



## Role of Media in Communal Violence

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### Abstract

*IN DEMOCRATIC societies, when there is a wide heterogeneity among the citizens this often results in conflicts and violence, sometimes leading to large-scale communal violence and loss of life and properties. India has also had a long history of communal violence among the various communities. In this situation, media occasionally plays a harmful role in fomenting communal violence. We find many biases in media reporting. Since communalism is rapidly increasing, threatening our pluralist society, media is also affected by this virus.*

*The media constitute the backbone of democracy. The media is supplying the political information that voters base their decisions on. They identify problems in our society and serve as a medium for deliberation. They are also the watchdogs that we rely on for uncovering errors and wrongdoings by those who have power. It is therefore reasonable to require that the media perform to certain standards with respect to these functions, and our democratic society rests on the assumption that they do.*

*The role of the media is vital in generating a democratic culture that extends beyond the political system and becomes engrained in the public consciousness over time. It is through the media that people share their experience, learn and become aware. It is how a constructive political debate about options and policies develops. The media right is exercised in public and therefore has greater effect vis-a-vis what a person says privately. In order for the media to fulfill this function, it must guarantee its objectivity; the journalist should always be a neutral observer, unengaged with events but faithfully recording them. The following information will outline the key requisites necessary for a robust and balanced media industry and highlight some of the issues that are facing working journalists today.*

In democratic societies, when there is a wide heterogeneity among the citizens this often results in conflicts and violence, sometimes leading to large-scale communal violence and loss of life and properties. India has also had a long history of communal violence among the various communities. In this situation, media occasionally plays a harmful role in fomenting communal violence. We find many biases in media reporting. Since communalism is rapidly increasing, threatening our pluralist society, media is also affected by this virus.

In the present times, with the advances in technology, the reach of all forms of media (print & electronic) has become all-pervasive, wide and deep. The mass media has become the single most potent medium to shape public opinion. It can vulgarize or brutalize the society. Or it can help lift the society onto a higher level. A good and responsible media is a nation talking to itself. In a diverse country like ours, which has different hues and shades of cultures and diversities, the role of media becomes all the more important.

In Independent India, it is obvious that the media has also been deeply implicated in the production of communal violence. It has been found that certain types of media elements have highlighted minority communities particularly Muslims on communal lines. Besides the political class and related segments of Indian society for promoting communal violence time and again whether it is Hindu v. Muslim, Sikh or Christian; the media has also been charged with manifesting communal frenzy along with politics, among the various communities.

The print media includes press and the word 'press' technically denotes the newspapers, pamphlets, magazines, etc. The press in our country was a pillar of national strength and aspirations until the early 1930s. It kept itself largely away from the virus of communalism or religious fanaticism. Now much of this seems to be washed out. The media, especially the press play important role in fomenting the communal violence at all stages including: (i) the planning and rehearsal; (ii) the instigation of riotous activity; and (iii) the interpretation phase.

In Independent India, the regional press has played a crucial role in the projection of Hindu-Muslim communal violence. This was however not so during the freedom struggle, but its attitude changed after independence. After the partition, the language newspapers adopted an anti-Muslim bias in reporting communal violence. On the other hand, the English press still occupies the preeminent position; its approach to communal problems is much more sedate and so-bar than that of the language press.

The press generally reflects the prevailing moods of its readers. The press does not attempt to investigate and ascertain the actual problems of the minority communities; on the contrary it has been revealed that misplaced stereotypes and baseless myths about them are freely propagated. During communal riots, the press generally lifts news from unreliable sources and publishes rumours and gossips. It can be said that, by and large the press in India, never played the role of cementing the gulf between the Hindu-Muslim communities even in cultural, social and literacy fields.

Electronic media as a tool of mass media is fully exploited to highlight such aspects of life between the communities which divide them on communal lines. The impact of the electronic media is more powerful and enduring than any other means of conveying the message

of communal harmony. One medium, in particular—Television (TV) emerges as most crucial in fomenting communal atmosphere in the country. Since the late 80s, many charges have been made that other forms of media were politically biased or promoted communal tension. However, such charges were against Doordarshan (DD) precisely, because it was under centralized national control.

Numerous instances could be presented of the ways in which electronic media have constructed images that have been or could have appropriated for communal ends; some of these images are consciously constructed to promote communal strife between the communities.

Cassette tapes are readily amenable to such appropriation for they are cheaply produced, sold, portable, durable and easily mass produced. Video clippings of communal riots tend to evoke public outcry. Easily transported across distances, they bring the message of upper-caste Hindu nationalism to remote regions. At the same time, the negative potential of such a democratization of the media is painful evident in the uses of cassettes by the Hindutva movement to foment bigotry and communal riots.

The four pillars, which sustain the edifice of parliamentary democratic system, are the legislature, the executive, the judiciary and the media known as the 'Fourth Estate'. The media is one of the institutions which have to play a more decisive role and contribute much more to make the nation really secular and democratic and help in national integration. Media plays most important role in strengthening democratic values and democracy itself. But it seems except for few papers and journals, media has been communalized.

The seeds of hatred are sown in tender minds through historical and media distortion. The media can play a major role in moderating and calming down public feeling and in reducing the gap between fact and perception. The media plays significant role in reporting events in democratic society like India. In fact, the media not only disseminate information but also help in shaping public opinion. The media has a role to play in information and educating the people during and after the communal violence.

The media is undoubtedly a powerful organ that can do much to unite the people and the nation, make the citizens to respect the Constitution and all the institutions created under it, enlighten the people on the programmes and policies of the various political parties, show which can help to make the nation strong and powerful, which ones will bring the various sections of people together and which ones may divide them, create animosities, antagonize the people and lead to communal tension/violence.

One of the objectives of media is to understand popular feelings and give expression to it; another is to arouse among the people certain desirable sentiments and attitudes and the third is fearlessly to explore popular defects and most important objective of the media is to educate public in right perspectives on problems of national and international importance and thereby build enlightened public opinion.

It is true that one of the functions of the press is to inform the public of all that is happening in the country. But the press must also know that it is an 'institution' in a democracy whose primary duty should be and has to be to uphold the Constitution and all the institutions it

has brought into being, and ensure integrity of the nation. It is not its function to help communal organizations/parties or groups whose purpose is to create dissensions, divisions in our society, to show seeds of hatred and discord among its various sections of the people and to turn the country into communal atmosphere.

Press has to be socially responsible and has to reflect the aspirations of the people. Press has to abide by the laid down professional code of conduct to promote responsible journalism. The press should ventilate the legitimate grievances of the people, faithfully report events that would make the government and the police wiser and enable them to bring timely assistance to the distressed segments of the country. The press has to reorient itself for a constructive and educative role. There is need of complete code for a politically free, socially responsible and economically non-monopolistic media press.

The media has the responsibility to bring to light the undesirable acts of the communal forces and police and make public aware, so that they might react suitably to bring about desired changes. Through judicial pronouncements and international covenants to which India is a signatory, this includes the citizen's right to inform and be informed.

The right to know is a precious democratic right and it is through this means that the citizen is ensured participation, transparency and accountability. The Indian media is privileged to enjoy a wide measure of freedom by this way; it must exercise this freedom with responsibility in matters relating to public order, decency, and morality, defamation and incitement to an offence.

It is incumbent on the media to strive for objectivity, fairness and balance to avoid sensationalism or anything that is liable to inflame passions, especially during periods of communal tension. It is also required to make corrections and afford injured parties the right of reply. In situations of communal strife, media has to avoid naming the communities involved so as not to exacerbate tensions.

The legitimate media must enjoy first strike capability. Else it will trail behind disinformation, speculation and rumour, never quite catching up and merely reacting to the agenda set by master manipulators and vested interests. Technology has critically altered the rules of engagement between truth or objective news reportage and falsehood or concoction. Old norms therefore require careful review and revalidation or amendment.

The media sharpens the division of people on the basis of religion and keeps communal problem alive. The publications of media weaken the authority of the government and a sense of illegitimacy of governing social and administrative institutions is injected in the minds of the public. Finally, the communal violence turns into 'we-them' relation. The communal violence in remote areas that remains unreported has no adverse reaction, unlike communal violence reported from nearby locality with multiplier effects due to massive publicity of the media.

Both the print and the electronic media have created over time a vertically and closely linked system of cultural, social and political communications. In modern society, media plays an important role not only in matters related to communal violence, but in moulding the character, attitude and behaviour pattern of the readers and viewers.

Media can act as a form of social control. It can reduce the role of religion, caste, language and regionalism in Indian society. Their aim should always be to strengthen the unity and integrity of the nation, expose grievances of the oppressed, and strive for getting justice to those who deserve it.

The modern media coverage and reportage of communal violence must be evaluated. Like war, riots too begin in the minds of people and truth can be a defense against 'information terrorism', incitement and panic. Sensationalism, horror and excitement of passions can be moderated, if not averted, by the manner of presentation, the choice of words and commentary, the editing of footage and pictures, the headlines, positioning and general treatment.

In this regard, the media persons can exercise discretion under overall top editorial control not merely during 'office hours' but in anticipation of major deadlines and during the communal violence. Therefore, these two types of media may be gainfully employed during the cooling periods to provide a healing touch to the physically and mentally injured.

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