

KARACHI CHRONICLE: Communication gap

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Last week a 22 member delegation of Mumbai-based journalists was in Karachi on a trust-building mission.

Speaking at a seminar titled "The Role of Saarc in People-to-People Contacts" at the Karachi Press Club, an Indian journalist said their families were worried about their safety in Pakistan.

This remark is often voiced by Indian visitors.

They mean it as a sort of compliment, that they are pleasantly surprised at the friendly reception they get and the generosity and fellow feeling of everyone they meet, including the bearded taxiwala.

But why is it that it takes a visit to Pakistan to vapourise Indian fears? Pakistanis visiting India do not have such fears, although there is news of bomb blasts, terrorism, fanaticism and character assassination going on in India too. This fear that Pakistan is not a safe place is a product of efficient propaganda.

Just how deep an impression it has made on the Indian mind was brought home to me on a visit to Pune.

I invited my aunt, who lives there, to visit us in Karachi.

She refused.

"Oh no.

I am not coming to a place where they kill people," she said.

So how come all of us, her sisters, cousins, nieces and nephews living in unsafe Karachi were still hale and hearty? I asked.

But logic didn't work.

She still refused to visit Pakistan.

In short, Indians do not reason; they believe in the hype demonising Pakistan launched on radio, television and the newspapers, that Pakistan is the most violent place in the whole world.

If ordinary Indians believe such nonsense, it is pardonable.

But should Indian journalists (or their families) be as ignorant, when it is they who have invented the bugbear themselves?

The leader of the Indian delegation, Jatin Desai admitted that Pakistani journalists knew more about India than Indian media persons knew about Pakistan.

But what a lame excuse from one who lives in a land where Information Technology (IT) has launched a flourishing multi-level business enterprise. At the KPC seminar and other forums, such as Karachi University and the MQM headquarter 90, Indian journalists called for trust-building steps.

A resolution at the KPC seminar was that media should avoid hate speech.

"Hate speech" is the current catch phrase for plain old anti-neighbour propaganda, indulged in India and Pakistan, not only by the media but by various information or rather disinformation agencies.

Radio, television and the press of both countries is coerced by the agencies to communicate to their respective listeners, viewers and readers the most appalling and incredible hype.

Journalists are not truly free to report "nothing but the truth." One result of this is that we and our colleagues across the Pak-India border have unconsciously dropped "communication" and simply refer to our work as that of the media.

There is no communication in what we report.

No matter what our conscience might dictate, we are not free to honestly inform. Perhaps a reason why Pakistani journalists are better informed about India than Indians are about Pakistan could be the long spells of dictatorships we have undergone.

It has made us able to read between the lies.

Indians never had untrustworthy rulers of the military type so they have not learnt this art yet.

The bottom line, however, is that journalists are the ones who have demonised

their neighbour country.

I am ashamed to admit it, but many of us have even taken a righteous pleasure in doing the dirty work of disinformation. Ordinary citizens of both countries are the victims of manipulated distrust of each other.

When they meet each other there is tension-free interaction.

Indians may visit Pakistan racked by worries about their safety, but it does not take more than a few minutes to dispel their distress.

This does not mean that Pakistan is a safe place, but it is not an exception.

Which country today is a safe place to visit? If it is not political agitation there is some natural calamity making a place unsafe.

But hype magnifying the danger in a country is simply meant to prevent friendly relations on a regular basis.

This is why the visa exercise in India and Pakistan is so discouraging. Visa restrictions are the means for discouraging more people-to-people contact between Indians and Pakistanis.

At present there is no tourism between the two countries.

Most visits are either by official delegations or by persons who have families on either side of the divide who wish to visit their folks.

There is a lot to see in both countries but one hardly gets an opportunity to see it as tourists would.

It is the hardest thing in the world for the powers that be in India and Pakistan to allow their people to see themselves as partners in the same cultural tradition.