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Indian Minorities & their ordeal in the light of the National Media's Pandemic Coverage in a Post-Truth world

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Abstract:

Minorities in the Indian subcontinent, i.e., South Asia, have been hounded for years on the flimsiest of grounds. Their 'patriotism' is often subject to endless examinations by the self-proclaimed nationalist crowd. This otherization is often reflected in the manner in which the media portrays the minority communities regularly. The COVID-19 Pandemic that brought the entire world to a standstill was no exception. In India, the Muslim community was held responsible for the spread of the contagious virus by leading media houses in a manner that bordered on xenophobia. This was especially true for the initial days of the pandemic when most were clueless about the way out of the crisis. The research paper tries to contextualize & dissect the post-truth circumstances in which a virus was weaponized by a large section of the media to target minority communities. It documents the effects such misinformation/disinformation has had on India's fraying social fabric. The paper throws light on key issues like forced censorship (enabled by spineless media owners), the decline of the editorial command & democracy. A qualitative research methodology & an exploratory research design have been deemed fit for the study. The research shows how a significant part of the population was successfully initiated into brazen racism at a time when the nation should have stood united & firm in the face of multiple crises. It reveals (using the gaze of the pandemic timeline) the soft underbelly of the Indian press, which is susceptible to political pressures. Speaking Truth to Power, after all, comes at a price.

Keywords: #Minorities, #Islamophobia, #Media, #COVID-19, #PressFreedom

Introduction:

Humankind is known to be resilient. It has survived wars, droughts, floods, famines, and plagues. 2020 tested humanity's resilience once more. The SARS-CoV-2 strain of the Coronavirus (popularly called COVID-19) brought the world to a standstill. It devastated families, economies, and normalcy worldwide with its hydra-headed variants. India was no exception.

Millions contracted the virus, lives & livelihoods were lost, corpses were found floating in the Ganges & sand-burials became a talking point. No one knew the solution to the crises at hand. The state infrastructure was crumbling; dead bodies were piling up & oxygen was in short supply.

The situation worsened in 2021 when the Delta variant of the virus dealt a heavy blow to the Indian subcontinent. At this hour, one would have expected the Indian media to behave responsibly. It was, after

all, a significant pillar of democracy that exerted a degree of control over a person's mind space. (Banerjee, 2022, p. 21)

A section of the media fulfilled its duties. Some journalists travelled extensively to get a sense of the ground reality, which included hapless migrant workers walking back to their villages/hometowns on foot. (Siganporia, 2020)

Unfortunately, another section thrived on rancour and sensationalism. Instead of bridging gaps, it tried to instill fear and hatred in society. Such tactics had awful consequences at a time when humanity should have been united in its efforts. Misinformation and disinformation added greater potency to the venom of the virus.

Objectives of the study:

- To evaluate the role of the state & the media during the pandemic
- To assess the role of misinformation (post-truth)
- To decipher how power play worked in that period
- To reveal the dangers of speaking truth to power

Literature review:

Scope:

The literature review seeks to concentrate on the years directly affected by the COVID-19 Pandemic. The researcher has tried to make the review as comprehensive as possible while keeping the core topic in mind. The material that has been considered for research is of recent origin since the pandemic period began about five & a half years back. A qualitative methodology-based approach defines the study.

Communalism & COVID: the meeting of the two Viruses

Since the end of 2019, tempers had started rising in India as the government & the opposition clashed over the contentious Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA). The Delhi assembly elections, held a few months later, were expectedly fraught with dog whistles. (Anand & Bhanj, 2020)

One would have expected the nation, cutting across race, religion, caste & language, to unite in the face of a monumental tragedy. But that wasn't going to be the case. The Indian media hadn't played a responsible role in the run-up to the incendiary Delhi elections, which saw even senior leaders making 'hate speeches' to consolidate votes. The Pandemic was no exception.

The Tablighi Jamaat, a little-known Islamic organization (born in 1926) shot into the limelight for being a COVID 'superspreader'. It held an annual religious congregation in March 2020 in the national capital. Though it was inaugurated on March 3rd, the date of conclusion remained unclear. (Johny, 2020)

In early April, it was reported that nearly 1/3rd of the COVID cases recorded in India were related to the Jamaat. While the religious congregation was surely careless in its attitude, one can't simply brush aside **underreporting** and the sectarian coverage of some of the constituents of the media (including social media). (*India Has Not Reported 3.4 Million Covid Cases*, 2020)

Hashtags like #CoronaJihad & #CoronaTerrorists were promoted with the help of IT cells of certain political parties. Incendiary tweets & posts became the talk of the town. Rumours about Tablighi Jamaat members refusing to go into quarantine & attacking health workers & 'Hindus' went viral. Mainstream

media happily played along with the dominant narrative of an 'Islamic conspiracy'. An entire community was stereotyped for the reckless acts of a few. (Petersen & Rahman, 2020)

The COVID virus had finally met its match in the Communal Virus. The consequences had started to be felt on the ground, too. When Delhi-based Mehboob Ali returned to his village after attending a Tablighi Jamaat Conference in Bhopal, he was demonized as a Corona Terrorist by his neighbours, dragged into a field & beaten with sticks & stones. Social media platforms like WhatsApp served as a major channel of sectarian bile & misinformation. (*Man Thrashed After Being Accused of Conspiracy to Spread Coronavirus*, 2021)

The post-truth of Muslims acting as COVID carriers with some ulterior motive gained currency. But why would anyone do that? Why would people expose themselves or their families to the dangers of a pandemic of their own volition? Wasn't every single person, irrespective of race, creed, or language, susceptible to the virus? Like masks & PPE kits, common sense too seemed to be in short supply.

"An audio clip was shared in WhatsApp groups urging people not to let Muslim fruit and vegetable vendors into their areas, saying they were spreading the virus through their produce. Posters appeared in cities like Mangalore and Meerut saying Muslims would no longer be permitted to enter certain neighbourhoods. Dividing citizens on the basis of religion and spreading the virus of hate and bigotry in the midst of a public health crisis was perverse." (Sardesai, 2024, p. 93)

Interestingly, the Tablighis were not the only group to have engineered mass congregations in the country. Many other gatherings took place from early March (2020) to late June (2020). But they sank without a trace. For example, in March 2020, the annual Hindu festival of **Attukal Pongala** took place in the state of Kerala. Women gathered in hundreds of thousands in the state capital of Thiruvananthapuram. (Tierl & Ranjan, 2023)

In 2021, another religious congregation hit the headlines for the wrong reasons again. The Uttarakhand government organized the Kumbh Mela, one of the holiest religious congregations of Hindus, on the banks of the Ganga in Haridwar. The announcement to hold the Mela came at a time when COVID infections were on the rise again. However, that didn't seem to bother the administration, so it went ahead with an advertisement featuring the Prime Minister, inviting seekers to take the customary holy dip. The country was sitting on a mine about to explode. Hundreds of seers started testing positive for the virus. Even key public figures were not spared. Former UP Chief Minister Akhilesh Yadav, Nepal's former King Gyanendra Shah & former Queen Komal Shah tested COVID positive. Legendary music composer Shrehan Rathod (of the redoubtable Nadeem-Shrehan duo) died in a Mumbai hospital after returning home. (Pandey, 2021)

The same system that had pinned the blame squarely on Islamic missionaries for the spread of the virus a year back was now complicit in the deaths & infections of hundreds following a 'religious' event. The irony couldn't be starker.

An issue of *India Today* (dated 17th May 2021) set the cat among the pigeons by proclaiming a highly provocative cover. The cover contained a blood-curdling image of a long queue of corpses in a

crematorium with the heading '*A Failed State*'. The powerful issue would eventually inspire *Outlook's* (a rival magazine) editor, Ruben Banerjee, to do a hard-hitting cover on COVID mismanagement, thereby prompting his downfall.

The May 24, 2021, issue of *Outlook* had a minimalist cover with 3 staccato lines

Name: Government of India.

Age: 7 years.

Inform: Citizens of India.

The cover went viral on social media. While critics hailed the courageous team behind the issue, government supporters resorted to trolling, even accusing the editor of doing the opposition's bidding.

"A very prominent Union minister messaged one of my editors, citing the toolkit claim and saying that I was amenable to the Congress. Even some in the Outlook management were swayed. They discreetly inquired how close I was to the opposition party. Is Ruben really close to the Congress? Does he really take orders from the party, they asked. In no time, the 'Missing' cover assumed an ominous portent of making or unmaking me." (BANERJEE, 2022, p. 43)

This reveals how the cut-throat world of politics has birthed an environment where a critical appraisal is often mistaken for treason & the government of the day arrogates itself the status of a sovereign state.

The magazine's proprietors were put under pressure. The 'Missing' cover soon disappeared on *Outlook's* online format, leading to greater chaos. Mahua Moitra, the firebrand TMC MP from Krishnanagar, took up the matter on social media. The management's response was hardly convincing. It was clear that the proprietors were trying to minimize the wrath they had incurred from the government. Meanwhile, Ruben Banerjee was compelled to take a leave by the powers that be. In his absence, a new editor was recruited, while Banerjee was assigned a different role. However, the arrangement couldn't last long. The senior journalist was shown the door for his 'abrupt absence from work'. The magazine's managing editor, Sunil Menon, hung up his boots too. Menon's departure was historic since he was the proverbial *last of the Mohicans*. He had been associated with the publication since its inception & was the last remaining link to the original team of Vinod Mehta (the legendary founding editor). (Banerjee, 2022)

The pandemic hasn't only revealed the dangers to human health, but it has also exposed the subtle threats to democracy. Speaking truth to power may be extolled in theory, but it is often treated as heresy in practice. To pin the blame on one political ideology for the mess does little to solve the problem. Power-play preys on the base instincts of man and is silently acknowledged by parties of all hues & colors.

Research Gap:

Even though some studies (mostly academic) have been conducted on the rampant communalism of the Indian media at the time of the pandemic, there have been limited attempts to understand the various strands of post-truth & self-censorship that the Indian media practiced at the peak of a global humanitarian crisis. The chucking of editorial jobs for simply asking questions of the government of the day hasn't been evaluated beyond certain circles.

Research methodology:

The study adopted a qualitative research methodology to explore the role of the state & the media in the context of post-truth. Articles from newspapers, online portals & magazines have come in handy. A content analysis approach has been employed to understand the complex power dynamics that are shaping the relationship between the media & the state.

The study followed an exploratory research design, aiming to understand the circumstances under which journalists are reporting on key issues under the sun. A **comparative approach** has helped in exposing the inherent biases & communal impulses of the media as evident during the reporting of superspreader events.

Data Collection:

Data has been collected from a variety of sources. They are as follows:

1. **Social media:** Propaganda related to the pandemic (including the vilification of the religious minorities) found a perfect channel in social media platforms. Trends & hashtags indicated the things to come.
2. **Published sources in the form of**
 - a. books,
 - b. research papers,
 - c. articles & opinions in various magazines & websites played a vital role in research.

Data Analysis:

The data collected from multiple sources were analyzed through the methods of content analysis. Content analysis has helped in systematically analyzing data. It has led to a better understanding of the pattern & underlying themes.

Subject Analysis:

The subject analysis reveals the following points:

1. **Communalism is plaguing the media:** The Indian media's partisan attitude during the greatest crisis of the century is one of the lowest points for the fabled fourth estate.
2. **Speaking Truth to power is becoming increasingly difficult:** Democracies thrive on criticism & counter-arguments. However, the growing polarization of the media, coupled with the tail-between-the-legs attitude of the proprietors, poses a dark future for democracy in India.
3. **Something is wrong with the proprietorship:** Many owners of the various arms of media have various conflicts of interest. They have investments in other businesses, which makes it difficult for genuine journalism to thrive. The proprietors tend to avoid conflict with the powers that be since the fear of a backlash weighs heavily on their minds.
4. **Media too busy with narrative building, post-truth is the by-product:** The media in this country has been busy setting agendas for the 'nation'. Hence, it is mostly busy in narrative building & Television Rating Points (TRPs)/ online traffic. Anything that suits the agenda, fact or fiction, is being cultivated. Hence, the arms of misinformation & disinformation are gaining in strength.

Conclusion:

The pandemic has given humanity important life lessons. It has shown the fragility of existence. It has also revealed the darker side of society that prefers to sow the seeds of dissension in the midst of a catastrophe. Historically, minorities have been the worst hit because of such devious actions. Their ordeals continue to multiply because of parochial political interests. The era of post-truth (which includes misinformation & disinformation) has further complicated the scenario. These are trying times for humanity as it battles the base instincts on display.

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