



Revisiting War Reportage: National Security, Press Reportage and the Legacy of the Sino-Indian Conflict of 1962  
Revisiting War Reportage: National Security, Press Reportage and the Legacy of the Sino-Indian Conflict of 1962 for War Publicity In India

**Aritra Majumdar**

Assistant Professor in the Department of History, Sivanath Sastri College.

Email: [aritra9.maj1@gmail.com](mailto:aritra9.maj1@gmail.com) | ORCID ID : [0000-0003-0364-9078](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0364-9078)

**Abstract**

The Sino-Indian conflict of 1962 was part of a decade in which India had to fight three major wars against her neighbours viz. China and Pakistan. Such exigencies demanded a reorientation of the priorities of the developmental state towards armed conflict. This required a reappraisal of the role of various sections of state and society in the context of the External Emergency. The press, long critical of the inefficient handling of publicity, sought vital changes to how the government sought to sway international opinion in its favour and build public morale at home.

This article seeks to revisit the press reportage and debates during and after the war, on the importance and modalities of wartime publicity. Drawing upon press coverage, archival sources and journalists' memoirs, it will be argued that the difficulties faced by both the press and the government in disseminating information about the conflict resulted in slow but lasting changes to the publicity apparatus of the government and the role of the press in the defence effort. The lessons learnt during the conflict would enable better exchange of information between the press and the government through institutional mechanisms during later conflagrations of 1965 and 1971.

*Keywords: War Reportage, Sino-Indian Conflict, Indian state, press freedom, War Publicity.*

Following a period of relative calm in the 1950s, the emerging postcolonial state of India found itself confronted with three major external conflicts (and one minor one) within a span of a decade. The emergence of China as a major challenge was an unexpected development that produced lively debates on what the Indian response should be. The question of war reportage and publicity i.e. gathering and disseminating information about the war with a view to moulding public opinion and maintaining public morale within and outside India, became a crucial component of these debates.

Central to these debates were the question of how the press should conduct itself in terms of collection of news, presentation of views and publication of war advertisements. How much access should the press have to the frontlines? What should be the war publicity policy and apparatus?

Unfortunately, debates on the means and ends of wartime publicity and report again a postcolonial context have not received adequate scholarly attention. This article seeks to understand the importance of the 1962 conflict in shaping postcolonial conceptions of war reportage, publicity and press-government relations in the context of war.

In order to pursue these strands of inquiry, the paper shall begin with a study of existing literature, before focusing on the specific background of the Kashmir and Goa conflicts. Thereafter, two discrete but interconnected avenues of inquiry shall take the reader through the development of the debates on reporting and press commentary of the war on one hand, and the reconfiguration of the state's war publicity apparatus on the other. These inquiries shall allow us to arrive at some tentative conclusions about how the 1962 conflict proved to be a major marker in the development of war publicity and the role of the press within it.

### Sources and Background

Studies focusing on news gathering and wartime publicity in the subcontinent are relatively rare. While Milton Israel has studied press-state relations in the late colonial context, Auriol Weigold and Philip Wood have studied wartime propaganda in India, US and Britain Devika Sethi and Diya Gupta have brought these strands together in their studies of the press and the radio during the Second World War respectively (Milton, 1994; Weigold, 2008; Wood, 2000; Sethi, 2019). Dinyar Patel and Rotem Geva have studied the discourse through the respective lenses of the India League of America and the journalist D.F. Karaka (Patel, 2021; Geva, 2023).

The postcolonial period has received scant attention. Raghuvendra Tanwar has sought to contextualize the debates on the Kashmir in the light of new material from the contemporary public sphere (Tanwar, 2019). A recent article by Meher Ali looks at the 'virtual warfare' through the building up of conflicting narratives in the public sphere in the context of the 1965 Indo-Pakistan war (Ali, 2023). However, these works leave the 1962 conflict largely unattended.

This relative lack of academic attention requires us to seek out the historical context of the growth of war publicity in postcolonial India and situate contemporary primary sources within it.

From Tanwar we learn that the wartime restrictions on access of correspondents to frontier areas continued. Journalists seeking to visit Kashmir and Ladakh were required to obtain permission from the Defence Ministry (Tanwar, 2019, pp. 73-4).<sup>i</sup> Despite this, newspapers like the *Statesman*, *Tribune*, *Times of India* and the *Hindu* sent their correspondents to cover the Kashmir conflict and devoted considerable space to it (Tanwar, 2019, pp. 93; Mankekar 1983, pp. 126-8).

In order to revitalize the Kashmir publicity effort, D.R. Mankekar was installed as Director of Public Relations, Armed Forces. He sought to establish a "communication bridge between Kashmir war news and the Indian press." Despite his efforts, however, the military continued to harbour a colonial distrust of the Indian press, as seen during the Hyderabad crisis of 1948 (Mankekar 1983, 146-9).

On the other hand, the civilian publicity apparatus owed its origins to the office of the Chief Press Advisor formed during the War. During the course of the 1950s, the advertising functions of the Advisor were hived off to what eventually became the Directorate of Advertising and Visual Publicity (DAVP) under the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, by 1955 (Directorate of Advertising and Visual Publicity, n.d.).

Emphasis on war publicity declined during the 1950s. This changed from 1959 onwards, when border clashes with China brought the question of military news and reportage back into focus (Verghese, 2010, pp. 68-70). News papers relied primarily on the press briefings by the ministries in New Delhi.<sup>ii</sup>

Perhaps the only possibility of frontline reporting between the Kashmir conflict and the Chinese invasion came during the brief military action that integrated Goa to India. As it became clear that the Indian forces were poised to liberate Goa, Indian correspondents rushed to the borders of the tiny colony.<sup>iii</sup> When the Indian forces finally pushed into Goa, however, the Defence Minister, V.K.K. Menon, refused to organize a pool system that would allow journalists to go in with the liberating forces. This allowed the Portuguese propaganda machine to have a field day (Mankekar, 1983, pp.315-6).

### Press and Reportage in the 1962 Conflict

From 1961 onwards, the press devoted considerable space to the Chinese activities in Ladakh and NEFA ("Not an Inch," 1961) It found the government unable to differentiate between "what should and should not be considered as essential secrets." This resulted in the Indian journalists being denied access even to official maps of Ladakh housed in the Parliament library ("Well-Known Secrets," 1961).

Conditions remained unchanged even when the Chinese invaded in massive numbers in mid-October 1962. News correspondents bitterly criticized Menon's policy of inviting only news agencies to his briefing about the war ("Newsmen attack Menon," 1962). The *Times of India* and *Indian Express* pointed out that up until October 1962, no correspondents have been allowed to enter the forward areas. The Press Information Bureau (PIB) did not even want to accredit journalists proceeding to Tezpur, which was at that time, far from the frontlines ("Unjust," 1962; "Telling the People," 1962). Newspaper editors Frank Moraes and A.B. Nair held a meeting in Bombay demanding that adequate information be made available to the press ("Obligation of govt. to Press: Moraes' Plea," 1962). The *Tribune* also made a similar protest in early November ("Press Restraint," 1962). The *Hindu* argued that the government should take the press into confidence to combat rumour-mongering ("Telling the People," 1962). Having been denied access to the frontlines or even Tezpur (the Corps Headquarters in Assam), correspondents of major papers like the *Times*, the *Hindu*, the *Indian Express* and the *Tribune* reported the initial phases of the conflict from Shillong and Sikkim ("Heroic Jawans Take Back Strategic Jang Village," 1962).

Eventually, a Press Consultative Committee (PCC) under the chairmanship of B. Gopala Reddi, the Minister for Information and Broadcasting, was formed. At its inauguration, the Home Minister, Lal Bahadur Shastri, argued that the press could help by "creating among the people a sense of urgency, sacrifice and solidarity." Correct news, rather than "half-cooked news" and rumours, should be given wide circulation. He agreed with the editors that dissemination of news had to be quick and correct during wartime and closer contacts between the press and the official machinery was necessary ("Fight Against China," 1962).

The PCC also debated the modalities of war reporting. The government informed the PCC that an advisory organization was in the process of being formed, and in the meantime, the Principal Information Officer would discharge this duty. The editors who participated in the meeting sought greater facilities for the correspondents in border areas and hoped for greater coordination *within* government with regard to war publicity ("Border Fighting Reports: Advisory Body for the Press," 1962).

Despite these assurances, Indian correspondents continued to face difficulties in accessing the frontlines. The *Hindu* complained that the government denied the Indian press information which was freely available overseas. As a case in point, he pointed to photographs and reports of the movement of Indian tanks in British and American journals ("Tell the People," 1962).



From early November, however, newspaper correspondents could report from Tezpur using the Press Camp set up there. Moraes appreciated this change ("The Press," 1962). The government went further and arranged a tour of selected correspondents to the frontlines in NEFA, where they were allowed to take photographs and interact directly with the armed forces ("The War in NEFA," 1962). As one of the correspondents, B.G. Verghese (*Times of India*) wrote, the journalists were hardly reassured at the sight of "ill-equipped jawans in cottons and canvas shoes..." (Verghese, 2010, p.70). The *Hindu* appreciated this tour, noting that this would allow for a welcome change from the dry communiqués of the government, while also gladdening the soldiers ("Reporting the War," 1962).

Verghese was one of only two Indian journalists who remained behind when Tezpur was evacuated on 19 November 1962 reporting on how administrative chaos impacted the public morale (Verghese, 2010, p.71).<sup>iv</sup> Papers like the *Tribune* and the *Hindu*, whose correspondents did not remain in Tezpur, instead acclaimed Assam's high morale in the face of imminent invasion! ("Assam's High Morale," 1962; "Lessons From Tezpur," 1962).

### Government Publicity During and After the Conflict

Government publicity – both inside and outside the country, became the subject of adverse comment even before large scale conflict broke out. Early in October 1962, Sudhakar Bhat pointed out from Hong Kong that the Indian government was being outflanked by the Chinese propaganda machinery ("India Bungles on the Propaganda Front," 1962). Similar complaints were made by observers in Ceylon, Kenya, U K and USA ("Poor Publicity by Delhi," 1962; "China Loses African Sympathy," 1962; "Tendency to Blame Both Sides," 1962; Easwar, 1962).

Such criticism was also extended to the various organs of government publicity viz. the All India Radio (AIR), the DAVP and the Films Division of the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting. The government acknowledged the vital role of the AIR. In a meeting with the States' Information Ministers, B. Gopala Reddi emphasized the importance of using all media (including radio) to the fullest for war publicity (Information Ministers Meet," 1962). In course of the PCC's discussions, members suggested that local editors be associated with air stations in an advisory capacity ("Border Fighting Reports, 1962).

In response to these suggestions, the Ministry informed the Committee that radio receiving sets were being sent to border areas and more listening posts were being established. Public relations officials had been posted in NEFA and Ladakh and the home and external services of AIR were being geared up ("Our Propaganda Must Be Geared Up, Ministers Told," 1962). It was further informed that the AIR had been geared up to serve a three-fold purpose – "to disseminate authentic information on the latest situation to counter false propaganda, to sustain the people's morale and build up confidence in the ultimate outcome of India's fight against Chinese aggression." New bulletins were added and existing ones lengthened. Special weekly features were introduced along with new services in Ladakhi and Tibetan. Existing broadcasts were extended to frontier areas of NEFA and Ladakh ("AIR Steps Up Propaganda to Counter Peking's Lies," 1962). In early December, it was decided that a new radio station would be established in Kohima, Nagaland, and more powerful transmitters installed in Gauhati (Assam) and Kurseong (West Bengal) ("Better Broadcasting," 1962).

Despite these improvements, Verghese reported that on the morning after the unilateral ceasefire by the Chinese, the AIR alone continued to state that the war was ongoing while newspapers and foreign radio stations informed the public about the ceasefire. Indeed, the military itself was reliant upon Radio Peking to learn about the developments on its own front! (Verghese, 2010, p.72).<sup>v</sup> The situation outside India was

equally dismal, with complaints about spotty reception coming in from Australia and Africa (Sarathy, 1962; Abraham and Narain, 1962).

Another aspect of the publicity effort involved films. Moraes noted on 18<sup>th</sup> November that the Films Division had “apparently not so far issued short films showing what mountain warfare is like.” (“Reporting the War,” 1962). By the end of November, however, at least one newsreel had been produced and was being shown in city theatres of Madras (Jagannathan 1962). T. K. Jhuremalani, Public Relations Officer, Films Division, stated that the Division had produced a number of short films or quickies on the war. He went on to name eight of these, with a ninth being released soon. Their prints had been supplied to the Field Publicity Units where rural folk could see them. Universities and other educational institutions were informed about them (Jhuremalani, 1962).

Lastly, the war also brought forth changes in the advertisement apparatus. The government appointed a Central Advisory Committee for the DAVP. Upon its recommendation, four regional offices of the DAVP were established (“Advertising and Publicity,” 1962). B. Gopala Reddi urged newspapers and advertising agencies to provide free advertising space for war publicity and persuade clients to advertise the war effort. By late November, he noted that the response had been enthusiastic and the DAVP was receiving daily offers. A special advertisement campaign entitled “Ask the Jawans” had been started. Posters dealing with rumours, defence savings, control of prices, donation of money and ornaments had been prepared and distributed. Some of these posters had been printed free by various presses. The Publications Division had prepared four pamphlets for educating the public (“Free Space for War Publicity,” 1962).

These activities continued into the succeeding years. In 1963-64, for instance, the DAVP undertook printing of pamphlets highlighting the heroic deeds of soldiers for the Jammu and Kashmir Government, while another proposal for a similar printing task for the Rajasthan Government was under consideration (Ministry of Broadcasting, 1964). Another proposal to run two special exhibition trains highlighting the wartime needs of the country was discussed in 1963, though it is unclear whether the plan was finally implemented (Ministry of Broadcasting, 1963).

## Conclusion

Appraising the performance of the government and the press during the 1962 conflict would require one to factor in the short duration of the war itself, as the journalist Chanchal Sarkar warned. However, he noted that the ultraconservative approach to the media continued to be an obstacle to war reporting. To this was added the unfamiliarity of the Indian press with both the conditions of full-scale war and the terrain in which they were being asked to work. At the same time, hunger for war news was great, and both newspaper circulation and AIR listenership grew during the 1962-65 period (Sarkar, 1967, 77-82).

However, notable improvements did occur as a result of the realization that war publicity formed an important part of the effort to build and maintain public morale during periods of conflict. When war broke out in 1965, the press found the government to be more receptive. Correspondents such as Prabha Dutt often accompanied the field units as they moved from one point to another. Such reportage, initially conducted by the journalists on their own volition, was later supported by the armed forces through mechanisms that enabled the journalists to travel to the frontlines and accompany troops without giving away critical operational details such as the ‘order of war’ and the positioning of the troops themselves. (India Foundation).



This process would develop further during the 15-day 1971 war, when Indian press policy would ensure unfettered access for both Indian and foreign journalists. Regular briefings by the military leadership in the critical theatres of war, such as Punjab, Gujarat and West Bengal ensured that the public received reliable information without needing to rely on foreign sources, which could often be biased based on their proximity to the origin of the news. Datelines during the 1971 war indicated that the journalists were reporting on developments in a timely and informed manner. Photographs of troops engaged in frontline combat appeared as front-page highlights, thereby enabling the public to better understand the actual course of the war as it progressed from day to day (Mohr, 1971).

The impetus provided by the war to the development of the government's publicity apparatus also continued with publication of publicity material on Ladakh and Kashmir in 1965 and discussions on setting up of a counter-propaganda organization. The government realized that instead of treating the war reporters as a hindrance and a possible threat to the operational efficiency of the armed forces, they could be used as useful adjuncts to the efforts of the government in keeping the public informed and supportive of the military effort. These could also ensure that there would be less space for 'irresponsible rumours' that may be circulated in the absence of credible coverage of the war. Furthermore, a reliable and unbiased flow of information would build world opinion in favour of India on the global stage, especially in the face of powerful propaganda machinery of China and the USA. Helmed by officials from the ministries of defence and information, as well as veteran journalists, this apparatus proved crucial in maintaining a steady flow of unbiased information that countered the narratives offered by powers hostile to the Indian war effort. (Ministry of Information, 1965a, 1965b).<sup>vi</sup>

Much later, the 1999 Kargil conflict witnessed the final fruition of the process, though it generated its own controversies. Journalist Barkha Dutt (Prabha Dutt's daughter) would provide 'live' coverage of the conflict, highlighting the heroic actions of leaders like Lt. Captain Vikram Batra ("Kargil Vijay Diwas," 2024; ORF 2024). However, Dutt's reportage was also criticized for providing operational intelligence that, it was claimed, aided the enemy as much as it provided crucial material for the television broadcast channels which, by this time, had become an important part of the Indian media ecosystem (Puri, 2015).

In conclusion then, it may be said that the 1962 conflict reopened the question of war reportage and publicity after the span of more than a decade. In the face of sustained criticism, however, the leaders admitted that their publicity apparatus was woefully lacking compared to that of China, while their approach towards newspapers was unsatisfactory.

This resulted in the gradual opening up of the frontline to war correspondents and photographers. On the other hand, the various organs of publicity were geared towards war propaganda. Together, they marked a growing acceptance of the utility of war publicity and reportage in creating public opinion and maintaining public morale on the part of the government, thereby creating the basis for lasting changes in the relations between government, press and publicity organs in postcolonial India. At the same time, however, questions relating to the extent to which journalists were entitled to cover ongoing military operations in sensitive areas like Kargil in 1999 have been raised by ex-military personnel, thereby highlighting the importance of balancing the necessity of information and publicity with operational secrecy. In sum then, it may be argued that the 1962 war, being the first major reckoning of the Indian media and the state with the possibilities of war reportage and publicity, paved the way for the evolution of the war reporting that we have witnessed in later conflicts, and which continue to shape the approach of the media today.



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<sup>ii</sup> Foreign correspondents were not allowed to visit Ladakh at all.

<sup>ii</sup> This can be understood from the fact that most of the articles on the China conflict were filed from New Delhi where the press briefings by the Ministry of External Affairs and later, the Ministry of Defence, were given.

<sup>ii</sup> For instance, the *Indian Express* despatched staff photographer Stanley Fernandes to photograph the Portuguese positions from a distance. See Photograph on Page 1 captioned "Goan soldiers have NATO-type arms." (1961, December 7). *Indian Express*.

<sup>ii</sup>Some examples of Verghese's reports in the *Times of India* from an evacuated Tezpur include "Bid to Bring Calm to Tezpur," published on November 22, 1962 and "Tezpur People feeling badly let down by authorities," published on



November 25, 1962. These were signed articles. It is not possible to verify if additional articles, published under a generic byline, arose out of Verghese's reportage.

<sup>ii</sup>Radio Peking was the state-controlled radio operated by the Chinese.

<sup>iii</sup>The publication of informative material on India's border areas, especially those prone to future conflict, became a regular feature of the publicity organs of the Indian government from thereon. Covering the later history of such publicity, is however, beyond the scope of the current study.