

he was disturbed by the "extra heavy reporting" on the attacks. "When operations are taking place, you are reporting that two commandos are going inside. They (terrorists) were in live contact with their masters, who were telling them what the channels were reporting. I think it requires a certain amount of restraint in ongoing operations. Do you really have to give minute-by-minute coverage? Media is an enabling instrument. Today, it is a disabling instrument," he said.

Shri Mehtra also had commented about the competition among news channels to score brownie points. Recalling the "famous shot" during the Kargil War that led to the destruction of an ultra-powerful artillery gun of the Army, he said in that 'foolish incident' three soldiers died and the Colonel, who yielded to a woman reporter's entreaty to fire the gun for the camera's benefit, was dismissed from service. The woman reporter Admiral Mehta referred to, who covered the 'famous shot' story during the Kargil war, was the same Barkha Dutt of NDTV 24/7.

If we go back to December 1999 when Indian Airlines flight IC-814 was hijacked to Kandahar, we may recall the similar questionable role of the media. When the hijackers demanded the release of hardened terrorists-including Masood Azhar-from Indian jails in exchange of IC-814's passengers, and threatened to blow up the plane (along with all its passengers) otherwise, the large section of Indian mainstream media-TV and print, English and vernacular-went berserk. They proceeded to whip up national frenzy in favour of securing the release of the passengers "at any cost".

"We want to know what the government is saying to the hijackers!" the TV channels and news headline shrieked, day after day, forgetting that negotiations with the hijackers are usually not carried out in public. "We want to know how the government will save the lives of

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hundreds of innocents!" the news anchors and talk-show hosts and editorials railed, day after day, even as their reporters chased and beamed non-stop images of and reports on processions of wailing men and women, relatives of those on board IC-814, marching through the streets and demanding rescue of their loved ones. One vividly recalls a blazing headline in the Indian Express' Express Newline (New Delhi) that read: "Government appeals to family members to keep brave faces. Family members reply: We can't, our tears get in the way!"

The grief and terror of the relatives surely was understandable. The immaturity of a section of the Indian media in placing their grief and terror under spotlight for the world - and the terrorists - to see, indeed the sheer puerility of media coverage, surely was not understandable. Buckling under the weight of overwhelming public sentiment whipped up by media bombardment, the government released Masood Azhar and others and secured the release of the IC-814 passengers. The nation is paying that cost till today in the form of attacks by Jaish-e-Mohammed, Lashkar-e-Toiba, al Qaeda, Indian Mujahidin and their affiliated groups.

Now a new trend is witnessed

during almost every terrorist attack-the terrorists send email or fax message to certain news channels or newspaper offices owning responsibility of the attack. Through such messages, the terrorists and their ideologues basically communicate the message of terror and the ideology behind it, not only to their potential victims, but also to their potential supporters and recruits world over. That's why former British Prime Minister Margret Thatcher had once characterised this type of media publicity as "oxygen of terrorism".

Not only the terror strikes, even during the coverage of communal riots we have seen the same irresponsible attitude of the media, surely except a few admirable exceptions. There is no harm in questioning the intelligence failure or any other fault on the part of the security agencies, etc. But covering the events in a way which purely serves the purpose of terrorists cannot be justified at all. Undoubtedly, terrorism reporting requires courage, but playing into the hands of terrorists is unacceptable.

It appears we the mediapersons have not learnt any lesson from the mistakes of the Kargil war, 26/11 and afterwards. This is a fact that terrorism cannot survive for long without extensive media coverage. The terrorists intentionally carry out their strikes only at the places from where they can get instant and wide media coverage. Therefore, it is time for us to take a firm stand not to allow ourselves to be used as a tool by the anti-national forces.

There is already a Code of Ethics followed by all reporters while covering juvenile crimes or rape cases. If a juvenile is found involved in any crime, his real name is not disclosed. Similarly, in rape cases, the real name and identity of the victim is kept undisclosed. Now time has come when we should formulate a similar Code of Ethics for covering terror strikes and riots also.