

Mass Media and the Politics of Polarization in India: An Overview

Irshad Khan

Research Scholar, Department of Political Science, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh

Abstract

Mass media plays a key role in shaping public opinion and influencing political discourse. However, the interplay between mass media, politics, and polarization is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon. The impact of mass media on polarization is influenced by various factors. Sensationalism (yellow journalism), bias, and inflammatory language employed by media outlets can amplify divisive narratives and fuel hatred. The impact of mass media on polarization is influenced by various factors. Sensationalism (yellow journalism), bias, and inflammatory language employed by media outlets can amplify divisive narratives and fuel hatred. Additionally, the spread of fake news and misinformation through social media platforms can further deepen polarization by disseminating false information and reinforcing existing biases. A well know social libertarian Noam Chomsky along with Edward S. Herman propounded the “Propaganda Model” presented in “Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass media” in 1988. In this work they pointed towards the biasness of media for the elite group of the society and also focused on how mainstream media filters the raw material of the news and how it is shaped before it reaches to the audience. Moreover, the Propaganda Theory laid emphasis on how the mass media effecting in manipulating the public minds in manufacturing their consent regarding socio-economic and political matters.

Keywords: Propaganda, Polarization, Mass Media, Public opinion, Hindutva.

The Role of Mass Media in Shaping Public Opinion

According to **Lumen Learning**, “Two basic assumptions underlie most research on agenda-setting: One, that the press and the media do not reflect reality, they filter and shape it; and two, that media concentration on a few issues and subjects leads the public to perceive those issues as more important than other issues.” Agenda-setting occurs through a cognitive process known as “accessibility.”

Mass media has played a significant role in shaping public opinion towards the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in India in the recent time. While it is important to note that public opinion is influenced by a wide range of factors, including socioeconomic conditions, historical context, and personal experiences, mass media has the ability to amplify certain narratives and shape the way people perceive political parties like the BJP.

Mass media, including television, newspapers, and online platforms, provide extensive coverage of political events, campaigns, and policy initiatives. The media's focus on the BJP and its leaders has helped in increasing their visibility and shaping public perceptions about the party. Positive coverage of BJP's achievements and policy initiatives is contributing to a favorable opinion, while negative coverage

can have the opposite effect. Here are some ways in which mass media has influenced public opinion towards the BJP in India:

1. Political Advertisement: Political parties, including the BJP, use mass media extensively for advertising and promoting their agendas. As per the report of the Hindustan Times (14 Dec 2022) the BJP government has spent 6491cr in total on advertisement likely 3260cr on Electronic Media and 3231cr on the Print Media respectively. Political advertisements on television, radio, and online platforms are shaping public opinion by emphasizing the party's achievements, projecting its leaders in a positive light, and highlighting its policies and promises. These advertisements are having a persuasive impact on the public's perception of the BJP.

2. Opinion Journalism: The opinions expressed by journalists, political commentators, and experts in the media are shaping public opinion towards the BJP nowadays. Media personalities who support or criticize the BJP are influencing public perceptions by presenting their arguments and analysis. These opinions, often presented in news analysis, talk shows, and opinion pieces, contribute to shaping public discourse and influencing the way people view the party.

3. Biased Media and Agenda-Setting: Media bias, whether real or perceived, can influence public opinion. Certain media outlets are having biases that favor the BJP, and this is shaping public perception of the party. Subhash Chandhra Goenka, chairman of the Zee Group, was backed by the BJP and nominated as an MP to the Rajya Sabha. Rajeev Chandrashekhar, a leader of the BJP, controls the well-known news station The Republic TV. In addition to all of this, a well-known businessman named Gautam Adani, who is a favorite of the BJP (as to be said by the opposition parties), owns 65% of the NDTV news network. As a result, media professionals play a big part in defining the agenda and choosing which topics to cover and how to frame them. By deciding what information is supplied to the public and how it is displayed, this affects public opinion.

It's important to recognize that public opinion is influenced by a complex interplay of factors, and mass media is just one of them. Other factors such as socioeconomic conditions, caste and religious identities, governance outcomes, and historical events also shaped public opinion towards the BJP in India.

Targeted Minority

After the BJP came to power in 2014, there have been concerns and debates regarding the treatment of minorities in India. It is important to note that public opinion on this matter varies, and there are differing perspectives on the issue. On February 23, 2021, a communal unrest in Delhi left 53 persons dead, including 40 Muslims. The authorities have targeted activists and protest organizers rather than carrying out a reliable and unbiased inquiry, including into claims that BJP leaders incited violence and police officials participated in attacks. Recently, in response to yet another large-scale demonstration, this one led by farmers, the authorities demonized minority Sikh demonstrators and launched inquiries into their supposed ties to separatist organizations. In December 2019, the government approved a discriminatory citizenship law that for the first time bases citizenship on religion and targets Muslims. Jammu and Kashmir, the only state with a majority of Muslims, lost its constitutional autonomy in August 2019, and the government enforced limitations that violated peoples' fundamental rights. The majority of mob assaults involving cows occur in the Indian states of Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, Delhi, Gujarat, Karnataka, Rajasthan, and Madhya Pradesh. Mob lynching has historically been a crime with a looming latent threat. The cycle of fear that results in mob lynching is one in which the majority fears the minority.

The Government of Uttar Pradesh enacted a law on 24 November 2020 with the intention of limiting interfaith relationships and named it as “**Prohibition of Unlawful Religious Conversion Ordinance, 2020**”. Politicians from the BJP use the term “**love jihad**” to further the unfounded notion that Muslim men seduce Hindu women into marriage in order to convert them to Islam. Though this applies only on the one side instead of both as if a Hindu man wants to marry to a Muslim girl then the same society celebrates the situation and also helps him monetarily. Due to opposition from right-wing organizations and religious authorities, Yashpal Rawat, alias Yashpal Benam, a BJP leader in Uttarakhand and the Nagar Palika chairman of the Pauri Garhwal district, called off his daughter's wedding to a Muslim man which was scheduled on 28 May 2023. The Prohibition of Unlawful Religious Conversion Ordinance imposes a penalty of up to 10 years in jail on those who convert another person through compulsion, deception, misrepresentation, or inducement. It also mandates that anybody seeking to convert obtain clearance from the district authorities. Although the implementation of this rule has primarily focused on Muslim men involved in Hindu-Muslim relationships, it ostensibly applies to all coerced religious conversions.

The Politics of “US vs. THEM”

The polarization of the vote in the name of Hindutva is a phenomenon that has observed in Indian politics in recent years. Hindutva is an ideology that emphasizes the cultural and religious identity of Hindus and seeks to promote their interests. There have been instances where the use of Hindutva as a political tool has contributed to the polarization of voters along religious lines. The use of religious identity as a basis for political mobilization can create divisions among voters. Some political leaders are seen to exploit religious sentiments and invoke Hindutva to consolidate support from Hindu voters. It is leading to the marginalization or exclusion of religious minorities and creating an “us versus them” narrative, which is further deepening the polarization. The use of the communal rhetoric, such as making provocative statements or promoting discriminatory policies against religious minorities, is fuel polarization. Such rhetoric is creating a sense of fear, mistrust, and animosity between different religious communities, leading to the fragmentation of the electorate.

The top leaders of the Hindutva ideology are instilling dread in the hearts of Indians by making remarks like “**the politics of 80 vs. 20**” or blaming a specific community for population growth. Election season makes it quite evident that such hateful rhetoric is widespread in today's society. Another similar statement came from the top most national leader of the ruling party in which he urged to recognize people by their attires. Some other cases can also be seen in which some saints in the name of “**Dharm Sansad**” openly counseling people to keep weapons in their houses. It does not stop there only, the media also broadcasts stories depicting Muslims as a threat to society, which indirectly fosters hate toward them and contributes to divisiveness. In the recent inhuman incident in Manipur in which girls were paraded naked throughout the village and raped, one of India's largest news agencies, ANI, without any concrete evidence tweeted and victimized a boy named Abdul (Muslim) for doing so, but later apologized because no Abdul was involved in that incident.

Misuse of Mainstream Media

Since 2014, there has been significant attention on the dynamics of Hindu-Muslim politics in India. The relationships between Hindus and Muslims in India are complex and varied, with both individuals and communities expressing a wide range of viewpoints. Increased polarization and antagonism between two

communities are causes for concern. During COVID Pandemic, there was a highly hazardous trend of accusing Muslims of spreading the disease. The manifestation of this propaganda was violence towards Muslims. In India, countless cases are being reported. Across the country, police were ordered to round up anyone associated with the organization, more than 27,000 Tablighi Jamaat members and their contacts were been quarantined in about 15 states. In Uttar Pradesh, the police offered up to 10,000 rupees for information on anyone who had attended the gathering.

News outlets like India Today, ABP News, and Republic TV ran headlines like "Save the country from Corona Jihad" and "Who is the villain of Nizamuddin?" while Sudhir Chaudhary of ZEENEWS and India Today's Arnav Goswami insisted that Muslims are purposefully spreading the virus. The manifestation of such extreme Hindu doctrine in the form of marginalization, harassment, and discrimination is currently materializing. The Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) passed in 2019 and the proposed National Register of Citizens (NRC) has been contentious issues. Critics argue that these policies disproportionately impact Muslims, creating apprehension and fear within the Muslim community. These initiatives have been viewed by some as evidence of discriminatory policies and further exacerbating Hindu-Muslim tensions.

Impact of Social Media on Youth

Social media has had a significant impact on shaping opinions and attitudes, including among the youth, and it has played a role in the spread of hatred against Muslims in India. Spread of fake news and misinformation on social media platforms have become breeding grounds for the hatred. False narratives, manipulated images, and misleading information related to Muslims can quickly go viral and influence the opinions of young users who may not have the tools to critically evaluate the content they encounter.

Auction of the Muslim girls through the online apps "Bulli Bai" and "Sulli Deals" and also the fake videos and pictures are the fruit of social media which are setting the false narratives.

Social media providing a relatively anonymous space where individuals can engage in hate speech and targeted harassment. Muslims, as well as individuals who speak up in support of Muslims or against Islamophobia, are becoming victims of online abuse, which can further fuel hatred and intolerance.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the relationship between mass media, politics, and polarization is complex and multifaceted. While the media plays a crucial role in informing the public, promoting dialogue, and fostering understanding, it can also contribute to polarization when certain factors come into play. The media's sensationalism, bias, and use of inflammatory language or imagery can amplify divisive narratives and fuel hatred. Fake news and misinformation spread through media channels, including social media, can also contribute to polarization by disseminating false information and reinforcing existing biases. Political influence over media ownership and control can lead to the promotion of biased narratives that align with specific agendas, further deepening divisions among the public. Additionally, the lack of diversity and representation in media organizations can perpetuate stereotypes and exclude certain communities, fostering an environment of polarization. Addressing the negative impact of mass media, politics, and polarization requires a multi-dimensional approach. Promoting media literacy and critical thinking among the public can help individuals discern reliable information from misinformation. Encouraging responsible and ethical journalism practices, fostering diversity and

inclusion in media organizations, and establishing strong regulatory frameworks can also contribute to mitigating polarization. Furthermore, promoting dialogue, interfaith understanding, and inclusive governance can help counteract the divisive narratives perpetuated by media and political actors. It is crucial for media organizations, political leaders, and society as a whole to prioritize fostering unity, tolerance, and respect for diverse perspectives in order to counter polarization and promote a more cohesive society.

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