Taliban as 'good guys' was very detrimental to capitalist ideology and anti Islam forces, so it became the necessity of the west to attach a negative connotation to the word Taliban. Analyses of the media content after 9/11 facilitate the argument that how militants of the Pakistani tribal areas were labeled as Taliban. Implied meaning of the word 'Taliban' is student but the Pakistani militants labeled as Taliban do not know even the basics of Islam. They have never been students of any *medresses* but they are known as Taliban in the dominant ideology.

Ideological state apparatuses help to shape understanding about reality, articulate behaviors, and influence upon the concept of good and bad. Ideology refers to "the taken for granted assumptions about reality that influence perceptions of situations and events"(Deetz & Kersten, 1983, p. 162). Assumptions of ideology are rarely questioned or scrutinized. Education is one of the effective and important tools in the ideological state apparatuses that help to inculcate peculiar thinking patterns and tame the brilliance. Miller (2002) explains this point by quoting Morrow, "For all his wisdom Aristotle could not criticize Athenian slavery because he was a prisoner of the 'spirit' of his time; only later, with the development of the universal 'right of man,' did this criticism become possible" (p. 61).

The ideological state apparatuses (ISAs) of Pakistan including literature, art, media, and cultural production tools started

representing Taliban as extremely detrimental to the peaceful society who want to deprive women of their rights and restrict them to the family surroundings. Media sphere connected the voiced political and public discernment about Taliban with the dominant anti-Muslim cultural orchestra. Although the voiced public opinion is not always the opinion of the majority but media, through its agenda-setting role, can project that opinion as dominant opinion. For example, during the first week of April 2009, an anonymous person made a video on a mobile phone in which a man was flogging a seventeen years old girl. The 'flogging video' was uploaded on the internet and followed by local television coverage. All the national and international media voiced that Taliban are indulged in this flogging event and projected Taliban as proclaiming that the girl was having illicit relations with her father in law. Political forces and local residents termed it as 'a drama' staged to give a bad name to Pakistan and Islam and to sabotage peace deal in Swat. That's how media sphere 'operates as a two-way mediation between an inner political-economic-public sphere and an outer textual-cultural semiosphere' (Lotman, 1996). According to an Associated Press report compiled in June 2009, by Paul Alexander, many people who used to support the Taliban are no longer their supporters. The finding is supported by those of Pakistani analysts and commentators, who say that they detect a similar shift in public opinion recently against the Taliban after the flogging event.

Today, people believe that they are provided with channel and choice oriented media, so they can glean the truth easily. But the fact is that every bit of information is filtered at various levels. There are thousands of embedded journalists working with CNN, so the information we receive through the prism of media is always engineered and used to manufacture consent. Where the outcome is unfavorable, it is declared untrue. For example in Palestinian Legislative Council elections of 2006, HAMAS secured 74 out of 132 seats and obtained 42.9% votes. It was a clean sweep but the George W. Bush administration immediately

declared not to deal with HAMAS owing to its Islamists ideology. Israel during 2009 conflict with Palestine refused the journalists to enter and cover the occurrences. Israeli Supreme Court through an order denied permission to any foreign journalist for the coverage. But in case of Taliban all the world's media is allowed to cover them in their own way and local voices are absent in the media. Pakistani media labels Federally Administered Tribal Areas' militants as 'Talibans.' Military is engaged in a war against them. Many questions arise in this situation including how the military recognizes militants as 'Talibans' when they are not counter attacking. Why are Pakistani forces following the policy to kill militants rather to capture and investigate them? How the government justifies US drones attacks in the North West Frontier Province? Media do not approach these questions from different dimensions.

According to post modernism and post structuralism truth is subjective and there can be many manifestations of the truth. Language is embedded in power structures that empower it for distortions, untruth, framing and domination of particular contexts and perspectives. Hackett (1984) pointed out that "framing is not necessarily a conscious process on the part of journalists; it may well be the result of the unconscious absorption of assumptions about the social world in which the news must be embedded in order to be intelligible to its intended audience." This argument has blurred the boundaries between realism and formalism. Taliban's image in both traditions is tempered and maneuvered at local as well as global level. Pakistani media is projecting limited voices so far as 'Talibans' are concerned. Journalists working in print media are appearing as analysts and experts on television channels and radio to explain 'Taliban' phenomenon that results in the projection of limited voices, myopic vision and dominant opinion that govern the media scene. Though the remedy has been suggested by the west for such dilemmas that is the promotion of contrapuntal readings. My point is that in a society where RSAs (Repressive State

Apparatuses) and ISAs are working to endorse a peculiar dominant approach, and global discourses are reduced to local discourses, it becomes almost impossible to have the other side of the picture. However, development and growth of community media can help audience to be more than consumers and spectators. Commercialization and profit maximization trends are shaping journalistic contents as sensational, scandalous, negative things are more on sale. Moreover, such trends are discouraging the investments in the community media. For example, 'City 42' is a community television working at city level. People working there are facing low and delayed payments because of the financial constraints. Under such circumstances, one can not expect professionalism and commitment to the ideals of journalism. That's why the concept of watchdog journalism is becoming grim. Fact checking and norms of sourcing are ignored in the competition of news breaking. That's why cyberspace sources sometimes hijack media agenda. Media along with elite transnational and multi-national corporations are controlling the public sphere and changing the public participation into spectator phenomenon. Media sphere has transformed a common man into a consumer of ideas, goods, services, political administration and demonstration. In some cases, higher consumption of media contents may result in changing common people into dupes.

Pakistan's education system follows the western syllabi; courses taught at different levels are borrowed from the west. Medium of instruction at higher education level is English that depicts our intellectual dependence on west. Both English and Urdu medium schools are being run but English medium schools are considered prestigious. In this way education integrates the power structures and controls the perception management from the very beginning.

Self reliance, economic prosperity, profusion of local information resources and strong networks of information

throughout the country are the call of the day for Pakistani media if they want to avert electronic colonialism.

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