

Coverage of Ram Janambhoomi and Babri Masjid Dispute: A Case Study of The Hindu

Dalip Kumar¹

Abstract

Journalism is very intricately tied with the fabric of our nation. Socio-cultural issues in a country as diverse as India when get the public eye, becomes volatile and can affect the peaceful situations in a dynamic unhealthy way which can give rise to riots. Communal courses are hence to be dealt with in such a manner that it is objective and has an informative human appeal to it. Press Council of India has even issued certain guidelines. Accordingly, in this research the researcher, tried to analyses and identify the patterns of Journalism in The Hindu on the coverage of the Ayodhya - Babri Masjid dispute.

Keywords: *Journalism, Communalism, Media Coverage, Religion and Media*

¹ Student, GGSIP University, Delhi, dalipkumar1920@gmail.com

1. 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

Even though the term "press" is now somewhat outdated and has largely been replaced by the more common "news media" to refer to both print and electronic journalism, its role has been no less controversial or fascinating than it was near the end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.

While the role of mass media in a conflict situation is well-documented, there is a 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 at least their audience, if not the masses at large? Did they provide The Ram Janam Bhoomi and Babri Masjid Case in the Public Eye and constant forum of discussion since the date of demolition. The coverage of this case is rather long and the discussion has shifted from "A Dispute of Property" to a "Dispute of Faith". Media has not only acted as a forum of discussion but also sensationalized the issue bringing forth only the concerns of one party at a point of time. A poster of Delhi Journalism read about the case, 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.

Communalism becoming news is not Dangerous, News becoming Communal is.

According to Mukul Sharma, "The Hindu Right and The Narrative of Hindutva was created on the myth of a continuous, thousand year struggle of Hindus and Muslims and the treatment of Muslims as aliens and is massively contributed and exaggerated by the Media and News." The biased role played by Hindi newspapers in reporting and documenting the Ram Janmabhoomi- Babri mosque controversy damaged their image. Many studies show clear linkages between the Hindi press and the production and sustenance of a communal discourse

(Nandy et al 1995, Engineer 1991, Rajagopal 2001, Hasan 1998). In its December 1991 Ayodhya Judgment, the Press Council of India also criticized the Hindi press for & quote offending the canons of journalistic ethics; (Press Council of India 1991: 338-39).

Some have criticized the then prevalent media for fanning communal flames, and this includes the Press Council of India and several senior journalists, while others have lauded the bravery of those journalists who stood their ground in Ayodhya while being under constant, mortal attack.

One news item, dated March 21, 1987, reports that Hindu religious gurus are travelling in Punjab appealing Hindus to take up arms for Ram Mandir. But the report also goes on to state that people there didn't really show any warmth to these ideas.

An edit piece in a Hindi newspaper names outfits like 'Bajrang Dal' and 'Shiv Sena' and holds them responsible for spewing 'a certain type of hatred in society.' In the article titled 'Hindutva ko samajhna zaruri hai,' published on September 5, 1986, the writer says that these outfits 'have neither studied Hindutva, nor Islam nor Humanism nor any other type of thought.'

The Ram Janam Bhoomi Case is an extremely sensitive case and it's reporting and coverage should be done in an extremely sensitive manner so as to not incite communal violence and disharmony in the country and amongst the population. Some of the implications of the sensationalising of the case would include:

Political: The Ram Janam Bhoomi case gained mileage only after a Rath Yatra done by L.K. Advani. Even today Political Leaders in their different speeches use this as "an issue" for votes. It really isn't a question of Heritage.

Sociological: The Ram Janam Bhoomi case will somewhat, shift the sociological thread of the country as this case has become about faith and unity and is not as isolated as one would think.

The Case is in court for years and is to be decided this year. A five-judge constitution bench headed by Chief Justice Ranjan Gogoi heard the matter February 26 and advocated an amicable resolution to the Ram Mandir case through mediation.

The apex court in its observation favoured peaceful dialogue to solve the contentious issue. Justice S A Bobde proposed the suggestion while hearing the case and quoted that we are considering the possibility of healing relations between the two communities. We, as a

court, can only decide the property issue. He also mentioned media should play a responsible role and motivate communal harmony rather than the opposite.

Guidelines Issued by the Press Council on January 21-22, 1993 in the Wake of the Ram Janambhoomi-Babri Masjid Dispute Guidelines for guarding against the commission of the following journalistic improprieties and unethicity.

- a. Distortion or exaggeration of facts or incidents in relation to communal matters or giving currency to unverified rumours, suspicions or inferences as if they were facts and base their comments on them.
- b. Employment of intemperate or unrestrained language in the presentation of news or views, even as a piece of literary flourish or for the purpose of rhetoric or emphasis.
- c. Encouraging or condoning violence even in the face of provocation as a means of obtaining redress of grievance whether the same be genuine or not.
- d. While it is the legitimate function of the Press to draw attention to the genuine and legitimate grievances of any community with a view to having the same redressed by all peaceful legal and legitimate means, it is improper and a breach of journalistic ethics to invent grievances, or to exaggerate real grievances, as these tend to promote communal ill-feeling and accentuate discord.
- e. Scurrilous and untrue attacks on communities, or individuals, particularly when this is accompanied by charges attributing misconduct to them as due to their being members of a particular community or caste.
- f. Falsely giving a communal colour to incidents which might occur in which members of different communities happen to be involved.
- g. Emphasising matters that are apt to produce communal hatred or ill-will, or fostering feelings of distrust between communities.
- h. Publishing alarming news which are in substance untrue or make provocative comments on such news or even otherwise calculated to embitter relations between different communities or regional or linguistic groups.
- i. Exaggerating actual happenings to achieve sensationalism and publication of news which adversely affect communal harmony with banner headlines or distinctive types.
- j. Making disrespectful, derogatory or insulting remarks on or reference to the different religions or faiths or their founders. The focus of this paper is to do the content analysis on the coverage of Ayodhya verdict in Supreme Court by The Hindu Newspaper.

2. Literature review

In an interview with journalist Karan Thapar, former prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee details the events that followed after the Babri Masjid demolition in December of 1992:

"I wanted to resign from the Lok Sabha because I had to defy the Chair. It never happened that when a Speaker was on his feet I persisted in saying something but it happened that day. Congress, Left, friends of Left parties did not allow me to speak," Vajpayee says while talking about the day after the Babri Masjid demolition in 1992. "The Speaker wanted me to make my submission. But the next day, the situation reached such a boiling point that on behalf of the party I had to say something. Because I became the spokesperson after the arrest of Mr Advani. But the Speaker did not allow me and in a way I defied him."

The Ramjanmabhumi-Babri Masjid issue prove to be much contentious for about a decade in Indian politics of mobilizing Hindu votes. It fractured and polarized the Indian voters along religious lines as never before. The BJP used it for winning and never tried to build the temple once it came to power. Also, the judicial processes are so tardy in our country that despite great urgency it never delivered its judgement on time.

Religious imagination and fervour have served to make up for a deficit of rationality, logic and historical evidence, with clerics turning into historians and judges becoming clerics. A close examination of the judgment shows much of it stands on flimsy legal grounds, and it would hardly be tenable if not supported by some very specious reasoning.

With great respect to the Allahabad High Court, it is not the presence of Marxists, real or suspected, but the absence of non-Marxists like Sankalia, excelling in their craft and undoubtedly independent, that holds the key to understanding the crisis that the archaeology of Ayodhya faces today. "I had not intended to be an iconoclast", Sankalia writes in his memoir Born for Archaeology, "nor am I a self-appointed critic of century-old beliefs of our people, but the distortions of truth I hate".

"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" (N. Ram)

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.

3. Problem Statement

Religion and symbols related to religion in India is a sensitive topic and should be dealt with great care. A lot of criticism is done of the way Indian media treats issues related to communal harmony in the country. This research aims to analyse the way Ayodhya-Babri Masjid issue is dealt with in Print Media for which The Hindu is selected.

4. Objective

To examine the treatment of the story as covered in Hindu and apply it on the norms issued by the Press Council of India related to coverage of an issue with communal colour to it.

5. Methodology

I have done the content analysis through a log sheet based on pre decided paradigms. Paradigms are chosen on the basis of previous researches.

Berelson (1952) suggested five main purposes of content analysis as follows:

- a. To describe substance characteristics of message content;
- b. To describe form characteristics of message content;
- c. To make inferences to producers of content;
- d. To make inferences to audiences of content;
- e. To predict the effects of content on audiences.

On the basis of the research done by, Campell Pennebaker (2003) and Maring (2005) following parameters were selected:

- a. Number of Articles
- b. Metaphor/Adjective
- c. Tone
- d. Viewpoint
- e. Statement
- f. Human Element

Analysis is done of a print media medium i.e. The Hindu. The Hindu is selected because it is considered to have an objective reporting style and is prescribed for the preparation of various Competition Exams like CSAT and other exams.

6. Results

Table 1: Log sheet

Date	Number of Articles	Metaphor/Adjective	Tone	Viewpoint	Statement	Human element
6 Nov 2019	1 News Piece	-	Informative	Objective Peace Appeal	Informative Directive	No
7 Nov 2019	1 News Piece	-	Informative	Objective Peace Appeal	Directive, affirmative	Yes
8 Nov 2019	2 News Pieces	“vulnerable area”, “Riot control scheme” “Access Control” “Transportation Plans” “Ram ki Nagri” “Ganga Jamuni Tehzeeb”	Peace Appeal	Informative Objective	Informative Directive Affirmative Emotion Provoking	No
9 Nov 2019	2 News Pieces	“to heal hearts and minds” “fear”	Informative	Objective Directive	Emotion Provoking, Directive	Yes
10 Nov 2019	33 News Pieces	“Rule of Law” “Public Workshop” “Jai Shri Ram”	Informative Objective Directive	Objective Informative Peace Appeal	Emotion Provoking Affirmative Directive	Yes

11 Nov 2019	2 Editorial 1 News	“religious leaders and intellectuals”	Critical Informative Peace Appeal	Critical View Analytical view	Informative Analytical Directive	No
12 Nov 2019	1 News 1 Opinion 1 Editorial	-	Informative Directive Critical	Informative Objective Critical Analytical	Informative, Comparative, Emotion Provoking Affirmative	Yes
13 Nov 2019	1 News piece	Religious Character Martyr Dharmik Senani	Informative	Peace appeal Informative	Peace Directive	Yes
14 Nov 2019	1 News	Peethadishwar	Information Objective	Request Appeal	Emotion Provoking	Yes
15 Nov 2019	1 Editorial	“Garbha Griha”, “a preponderance of probabilities”, “miracle of complete justice”, “matsya nyaya”	Critical	Critical Informative	Informative Critical Emotion Provoking	Yes

Source: Author's Compilation

7. Discussion and Analysis of Log Sheet

- a. On November 6, there was 1 news piece published, the article written in an Objective manner and Peace Appeal was used “all agreed that whatever be the verdict of Supreme Court it would not be allowed to disturb the communal harmony and peace”.
- b. On November 7, there was 1 news piece published, the article written in an objective manner and “this statement was issued by Mr. Madani at a press briefing where he said no matter which way the judgment goes, we have to abide by the law and maintain peace. If there is no peace, the idea of a united country is lost”. This statement is appealing for peace in the nation and on similar grounds Mohan Bhagwat issued the statement the court’s judgment would be final which against peace appeal and also directive in nature.
- c. On November 8, there were two news pieces. The tone that includes that the Hindu took was informative in nature and published statement issued which were directive in nature for instance. Acc. To The Hindu, a senior govt. official quoted “we have sent an advisory to all the states and asking them to keep a watch on law and order as the verdict is set to be announced. Hindu also mentioned UP cm Yogi Aadityanath held a video conference with police officers, in charge of all the districts and review with the security”.
- d. On November 9, there were 2 news pieces out of which informative tone is used and directive statements were published. The informative tone was published in such a manner that data was presented. It also used peace appeal and statements where thing like, “to heal hearts”. The tone was also directive in nature as Hindu published and I quote “calling for peace and harmony in the country is requested”. All are appealed for peace and unity which is sentiment that should be predominant.
- e. On the 10th of November, the paper was rather full of articles as it was a day after the verdict and about 33 articles were published.

The articles were based on:

7.1 News/Information:

The news pieces published were based on and objective informative tone. Crisp objective headlines were written, for instance the banner headline, read, "Temple at dispute site, mosque within Ayodhya, rules SC" which summarises the situation. Sentences like, "The Constitution Bench of the Supreme Court on Saturday permitted, the construction of a temple at the site where the Babri Masjid once stood, and asked

the government to allot a permanent and suitable, 5 acre plot to Muslims to construct a Mosque in Ayodhya. Most articles were objective in nature and trying to summarize the situation with facts.

7.2 Peace Appeal:

Understanding the seriousness of the issue various articles were written in a manner, where Peace was appealed for. Statements issued by authorities were published, were written in the similar manner, for instance, the statement by Vijender Gupta, "A very old legal dispute has come to an end... We hope that the implementation of this judgment will promote religious harmony and brotherhood between all communities. Advisories were also issued both in the form of one liners and an article, For instance, an article was published, with the headline, "Police keeps an eye on Social Media for rumour mongers." The sub headline was, "The Force is also using drones to monitor situation in sensitive areas of the city."

7.3 Timeline:

The edition, traced the timeline of the property of dispute from the year, 1528, when Babur is believed to have built the Babri Masjid to October 16 2019 when it had been 40 days of the Constitution Bench Judgment.

Judicial Voice:

A Special Section was done where, judicial voices were covered, and various dignitaries gave their statement. Statements given by, Bhupesh Baghel, Pramod Sawant, Sumitra Mahajan, Nitish Kumar and Arvind Kejriwal were published. Excerpts from the judgment were also published in key points.

7.4 Invitation for Discussion:

Statements, were given in a manner that invited discussion. Aspects like majoritarianism, Liberalism were debated. Writers wrote their opinion piece invited discussion. A news Piece titled, "Ayodhya Verdict echoes at literally fest." A sub headline was quoted, "Panelists explored theme of, 'India moving towards an illiberal democracy.'"

- a. On November 11, there were two editorial and 1 news piece. The front page article talked about Doval meeting religious leaders. The entire article was written in a directive manner

where statements issued was “certain anti-national and hostile elements...may attempt to exploit the situation to harm our national interest”. The editorial was written in critical, analytical and inviting discussion where the lead says “The Supreme court of India has to be given wide latitude in its effort to address as unwelcome task: to resolve a dispute that has stirred up ancient resentments beyond the powers of a modern republican order to placate. It was a matter involving criminal trespass that should have been reversed by local administrative action. Once criminality was deterred, the underlying dispute should have been settled at the local civil court.” Bringing the nation to a pace of discussion and analyzing the present situation, the writer Sukumar Muralidharan said a “finding of title”, it pronounces, “cannot be based... on... Archaeological finding”. Rather, the matter “must be decided on settled legal principles... applying evidentiary standards which govern a civil trial”.

- b. On November 12, one news was published. The news was about the Reaction of Kashmir on the Supreme Court’s ruling. The article was rather objective, the headline written was, “Valley remains silent on Ayodhya Verdict.” The article presented the scenario of Valley because of the verdict. One Editorial was published, titled, “A missed Opportunity in Ayodhya.” The article was written in a critical tone and divided in sub heads, “The essence of Judgment”, “Dignity irrespective of Faith”, “and Impact on the Republic”. Statements, like, “It was a political dispute that became a social contestation that then landed up in courts as a dispute over a plot of land.” The editorial was titled, “Several Positives for the Muslim Plaintiffs.” The editorial was written by, Faizan Mustafa and Aymen Mohammed. The tone was set in a way, emotionally provocative way, the editorial opens with, “Though our judges, do take an oath to decide on cases, without fear or favor, in what looks to be an unprecedented act, the judge who authored this verdict preferred not to reveal his name. Even the author of the 116 page addendum has strangely kept his name secret.” The editorial was full of human elements.
- c. On 13 November, there was 1 hard news published, titled with the headline, “Ayodhya, land exempted from Act: SC”, the news was written in an informative objective manner. It had a request appeal to it, as it tried to, list out the provisions of the judgment and appealed to maintain the religious character and peace within the society.
- d. November 14 had one news article which was of a request appeal and there was an emotional appeal to it. It talked about saving and maintaining the integrity of faith.
- e. November 15 had 1 Editorial, titled, “Peace, bought by an unequal compromise” which run with a sub headline, “We must be wary of verdicts that align cleanly with what appears

to be the dominant public sentiment at a given name.” The editorial was critical in nature and included various statements of the order questioning the social relevance of the issue.

8. Conclusion

On the basis of the research done the reporting done by ‘The Hindu’ is done mostly in an objective manner. The team tries to put forth the issue in an objective, analytical manner. They have used human appeal.

When applied on the norms, issued by PCI, it was found that reporting was well within the norms and hence followed the prerequisites of covering a sensitive issue. Nothing was exaggerated, people were kept informed and the integrity of the rule of law was maintained. Though certain editorials and opinion pieces were critical in nature, none seemed to emotionally sway the audience or disrespect the court, they simply opened the forum of public discussion by sharing facts objectively and then analysing them, presenting a balanced point of view.

There was no exaggeration of facts. Most of the days the tone of reporting was objective in nature with a rather analytical approach. Some days the tone selected was directive and tried to convince people to maintain peace on human grounds. All in all not much exaggeration was seen within the reporting.

References

- Aalberg, T. (n.d.). 19. Issues, events and frames in political media coverage. *Political Communication*. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110238174.375>
- Alam, J. (1993). Democracy and rights in India in the wake of Ayodhya. *Social Scientist*, 21(7/8), 49. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3520345>
- Ammu Joseph (1990), "Some Lessons from Ahmedabad, 1986, "Madhyam", Bangalore, page 19
- Anand, D. (2011). The awakened Hindu India: Ayodhya and Gujarat. *Hindu Nationalism in India and the Politics of Fear*, 123-150. https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230339545_6
- Asghar A. Engineer, (1990), Communal Violence and the Role of the Media, "Madhyam", Bangalore, page.3
- Barnard, S. R. (n.d.). Crooked coverage: A study of (de)racialized texts in print media. <https://doi.org/10.32469/10355/4948>
- Nnaemeka, T.I. (1976), Issue Legitimation, mass media functions and public knowledge of social issues; Ph.D.Dissertation, University of Minnesota.
- Venkitesh Ramakrishnan & S.P. Singh, "When the 'dead' came back". *Frontline*, May 11-24, 1991, Madras: pages 12-16.