Mediating Conflict between India and Pakistan: An Inquiry into the Role of the English Press and New Media of the Two States

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A SUMMARY

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THESIS SUMMARY

Conflict which has come to occupy a central place in human and societal relations is widely understood to be a struggle over power, resources and ideas. Conflict emanates from a perceived difference in “opinions” among parties involved in a relationship. It can be termed as a state or quality of ongoing relationships among social entities – persons, groups or nations resulting from a lack of agreement over an issue expressed in either words or actions (Arno, 1984).

With conflict at the centre-stage, the present work of research is focused on exploring and describing the news media’s role with specific reference to the India-Pakistan conflict. The present research provides for an intersection between these two disciplines and seeks to understand and explain media’s role in select events in the India-Pakistan discord. The study also addresses questions related to factors that propel media’s role in selected conflict situations, communication strategies employed by news media in the conflict zone, the dynamics of media-state relationship and emergence of ‘peace media’ in the form of collaborative new media forums.

The study is primarily a content based qualitative inquiry that seeks to understand the various nuances of media’s role in the India-Pakistan conundrum through an in-depth examination of content covered in the mainstream English press (in both India and Pakistan) and interactive new media forums created in collaboration with the citizens of the two countries. The study
stands significant in the post-cold war media landscape where mediatization has made giant inroads especially in developing countries and where conflict is being increasingly viewed from a “mediatized” lens.

With a focus on the mainstream English press in both countries and collaborative new media forums, the researcher has studied the “mediating” role of news media – by particularly analyzing events wherein an effort at conflict resolution and mediation was made by the two states.

RATIONALE

The study is significant due to the following reasons:

- It incorporates the study of those events in the India-Pakistan relationship which have been inadequately studied in past research endeavours.

- It offers a South Asian perspective to the very significant domain of media and conflict.

- It attempts to fill the intellectual void created due to a lack of study of Pakistani media in Indian scholarship by examining coverage and opinions as reflected in the Pakistani press.

- It is contemporary in nature since it explores the role of the new media which has emerged as a powerful medium of interaction between enemy populations in the recent past.

- It offers a comparative evaluation of two distinct media of communication – press and new media.
• It engages with the theoretical dimensions related to media and conflict in an attempt to build a novel explanation about media’s role in Indo-Pak relations.

• Through recommendations offered at the end of the study, it envisions a better and more constructive role for media in India and Pakistan; thereby contributing whatever little is possible to conflict management between the two countries.

• It may in the future serve as a practical guideline for personnel and organizations striving for an effective understanding of media-conflict dynamics, in terms of policy recommendations as well as grassroots implementation.

OBJECTIVES

The basic objectives of the study are as follows:

• Exploring the many roles of media during key events of the conflict in the said phase: There have been major events in the India-Pakistan conflict right from war to aggressive diplomacy to backdoor engagement to truce and cease fire in the post-1991 period. The study takes up important events of the phase for inspection and analysis of media’s roles in the same.

• Finding determinants to establish media’s roles: After in-depth exploration and analysis of the various roles played by media, the study determines factors that have influenced media’s different roles in the events under scrutiny.

• Describing conflict communication strategies used by media: Consequential to exploring the nature of media’s different roles and the factors influencing it, the study describes the various ways and strategies employed by media in communicating information about conflict to audiences.
• **Explaining media-state relationship in case of conflict situations:** A critical question for analysis is ‘In the events selected for the study, to what extent do media interact and collaborate with the state?’ This is an attempt to explore the dynamics of media-state relationship especially in cases of national security, conflict and antagonism.

• **Charting the rise of alternative peace media in the India-Pakistan conflict relationship:** A crucial question for analysis is ‘Assuming (based on existing literature) that the mainstream media in the case of India-Pakistan work to exacerbate the conflict and intensify a mutually hateful relationship, is there any evidence which supports the existence and rise of alternative media practices that promote peace, especially in the context of the new media?’

**METHODOLOGY**

The present piece of research work is a qualitative content based study seeking to achieve a blend of empirical and theoretical dimensions through adoption of an exploratory, descriptive and qualitative research design. Purposive sampling technique was employed in order to select newspapers from both India and Pakistan – based on pre-set research requirements and archival availability. The principal nature of the data collected is qualitative and a hermeneutical and interpretive approach within the constructivist paradigm was used to carry out data analysis and interpretation. The major methods employed in the study involve a mix of qualitative content as well as thematic analysis based on which themes and frames were extracted from the collected data. Four English newspapers (two each from India and Pakistan) were selected for analysis on pre-decided content criteria. This research has heavily relied on theoretical dimensions of media’s role in conflict and has employed theoretical underpinnings from Robert M. Entman’s Media Framing Theory (1993), Galtung’s model of
War and Peace Journalism and Gadi Wolfsfeld’s Political Contest Model (1997) to reach to a coherent explanation of media’s role in the India-Pakistan conflict

SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS

The nature of the present work is inter-disciplinary and is an attempt towards synergizing knowledge located within disciplines such as Political Science, International Relations, Peace and Conflict Studies and Communication Studies. Though the scope of this study expands only to selected mainstream English press and the New Media, and collates knowledge from a ‘political’ as well as ‘communication’ perspective. Since it majorly examines the ‘political’ role played by media in the conflict arena, it borrows theoretically as well as empirically from different disciplinary domains as mentioned above. The findings and recommendations derived from the study will be useful to practitioners, academicians and researchers in politics, mass media, peace and conflict, foreign policy and international relations.

The following limitations were encountered during the course of the study:

- The study is limited to analyzing the role of mainstream English press and New Media in the two states and does not offer an account of the role played by other popular mediums such as – Television, Radio and Cinema.
- The analysis does not comment on the role of the regional press in the two countries which is an important carrier of public opinion. This limitation was encountered due to lack of knowledge of regional languages especially languages spoken in Pakistan.
- The time period selected for the study also emerged as a limitation since only a few significant events of the relationship were considered for analysis.
• Methodological limitations such as those involving sample selection, sample size and sampling procedure were also encountered due to time and resource constraints. A lack of ease in accessing archival material was also a barrier to the research process.

• In terms of research design, the emphasis on qualitative aspects led to a subjective and constructivist paradigm, thereby limiting the possibility of generalizing derived conclusions. The lack of analyzing and presenting quantitative aspects of media content was also a major drawback of the said study.

MAJOR FINDINGS

Major findings from the study are as presented below:

• In the case of the Indo-Pak discord, the mainstream media have played varied roles. These roles are both positive and negative in nature. The news media act as a creator (source) and carrier of stereotypes and works to perpetuate and reinforce already existing stereotypes about the ‘other’. Media discourse also discourages audiences from questioning mainstream opinion and thereby works to exacerbate conflict in a very subtle manner.

• Media also act as carrier of nationalist ideologies and narratives which are generally propagated by those in power. Media reporting also by and large confirms to nationalist agendas set out by the state as well as the state apparatus, though exceptions to these are visible in new media forums. Media discourse is though at times also critical of the actions undertaken by the government; however it reiterates its loyalty to ideas of nationalism and nationhood.
• Media’s political role is that of a communicator and a facilitator for the purpose of exchanging diverse views that exist during both peaceful as well as conflict situations.

• Media in both India and Pakistan, during a conflict situation, operate in terms of dichotomous realities which are evidently reflected in the coverage of issues. Though it does question existing narratives, it presents realities in terms of ‘binaries’ and so media leave very little space for an alternative narrative to emerge and sustain in the India-Pakistan conundrum.

• A wide range of factors operate in tandem to influence the way media works in the India-Pakistan relationship. These factors are both internal (related to media environment, media professionals, media ownership) as well as external (related to the troubled relationship between the two countries) in nature. These factors include – history, state and state apparatus, religious and cultural factors, nationalism and ideology.

• The basic aim of media coverage during conflict and peace is to keep audiences updated with the latest happenings and also provide a perspective to issues under discussion. For this media employs routine stories, special articles, niche stories, commentaries and reader feedback to accommodate an array of opinions.

• One of the main communication strategies is to exhibit contradictory opinions and provide a holistic picture of the same. Both the Indian and the Pakistani press also source stories from each other to give readers a perspective of the opinions held by the ‘other’.

• Since the India-Pakistan conflict itself is laced with various dimensions, media-state relationship comes across as complex, dynamic and multi-dimensional. Majority of
the times, it is the state that decides the agenda of response to the conflict situation, however there are times when media through its coverage pressurizes the state for a certain response. For instance, during the Mumbai terror attacks the Indian media acted as a powerful force demanding accountability from the Indian state with regard to action against Pakistan sponsored terrorism.

- The state also is dependent on media and its impact on public opinion to mobilize popular opinion in the times of crisis. In case of a diplomatic deadlock, communication between governments is carried out and messages/feelers sent through interviews to TV channels or statements in the press.

- The state also employs media platforms to convey its tough and belligerent responses to the enemy and assure citizens that they are strong enough to deal with enemy threats.

- The alternative media enable Indians and Pakistanis to engage in sustained and meaningful dialogue thereby leading to increased instances of people to people contact, help question and counter mainstream narratives of conflict, peace, enmity, nationalism, patriotism – thereby developing one’s own narrative of the relationship, emerge as a space for cultivating and mobilizing opinion for peace, enhancing the peace based constituency and serve as a start up forum for disseminating peace based content and activities.

- The new media play an educative role in terms of trying to dispel deeply entrenched stereotypes reinforced by historical factors, state led discourse, popular media and culture and the educational system in both countries. These forums also encourage local and indigenous content creation that is created and shared by people on both
sides which is otherwise not possible in mainstream media forums that are dominated by elite opinion.

- The Indian and Pakistani media serve as a platform for nationalistic jingoism and work overtime to blame the ‘other’ for all undesirable events in their own countries. Though it can be said that the Pakistani media resorts to nationalistic jingoism more than the Indian media and its reportage is full of religious undertones.

- The news media in India and Pakistan is also a constructor of political realities and narratives during the time of conflict. Often it is media that sets the agenda for a response from the government and in this sense media’s role cannot be restricted to that of a communicating agency, but it extends to construction and framing of realities as per a pre-decided agenda.

A cumulative analysis of media’s role has led the researcher to reinforce the fact that to demarcate media’s role as strictly ‘positive’ or ‘negative’ would be to do injustice to as dynamic and vibrant an entity as media. The many shades of media’s role cannot be understood as opposites and thus the study takes a comprehensive and holistic overview of media’s role.