

September 28, 2003

US media and India massage

The Indian Prime Minister's annual visit to the United States produces ritual bellyaching among Indians both in India and the US about how little coverage he is getting in the American media vis-à-vis Pakistan and its leader. This year, once again, Gen Musharraf went yada yada yada with the western media, speaking to ABC, BBC, CBC and every other BC, including three separate chats with CNN (for its domestic, international, and business programs). In contrast, there was no Vajpayee at all in the US media.

Indian officials provide their own spin to what some see as a media drubbing, ascribing lofty meanings to Vajpayee's reticence. He is a philosopher-poet, a man of few words, above such mundane concerns etc etc. The Pakistanis need to talk, they say, because they stand condemned before the bar of world opinion and they have to defend and explain themselves constantly. Vajpayee doesn't need to indulge in a gabfest.

Fortunately though, India itself speaks louder and clearer than Vajpayee, whose days as a great communicator, alas, are long past. There was a time when we complained endlessly about the negative coverage and portrayal of India and Indians in the west. But try this -- a sample of the coverage in the US media -- during the week Vajpayee was in the US.

From a Washington Post story on India's growing middle class to a Wall Street Journal report headlined "India's elephantine economy may be poised to run," the country's growth was an everyday event. The New York Times reported on whether India's new frontier is electronics while several news outlets ran stories on India becoming the most preferred destination for American automobile manufacturing business. There was the Usual clutch of stories on India's IT sector and outsourcing stories in newspapers across the country.

There was also a good deal of coverage in the mainstream media about Indian arts, culture, literature, cinema, dance etc. The NYT may not have even mentioned Vajpayee name in the time he was here, but it reviewed Vidya Murthy's Pushpanjali dance and Deepa Mehta's Bollywood-Hollywood. The Washington Post had a story on an Indian woman's effort promote alternative therapies such as ayurveda and reiki, and India's first community radio effort.

The Indian flavour is by not restricted to the big media. In fact, India and Indians now feature regularly in Middle America. In the last week alone, The Daily Pennsylvanian had a story on Pepsi President Indra Nooyi, the Oregonian wrote about a Kuchipudi performance by Swapnasundari, Houston Chronicle featured John McLaughlin on his collaboration with Zakir Hussain; The Huntsville Times previewed drummer Sandip Burman's fusion jazz concert, the Arizona Republic wrote about the path to Miss India USA, the Milwaukee Sentinel had a story on the opening of an Indian restaurant, and the Albany Times Union and Daily Texan wrote about local Indian festivals.

In contrast, The New York Times welcomed Musharraf with an editorial headlined "Pakistan, a Troubled Ally". Time magazine asked "Is Pakistan a Friend or Foe?", a question echoed by an ABC Special also titled "Friend or Foe?" CBS' Dan Rather ran a special on Pakistan as a renegade nation that is suspected of both terrorism and proliferation.

Stories from Pakistan too centered round its slide into fundamentalism and anarchy, while stories in the US about the Pakistani diaspora almost always dealt with the problems they are facing post 9/11. Much of Musharraf's media exertion was devoted to countering all this negative coverage.

So should India be worried about Pakistan or Musharraf getting more coverage in the US media? Sympathy might be a better sentiment. It's too much of a bad thing.