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The Role Of Media In Communal Conflict:
A Situational Analysis Of Socio-Religious Crisis In India

By

Abdur Rahim
THE ROLE OF MEDIA IN COMMUNAL CONFLICT:

A SITUATIONAL ANALYSIS OF

SOCIO-RELIGIOUS CRISIS IN INDIA

By

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Paper presented at the Regional Seminar on
"The Role of the Media in a National Crisis",
organised by the Asian Mass Communication Research
and Information Center, Singapore and the Sri Lanka
Working Journalists Association, held at Colombo,
Introduction:

The relationship between the press and socio-political developments has been analysed and debated all over the world and has been a recurrent theme in media effects studies. Eventhough the term "press" is now somewhat outdated and has largely been replaced by the more common "news media" to refer to both print and electronic journalism, its role has been no less controversial or fascinating than it was near the end of the 18th century when the English statesman Edmund Burke deprecatingly coined the term "the Fourth Estate". Since then the news media have never been far from controversy.

In the wake of the fiery agitation against the job reservation for "Other Backward Classes" recommended by the Mandal Commission and the high drama enacted over the Ram Janmabhoomi-Babri Masjid controversy in the last four months of 1990, public attention has once again turned to the crucial role of the media in reporting communal conflicts. This period witnessed, in a short span of 100 days, an unprecedented national crisis that threatened to envelop the entire country. More people were killed on this issue than on other issues in recent history. The news media reacted, in some cases, quite abnormally, to this abnormal development. Research has shown that media coverage of conflict is dependant upon and shaped by the larger social system (Tuchman (1980); Fishman (1980); and Gans (1980).

While the role of mass media in a conflict situation is well-documented, there is need to understand their role in specific national crisis like what India encountered in the last quarter of 1990. Did the news media's response stand up to the expectations of atleast their audience, if not the masses at large? Did they provide
necessary information vital for comprehending the issues facing them? Did media coverage help in creating more awareness about the problem of caste and communalism, or did they helped in inflaming the passions of different groups? How objective was their coverage? These and many other questions immediately come to the fore. Answers are not easily forthcoming. The two basic problems being, the diverse nature of events occurring in different parts of the country, relating to the same issue, and the inherent pluralism present in India's media structure. Response of the news media has, therefore, to be evaluated on an event-to-issue basis to make an objective assessment.

This paper studies the response of news media to communal conflicts in general during the last four months of 1990 and specifically, their role in the communal disturbances during December 6-15, 1990 in Hyderabad, the capital of the state of Andhra Pradesh.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE:

There is a widespread belief among the academia and even the public at large, that in a participatory democracy, citizens should be encouraged to acquire as much information about public issues as possible. It is further assumed that acquisition of information will supposedly result in the best decision on an issue. While the need for greater citizen understanding of social issues may be generally agreed upon, ways of creating that understanding are not. There is, on the one hand, the traditional belief that responsible and interested citizens would inform themselves (Hennessy, 1975). Parallel with that view is the belief that information media, such as newspapers, radio and TV, have a responsibility and they should provide the needed knowledge and information. The act of informing is a value-laden process. The emphasis given to specific developments, the tone and content of the coverage of an issue or an event, by
the news media, reflects a certain implicit ordering of social priorities (S. Murlidharan, 1990). A certain kind of coverage of events may reflect no more than a set of assumptions by media professionals, about the range of interests of their readership or listenership. These could be purely incidental, and need not reflect any widely shared social traits.

There is a traditional viewpoint that resolution of social problems is related to inputs of information. Accordingly, if a system is sufficiently saturated with information, a general understanding of the issue will develop within the system. Once understanding is at hand, resolution is assumed to be at hand. (Tichenor and Donohue, 1986). Another popular belief is that information and attitudes favourable to any kind of agitation or movement go together. The evidence to date on this question, in the literature of social and behavioral sciences, is mixed. A frequent finding is that people are highly selective, so that new information tends to be interpreted in terms of already existing attitudes and opinions (Berelson and Stiener, 1964). The content of news media would, therefore be judged against what the reader perceives to be the attitude of his peer groups and their held values. News of communal conflicts would also be judged against this background.

Information dissemination and its use go hand in hand. In the Indian context, the elite nature of the mass media channels and their users, make it imperative to study the level and location of impact. Several studies have supported the hypothesis that as the flow of information into a social system increases, groups with higher levels of education often tend to acquire this information at a faster rate than those with lower levels of education. Similarly, more highly educated groups are trained to recognise the relevance of information for their particular position in the social structure and for maintenance of that position (Tichenor, Donohue, and Olien (1970); Rogers, 1974; and Katzman, 1973). These studies add
that news media coverage may be more likely to equalize levels of understanding to the extent that they contribute to the intensity of conflict in a specific section of society.

News Media and Social Conflict:

A communal conflict highlights the manner in which the news media functions within the structure as instruments of information control. Actions and statements by individuals and groups take on special intensity and salience during the heat of the controversy, and attention is drawn repeatedly to the news media's quality and tone of reporting of the crisis. They are singled out, and frequently charged with creating the conflicts. They are accused of "sensationalizing" and "blowing things out of proportion" or of "covering up" and "not paying attention to all sides" of a controversy (Gerald, 1963; Rivers and Schramm, 1969).

Sensational news — factual or otherwise — is much more in demand especially in riot situations. Besides, in a surcharged atmosphere, truth is the first casualty. During the Ahmedabad communal riots of 1960, a section of the Gujarati press threw all restraint to the winds and reported stories based purely on rumours. A paper called Sevak, an afternoon edition of the leading daily Sandesh, reported on September 20, 1969, that several Hindu women had been stripped and raped in public in Lal Milni chawl. This news caused a sensation and many Muslim women were actually molested and raped. The story was contradicted the day after when all the damage had been done.

At times even major English dailies, like The Times of India and Indian Express, among others, by carrying dubious versions of events, created further tension in an already tense situation. Asghar Ali Engineer (1990) mentions one instance each from both these newspapers. During the Bombay-Bhiwandi riots of May, 1984, violence
erupted in the Kherwadi areas of Bandra East. It was a Shiva Sena stronghold and there were many attacks on Muslims in the locality, most of whom were vegetable and fruit vendors. An Express story said that "Muslims in Kherwadi, most of whom were externees from UP and deal in illicit arms, had stabbed 18 Shiva Sainiks". This sensational news could have caused havoc, but for the timely contradiction of the story by the police.

Similarly, during the 1985 communal riots in Ahmedabad, The Times of India carried a news item that "some people pretending to carry a dead body for burial in a coffin were caught and firearms were found inside the coffin. The police arrested the culprits and confiscated the arms". Investigations later revealed that there was no coffin at all. In fact, some Muslims carrying an infant's body for burial, were attacked by miscreants. The father of the infant died on the spot and the uncle and few others ran away. In order to hide this fact, the story of the coffin carrying arms was floated and even a paper like The Times of India accepted it uncritically.

Engineer points out that the Express story was "largely due to the bias of the reporter, while it is difficult to say how The Times of India was caught napping".

Objectivity was one of the most unfortunate and unmourned casualties of the reporting on the Bhagalpur riots of October, 1989 in a substantial section of the media, especially the local press in and around Bihar. The norms to be followed by the press in reporting communal riots to contain tensions were, in this case systematically subverted by the use of innuendo, half-truths and blatant untruths.

Uma Chakravarti (1991) reporting about Bhagalpur riots that the most notable characteristic of the biased reporting is the relationship between rumours, the contents of the Vishva Hindu Parishad pamphlets, and the communalised writing of many influential
reporters. The reports in the press legitimised and authenticated the circulation of wild rumours and sedimented the stereotypes and biases of the VHP propagandist pamphlets.

The most reprehensible and dangerous dimension of the reporting on Bhagalpur by a section of the press was the manner in which the reporters, in their turn lifted many of the rumours and wrote items which reinforced and legitimised the stereotypes of Muslims represented in the VHP pamphlets. To begin with the reporting suggested that Muslims "began" the riots and were the major aggressors. By a clever sleight of hand, the code by which the press does not highlight the identity of victims (to avoid inflaming passions) was subverted by personalised accounts of individual traumas experienced only by Hindus. Thus, eventhough the overwhelming numbers of people killed in Bhagalpur were Muslims, the Hindi newspapers described scenes where Muslims appeared to be the major killers and Hindus the main victims.

Giving an example of this kind of reporting Uma Chakravarti notes: "By far the most damaging and irresponsible specimen of writing published about Bhagalpur was an article by Shruti Shukla which demonstrates the easy slide from pamphlet propaganda, to rumour, to newspaper "feature". Published in the November 14, 1989 issue of Hindustan Times (Patna edition) it purported to be a full-length account and analysis of the carnage in Bhagalpur titled "Fear in the Air: Suspense marks the place where the story Ended"

Shukla achieved this slant without talking about the actual victims, those Muslim men, women and children who were killed. Faced with the incontrovertible news of Chanderi and Logain, where gruesome massacres of Muslims took place, Shukla attributed them to the cruelty of the "Hindu backlash": the "silence" of the Hindus about massacres itself legitimately flows from the cruelty of Muslim "Criminals" who had held Bhagalpur to ransom in Shukla's reasoned view.
Rumours, VHP pamphlets and Shukla's writing thus together form part of the same continuum of communal biases and all perform the same function of stoking communal passions.

On Bhagalpur, Doordarshan's telecast of Nalini Singh's film was a more sophisticated but equally dangerous exercise is glossing over the horror, tragedy and brutality of the marauding mobs that attacked Muslims in Bhagalpur and the conspiracy of silent support that Hindus maintained, making it possible for such a tragedy to occur.

Nalini Singh, like Shukla, achieves her slant by tactics such as a sleight-of-hand in reporting and artful editing. The film evokes a generalised sympathy for riot victims without telling us how such brutal killings were made possible by ideological preparation by communal organisations such as the VHP. It also exonerates the Hindus of Bhagalpur of any kind of complicity in the riots by conveniently placing the entire blame on "criminals" and politicians; it equates Logain, where over one hundred and ten Muslims were killed and where the entire village connived in destroying the evidence, with Jamalpur, where four Hindus were killed; and it shows the Hindus as sympathetic and tolerant, almost in the compulsive habit of standing above communal passions.

Singh also includes an inflated figure of students killed, without checking her information out before the film was screened, many months after it was shot in Bhagalpur. Her film too, legitimised the rumours which had played havoc during the riots. Clearly this is not the attitude one would expect from a responsible journalist.

Social conflict is a principal ingredient of media content since conflict is a central component in community life and social change. Differing interests and competing goals in a complex society like India, leads to a variety of tensions which, themselves, create pressure for change. The pervasive nature of conflict has been
pointed out by many writers (Dahrendorf, 1959; Coser, 1956, 1967). Ammu Joseph, (1990) writing in Madhyam says:

"The role of the media in preventing the escalation of social conflict instead of merely reporting and analysing it once it erupts has been sadly neglected, certainly in situations of communal tensions".

Even a seasoned journalist like N. Ram of The Hindu*, speaking on the present role of the media feels:

"...the role of the media has been characterised by a great deal of froth and dilettantism in relation to what is clearly media's business - reporting, providing background on and analysing and, indeed, providing some kind of value judgement or assessment of the prevailing communal situation..... many of us (journalists) are dis-satisfied and share some of the serious misgivings about the journalistic response to the communal phenomenon and the challenge of building harmony and secularism"

Apart from this "intrinsic superficiality" that Indian media has been afflicted with, N. Ram holds that the press had by and large been unprepared for some of the major developments of a communal nature during the 1980s. He cites the example of the rise of such phenomenon as Bhindranwale and armed extremism in Punjab, "although it had long been aware that the mixing up of religion and politics was a notorious problem there". Also, during the Operation Bluestar, the press was not prepared for the chain of events that followed. Its aftermath on October 31, 1984 when the entire fabric of civic society was ruptured in the genocidal attack on the innocent Sikh

* N. Ram, Associate Editor, The Hindu, The Press: Letting Down the People*, Lecture at a Seminar in Bangalore organised by the National Law University on December 8, 1990.
people following the assassination of Mrs. Indira Gandhi, no one was prepared for the kind of extremist force that was unleashed.

He goes on to cite media performance in Meerut of May, 1987, Bhagalpur in October, 1989:

"In other words, although the phenomenon of communalism appeared in different nooks and corners of India, it was not easily recognised as a part of mainstream social and political process. The country was being overtaken by something deeply troubling, something menacing, something malignant - which now stares us fully in the face. But the media by failing to report, to analyse and assess the phenomenon in an intelligent way let the people down badly".

Referring to the Mandal Commission and Ram Janmabhoomi-Babri Masjid tangles and its coverage by the press, N.Ram expressed his deep disappointment:

"...news had been devalued and the concept of news had been so altered as to sanction and legitimise practically everything in the name of reporting - bringing in loaded viewpoints into news reports".

A seminal study by S.Murlidharan (1990) is perhaps the first of its kind on the role of media during a socio-religious crisis. Underlining the unity of purpose in the Mandal and Masjid agitations, Murlidharan's attempts a detailed study of the reporting of the anti-Mandal agitation and communal riots by three national dailies - Indian Express, The Times of India and The Hindu.

The relative importance in terms of space given by these newspapers to events connected with Mandal and Masjid is in itself is a significant pointer. The Indian Express devoted 12.81 times
as much space to the anti-reservation agitation as it did to the communal riots in October-November, 1989. The Times of India and The Hindu earmarked 9.81 and 5.75 times the space respectively. That the lives lost in these communal riots were far more, at least six times, than in the anti-reservation agitation makes this a glaring disparity. Most of the newspapers opened its columns to those defending the rights of the privileged in the name of merit, national brain power and national unity; in these tracts, most of them inflammatory, the interests of the upper castes were equated with that of the nation.

The space devoted to events is only one indicator; a more blatant expression of communal bias is in the content of the reports. The communal slant in the coverage and articles is only too evident in many newspapers. It appears that communal forces have managed to penetrate into influential places in newspaper offices. Consequently, some newspapers are forced to maintain a balance between secular and communal writings. Some others are not troubled by even the semblance of impartiality; they take an unabashedly partisan and communal posture, often sacrificing all journalistic ethics.

Muralidharan's study reflects on the implication of the Mandal-Masjid agitation vis-a-vis national unity and locates them in the context of the current crisis engulfing the Indian state. His conclusion is instructive: "The Mandal Commission is reflective of the efforts of an assertive and productive section of the nation to capture the power that is in their due. "Mandir" seeks to deflect this quest for power by offering an illusion of power".

POSITIVE ROLE OF THE MEDIA:

Instances from Moradabad, Aligarh, Bhiwandi, Malegaon, Hyderabad, could be cited as examples of biased media reporting, the few mentioned here should prove the contention that such reporting exists. But some light should also be thrown on the
positive role sections of the news media have played in barring the truth about many serious communal riots. The truth about many serious communal riots would not have been known but for some major English and language papers. The example of the Hashimpur and Maliyana killings in Meerut in May, 1987, is relevant. It was due to reports in newspapers like Chauthi Duniya (a Hindi Weekly from Delhi), The Sunday Observer, The Telegraph, etc., that the public came to know how the Provincial Armed Constabulary (PAC) killed innocent people from Hashimpur and threw them into a nearby canal. Also, the whole story about the shooting down of innocent people from Maliyana was reported in detail by The Telegraph.

Similarly, papers like The Telegraph, The Statesman, The Times of India and some other dailies, were responsible for uncovering much of what really happened in Bhagalpur that was sought to be hidden from the public by the Bihar administration.

It cannot be denied that there are committed journalists who make hold to uncover the truth and display an investigative spirit. Their commitment is to both secularism and modern investigative journalism. Their spirit must be appreciated.

CAN NEWS MEDIA BE USED?

News Media are instruments for gaining public attention and, therefore, are seen as a resource by the different segments of the community seeking to gain or maintain a particular position of social and political power.

Questions of legitimacy often become central to a controversy. Newspapers and other mass media, if they report a conflict at all, contribute to the legitimation of the conflict and/or certain points of view that are part of the conflict. In effect, any mention of a conflict by a newspaper has consequences for legitimation (Nnaemeka, 1976). The very recognition of a conflict confers a new
status to the issue, even if the news story (or editorial) contains negative references to individuals or groups that are party to the controversy.

How the news media could be used for the sake of gaining legitimacy could be seen in the way many English and Hindi dailies and periodicals gave the names of the 'Kar Sevaks' who died in police firing in Ayodhya on October 30, 1990 and later on November 2, 1990, during the storming of Babri Masjid. These people were termed as "martyrs". Now, Frontline has come out with an investigative story "When the 'dead' came back" describing how the VHP list of "martyrs" given to the press and lapped up by them, included many names of persons who were actually alive, and some who died later, but not on the day claimed by VHP and reported by the Press. This report by Venkitesh Ramakrishnan and S.P. Singh, brings to light the fact that in the heat of the controversy, the news media can also fall prey to such jugglery.

COMMUNAL RIOTS IN HYDERABAD: A BACKGROUND:

Hyderabad has witnessed riots intermittently between 1978 and 1984. After 1984 there was peace till 1990, when once again after a gap of six years a major riot broke out in December. The riots were more intense and widespread than witnessed earlier, the death toll much higher.

Bharatiya Janata Party Supremo, L.K. Advani's "rath yatra" in October, 1990 and its aggressive propaganda had a destabilizing effect all over the country. Muslims were feeling insecure in the face of the massive BJP/VHP/RSS mobilisation preceding the "Kar Seva". The "rath yatra" brought this intimidation to a frenzied pitch with the Bajrang Dal activists brandishing trishuls and swords and aggravating the communal tension. This had its effects in and around Hyderabad. When Advani was arrested on October 23, there was serious rioting by Hindu political organisations in Rangareddy and Mahabubnagar districts of Andhra Pradesh. This rioting was aggravated during the Kar Seva on October 31, and its culmination
in the killing of Kar sevaks in police firing. It has been estimated by various agencies that around fifty mosques and three temples were destroyed in Ranga Reddy and Mahbubnagar districts, though a small fraction of this number was reported in the press. In a few villages such as Shankarpalli and Dhobipet, properties belonging to the Muslims were looted. In some villages, Muslims were subject to a social boycott. Hindu agricultural labourers were prevented from working in fields belonging to Muslims landlords.

DEMOGRAPHY:

The population of Hyderabad has grown three-fold in 30 years. This expansion has been fuelled by the overall population growth in the country, and the pressure on the rural unemployed to migrate to cities in order to survive. This has inevitably meant that the city has grown largely in its slums.

If we look at the figures first, this has meant that the number of slums has increased from 94 with a total population of 1 lakh in 1967, to 672 with a total population of 8.2 lakhs in 1987. The percentage of the city's population with an annual income of less than Rs.100/- per month was 47.97 per cent in 1980. The population density has increased from 5678 persons per sq.km. in 1961 to 11732 persons per sq.km. in 1981. The total population of the city has increased from 12.51 lakhs in 1961 to 25.45 lakhs in 1981. The present population is estimated to be over 35 lakhs.

The distribution and articulation of these gross numeric measures of population in the city must be viewed on the basis of caste and religious groups and of socio-economic capacity.

The old city of Hyderabad, that is the southern part around and extending beyond Charminar is composed mainly of poor and wealthy residents. The new city sprawling out to the north of the older part, while it has its share of slums, is composed largely of Hindu upper caste residential colonies ranging from flats of the merely comfortable, to bungalows of the well-to-do. The backward caste or Muslim slums in the new city are largely associated with these residential colonies, which serve as sources of income for the slum households; Often the wife earns by washing and cleaning in the well-to-do homes while the
husband works as a daily wage earner hauling rickshaws, driving autos and lifting loads.

While the Muslim population of the new city is a small minority, it is around 55 per cent in the old city, out of which a small fraction belongs to the wealthier sections and rest mostly live in bastis (urban slum). The remaining 45 per cent, again excluding the upper and middle class fraction, is mainly comprised of Scheduled Caste, Pardhi, and other backward caste bastis.

HYDERABAD RIOTS: A CASE STUDY:

After the December 5-15, 1990 communal riots in Hyderabad and its outskirts, a survey was undertaken to find out people's reaction to the performance of the news media. 200 respondents were interviewed including Doordarshan, All India Radio officials, journalists and police officials.

FINDINGS

1. Research findings about communal riots in Hyderabad from December 5-15, 1991;

a) The 200 respondents interviewed, all felt that there was a wide information gap between newspapers and Radio/TV.

b) While some Urdu newspapers reported responsibly, others played up the communal angle. But some of the Telugu newspapers also joined the fray in giving sensational reports. Sensational headlines, exaggerating the death toll, were given in nearly all newspapers.

c) TV, according to about 75% of the respondents, committed a grave blunder by showing in its December 8, 1990 evening bulletin wailing and crying women of a particular community in Shakargunj. This led to a stabbing and killing-spree which spread to non-communal and peaceful localities also, leading to the largest number of casualties in one single day – 25 – on December 9, 1990.
d) Most of the respondents (85%) felt that had TV not shown the plight of the particular community, the death-toll would have been much lower. This conclusion was also aired by the police.

e) The respondents felt that gory pictures and full-page accounts printed in colour, also contributed to the increase in communal frenzy. This was done by the Telugu Press. However, the English and Urdu press also provided heart-rendering black and white pictures of the dead and wounded.

f) About reportage from outside the State, the respondents, said it was not clear which community was suffering. This led to a rumour-spree, leading to all sorts of speculations, fanning the inner fears of the people.

g) The issue of use of "audio cassettes" was badly managed both by the police and the media. (For the first time in India, these audio-cassettes were played not only in Hyderabad, but also in Aligarh, Kanpur, and Agra). Many respondents felt that TV could have played these audio-cassettes to show to the people about the hoax being played and the danger it portended. But, for some reason, better known to the Doordarshan authorities (who chose to remain silent) this was not done.

Even after a week after the first discovery of the use of the audio-cassettes, people were totally helpless regarding the origin and the identity of the culprits. 50% of the respondents, said they firmly believed that police was playing the cassettes, but denied any knowledge of their motives to do so. The police vehemently denied having done so.

The newspapers published the photograph of a white Ambassador car seized in connection with offences in the riots, indicating
by implication that they were responsible for the playing of audio-cassettes. The police supplied the photo. But, actually the seized car belonged to a toddy and arrack contractor (an ex-NSA detenue) with lethal weapons only and they were booked under the Arms Act.

h) The Commissioner of Police lodged a complaint against all newspapers and Doordarshan to the Press Council of India. But to date, no action has been taken, according to Commissioner of Police.

However, the Press Council of India did appoint a Committee which enquired into complaints against many Hindi Newspapers in Uttar Pradesh for whipping up communal passions. One Hindi Newspaper reported that all the in-patients in the Hospital of Aligarh Muslim University were killed. Violence broke out, engulfing over 18 towns of UP. The Press Council of India reprimanded two Newspapers for their irresponsible journalism.

The Press Council of India can only reprimand or censure a newspaper. No penal action can be taken directly against the newspapers.

There are only two legal provisions under the Indian Penal Code, Section 153A and 505 IPC, which imposes a punishment from one to seven years rigorous imprisonment for "creating communal disharmony between two committees. According to data available, less than a dozen among over 2500 cases actually resulted in conviction.

Andhra Pradesh is the only state which has as Special Police Act - "Communal Offenders Act, 1986", where a person or persons, who create or are likely to create communal disharmony, can be detained for 6 months. There is also specific provision, that any newspaper office could be sealed for a period of 30 days, if it is found publishing communal writings.
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