

Representation of Mahayana Buddhism in Mainstream Indian Media

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Abstract

Buddhism originated in India about two thousand six hundred years ago. Siddhartha, a royal prince concerned by the sufferings of human life, left his home in search of truth and a solution to those sufferings. When he attained enlightenment after years of struggle, a new path, Buddhism, was born. Ideological conflict started in this new religion soon after the death of Siddhartha Gautama. In the Fourth Buddhist Council held about five hundred years after his death, Buddhism mainly divided into two sects – Hinayana and Mahayana. With time Mahayana spread to many parts of the world including India. But it is also true that gradually the separate identity of Buddhism started shrinking in India and it started mixing with Hinduism to a great extent. It was an interdisciplinary study that involved philosophy and mass communication. The main objective of this study was to understand the current discourse taking place on the philosophy and other aspects of Mahayana Buddhism in Indian society, the birthplace of this sect. We all know that the content appearing in the media largely reflects and guides the discussions taking place in that particular society, hence this study analyzes the coverage of Mahayana Buddhism in India's mainstream online media. To achieve the objectives of the study, both quantitative and qualitative approaches of content analysis method were used. The findings indicate that Mahayana Buddhism is receiving negligible media coverage in its birthplace. Most of the content being published about this sect in Indian online media is related to religious practices, events and philosophical aspects of Mahayana. After this, tourism and archaeological discoveries have also got some place. Some coverage related to legal disputes was also seen. Content dealing with philosophical aspects includes the development of the Mahayana sect, its philosophical uniqueness, its comparison with Hinduism, the paths it suggests for leading a better life, the principles of gender equality in this sect, its contribution to the development of Islamic Sufism, etc. News related to collaboration between Indian and foreign universities for academic research on Buddhism (including Mahayana philosophy) has also found some place. The coverage of Mahayana Buddhism was found to be visually rich. Adequate number of images were used in these materials.

Keywords: Mahayana Buddhism, Indian Mainstream Media, Representation, Philosophy, India

Introduction

Buddhism originated in India about two thousand six hundred years ago as a simple and easy religion to liberate mankind from its sufferings. A prince named Siddhartha, distressed by the sufferings of human life, left his home full of comforts and luxuries to search for truth and the solution to these miseries. After

a long struggle he attained enlightenment and laid the foundation of Buddhism. He preached the four Aryan Truths and eightfold path to the mankind. He propagated his teachings quite simply in the language of common people so that all people can get rid of the miseries of human life. The socio-religious circumstances of that time were quite complex. Religion was full of complexities and rituals. In such a situation, Buddha's simple and easy teachings started attracting people and Buddhism started spreading rapidly [1].

While Buddha was alive, due to his extraordinary personality, there was no division in Buddhism, but after his death, diversity in thoughts and the formation of sects on the basis of that diversity began to be seen. Many gradual changes took place in Buddhism over time and after the death of Buddha, many of its varieties (sects and sub-sects) started developing [2][8].

Emergence of Mahayana Buddhism and Its Core Principles

According to later traditions of Buddhism, shortly after the death of Gautam Buddha, differences of opinion began to arise among his disciples on many issues. To overcome these, the first Buddhist Council was organized in *Rajgriha, Magadh* (modern Rajgir, Bihar, India). In this council, Buddha's disciple Kasyapa was asked to present Buddha's metaphysical views before everyone. The compilation of those views was called *Abhidhammapitaka*. Upali, Buddha's oldest disciple, recited rules related to discipline, the compilation of which was called *Vinayapitaka*. Finally, Ananda, the Buddha's favourite disciple, narrated the stories and parables told by the Buddha while preaching, which were compiled as the *Suttapitaka*. Buddhist monks passed on the knowledge of these three *Pitakas* orally to the next generation and much later they were given written form. The oldest and closest sources of the Buddha's teachings that are still available are the *Pitakas*.

Even later, Buddhist councils were organized at different times. The second Buddhist council was held in Vaishali (currently in Bihar state of India) and the third in Pataliputra (modern Patna, state capital of Bihar, India). The third council held in Pataliputra took place under the patronage of Emperor Ashoka, who is considered to have made an important contribution in the spread of Buddhism outside India.

The fourth Buddhist council took place under the patronage of king Kanishka and in this council Buddhism got divided into two major sects – Hinayana and Mahayana. The process of this division had been going on for years, which became almost formal in the fourth council. The role of the sage and philosopher Nagarjuna, who was a contemporary of Kanishka, is considered very important in the development of the Mahayana sect [1].

The people of Hinayana sect remained close to the old tradition of Buddhism while Mahayana incorporated new concepts and practices. Devotion (*Bhakti*) was given place and Buddha was given the status of a deity and worship of his idol started. Mahayana spread towards China, Tibet and Nepal. Gradually *Tantra* and popular magic also got included in it. Hinayana was considered suitable mainly for those few people who were thoughtful and had passed the period of religious infancy. Mahayana, on the other hand, was found suitable for the general public who needed some symbols for devotion [3].

Hinayana followed the old texts written in Pali and carried forward the same tradition, while in Mahayana new texts were composed in Sanskrit. Hinayana was considered Pali tradition and Mahayana was considered Sanskrit tradition [4].

One of the core elements of Mahayana Buddhism is the concept of Bodhisattva. Hinayana limits the designation of Bodhisattva only to the stage of the Buddha until he attained awakening (Bodhi). In contrast

the Mahayana teaches that anyone can aspire to attain awakening (*Bodhicitta-pada*) and thus become a bodhisattva [5].

Mahayana Buddhism was greatly influenced by Hinduism. Both religions worshiped many deities who had many similarities. There were many similarities at the philosophical level also. Just as Hindu religion welcomes diversities, similarly was the situation of Mahayana. It started incorporating the beliefs and worship methods of the people it reached. Hindus declared Buddha to be the incarnation of *Vishnu*. Now Buddha started being worshiped in Hindu religion also. Gradually it became difficult to differentiate between Buddhism and Hinduism. This was also a major reason for the shrinking of the separate identity of Buddhism in India [1].

Significance of the study: As we discussed above, Mahayana Buddhism originated in India, developed, and spread from here to other countries of the world. In such a situation, it is interesting and useful to know what kind of discussions are going on about Mahayana Buddhism in the Indian society at present. One way to know this is to study the coverage of Mahayana in mainstream Indian media. Because mainstream media not only directs the discussions taking place in the society but also reflects it.

Objectives of the Study

This study has the following objectives:

1. To determine the importance given to Mahayana Buddhism in the mainstream online media of India, the birthplace of Mahayana Buddhism.
2. To understand the type and nature of coverage given to Mahayana Buddhism and its philosophy in Indian mainstream online media.

Research Methodology

Content analysis is a suitable and popular research method for studying media content [6]. Through this, various aspects of media content can be analyzed in detail. Since the nature of this study was similar, content analysis was used to achieve its objectives. In this study, both quantitative and qualitative approaches of content analysis were used. Content related to Mahayana Buddhism in sampled news websites was analyzed. By analyzing the sampled content, various themes and content formats were presented quantitatively. But a qualitative approach was also employed to understand the discussion within the different themes.

Selection of Media : Print media has space limitations and traditional electronic media such as radio and television have time limitations. Apart from this, if we talk about online media, here the limitations of space and time are relatively less. There is relatively more freedom to publish different types of content here. That is why only online media was included in this study.

India is a linguistically diverse country. Many languages are spoken here. Among them, 22 major languages have been included in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution [7]. Hindi is the most spoken language here but the use of English is also quite popular. The official language of the Indian Union is Hindi but English is also being used as second official language. To some extent, English also acts as a connecting language between people speaking different languages. Apart from this, the researchers also did not have knowledge of languages other than Hindi and English. Keeping all these factors in mind, news websites of the largest media groups in Hindi and English languages were included in this research.

After determining the languages, two-tier sampling was done for the selection of news websites. In the first level, as per the latest RNI report (Press in India 2021-2022)[9], a list of 5 Hindi and 5 English language newspapers with maximum circulation was made and one each was selected randomly. The websites of these two selected newspapers - The Times of India (English), <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com> and *Dainik Jagran* (Hindi), <https://www.jagran.com> were included in this study.

The coverage of last five years (1st October 2018 to 30th September 2023) was included in this study. Keywords like “Mahayana”, “Mahayana Buddhism” and “Mahayana Buddhist” were used to find content related to Mahayana Buddhism in both the websites selected as samples for the study. Hindi forms of these keywords were used in the context of Hindi website.

After analyzing all the content related to Mahayana Buddhism published in the selected news websites, several thematic or subject categories were emerged. These categories were - Philosophy and Information, Historical Discovery, Tourism, Education, Legal Issues, Conflict, Personality, Entertainment, and Others.

'Philosophy and Information' contains material that discusses philosophical and other related aspects of Mahayana Buddhism such as practices, rituals, teachings, festivals, celebrations, etc. The content included in the 'Historical Discovery' category was based on archaeological and other historical discoveries related to Mahayana Buddhism. During the analysis, many features and news were also found which were about places related to Mahayana Buddhism. In this type of material, information was given about those places and an attempt was also made to inspire people to go there. Many of these places were suitable for pilgrimage and many for general tourism. All these types of content were included in the 'Tourism' category. In the 'Education' category, material based on educational activities and research related to Mahayana Buddhism has been included. As the name suggests the 'Legal Issues' category includes content that has legal dimensions.

In the news websites selected for analysis, some material related to Mahayana Buddhism was also found which was placed under the category of 'Conflict'. The content based on Mahayana Buddhism which is related to films, web series, TV shows, lives of celebrities was put in the 'Entertainment' category. And finally such materials which could not be included in any of the previously mentioned categories were included in the 'Other' category.

During this content analysis the content was also categorized on the basis of format. Several formats were used by the studied news websites to publish the content related to Mahayana Buddhism. These were – News Report, Article, Feature, Photo story and Video story.

In addition to theme and format, visual presentation was also made a part of the study. Visual presentation plays an important role in increasing the impact of any content on readers. Pictures, photographs or infographics attract readers' attention more than text. Their impact can also remain on the minds of readers for a relatively longer period of time. Therefore, in this study, an attempt was also made to see how many images were used with the material related to Mahayana Buddhism and what were the main types of those images.

Importance given to Mahayana Buddhism in the mainstream online Indian media

How much importance has been given to a subject by the media can be understood from the coverage given to that particular subject. More coverage means more importance and less coverage means less importance. If we look at the website of The Times of India (English), <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com>,

the amount of content related to Mahayana Buddhism is very less. Over the course of five years (1st October 2018 to 30th September 2023) only 45 items have been published that mention the term Mahayana Buddhism in any form. The situation is a little worse in the case of Hindi language mainstream media. Over the course of same five years, only 28 items were found on the Jagran Group's Hindi website (<https://www.jagran.com>) that discussed Mahayana Buddhism in any form. This negligible coverage can be understood with the help of Osgood and Schramm's (1954) model of communication and Agenda Setting Theory.

The Agenda Setting theory explains the role of mass media in setting agenda for the discussion or discourse in the society. According to this theory the role of mass media is limited in what people think about an issue, but the mass media decides what issues people think about. Mass media, through its coverage, decides what issues will be the priority of the people [10].

Unlike print, radio and television, online media provide quick and accurate information about their readers or audience. Accurate data on how many people clicked on a content, from which parts of the world and for how long they stayed on that content is immediately available. The number of clicks on an item and the time readers/viewers/listeners spend on it indicate the popularity of that particular item. This is a type of audience feedback that the news website receives immediately. And as Osgood and Schramm's (1954) [11] model of communication says, the sender modifies its content according to the feedback received. Therefore, if the content becomes popular and gets more audience, the website increases both the quantity and frequency of such content. But if the opposite happens then the publication of that type of content may also reduce.

Both the Osgood and Schramm's model of communication and Agenda Setting Theory can be used to understand the very less coverage of Mahayana Buddhism in major Hindi and English news websites of its birthplace. As we know the number of people following Buddhism in India is very limited (0.8%). Therefore, the number of people reading the material related to it is also limited and this is one of the main reasons that the coverage of Mahayana Buddhism in news websites is also very less. If we try to understand this negligible coverage with the help of Agenda Setting Theory, then it can be understood that the Indian mainstream media is not interested in presenting Mahayana Buddhism as one of the important issues before the public.

Coverage of Mahayana Buddhism : Different Themes

In this study, published content related to Mahayana Buddhism in both the sampled news website was classified into a total of eight themes. Content from both Hindi and English websites were combined and analysed on the basis of theme. Following table shows the share of each theme.

Table 1: Coverage of Mahayana Buddhism : Different Themes

S.N.	Theme	Share in Percentage
1	Information and Philosophy	42.46
2	Tourism	21.92
3	Historical Discovery	17.81
4	Education	2.74
5	Legal Issues	4.11
6	Conflict	5.48
7	Entertainment	2.74

8	Others	2.74
	Total	100

‘Information and Philosophy’ theme had the largest (42.46%) share. Content that discussed the philosophy of Mahayana Buddhism, its traditions, literature, rituals, festivals, prominent Mahayana figures, etc. was categorized under this theme. ‘Tourism’ got the second largest (21.92%) share followed by ‘Historical Discovery’ (17.81%). The analysis found a lot of material that provided information about places that were attractive for tourism. Besides, these places were also currently or historically associated with Mahayana Buddhism. This type of content was placed under the ‘Tourism’ theme.

Since in the past, Buddhism and its Mahayana sect was quite popular in India, therefore, during archaeological excavations, remains of statues, viharas etc. related to Mahayana Buddhism are often found. This type of news and news related to other historical discoveries were kept in the 'Historical Discovery' theme. As the data shows, it has emerged as the third biggest theme.

Conflict appears as the fourth major theme with 5.48% share. Mahayana originated in India and today has followers in China, Tibet and Nepal. Currently Tibet is a part of China but the Tibetan government-in-exile operates from India under the leadership of the fourteenth Dalai Lama. There are disputes between India and China. Both countries fought a war too. There are some issues in India and Nepal also. In such a situation, some news and articles were found where Mahayana was mentioned but mainly they were related to some conflict or the other. Therefore, such content was kept under the theme 'Conflict'.

‘Legal Issues’ got 4.11% share and ‘Education’ and ‘Entertainment’ similar share of 2.74%. The ‘Education’ theme mainly contained news related to cooperation agreements made between foreign universities and Indian universities for the education and research on Buddhism.

Coverage of Mahayana Buddhism : Presentation Related Aspects

To properly understand the coverage of a subject in the media, it is important to understand the amount of the content that gets space or time as well as the manner in which it is presented. This presentation dimension was also included in this study. Under this, content format and use of images were analysed.

Content Format: It is true that the amount of coverage of Mahayana Buddhism in Indian online media was quite low, but there was considerable diversity in their presentation. Mahayana related material was presented in a variety of content formats. The following table is giving detailed information about it.

Table 2 Coverage of Mahayana Buddhism : Different Content Formats

S.N.	Content Formats	Share in Percentage
1	News Report	38.36
2	Feature	36.98
3	Article	16.44
4	Photo story	4.11
5	Video story	2.74
6	Review	1.37
	Total	100

There was considerable diversity in the presentation of Mahayana Buddhism. Content related to Mahayana was presented through six different types of content formats. News reports (38.36%) have been used the

most followed by features (36.98%). Article (16.44%) got the third largest share. Apart from these, photo story, video story, and book review were also used in presenting content related to Mahayana.

Visual Presentation: Photo story and video story completely fall in the category of visual presentation, but apart from it, adequate amount of images have been used in formats like news story, feature, article and book review. Pictures of Buddha, pictures of statues, temples and monasteries found in archaeological discoveries, pictures of places related to Mahayana at various tourist centres were majorly used.

Coverage of Philosophical Aspects of Mahayana Buddhism

Serious philosophical discussion cannot be expected in news media, but glimpses of it can definitely be seen in different types of content. The same has emerged in this study also. Content related to Mahayana Buddhism discussed many philosophical aspects of this sect briefly. Also, news media plays an important role in conveying information to the general public. In such a situation, inclusion of philosophical aspects along with different types of materials can play a meaningful role in educating the general public on this subject.

The content published on the philosophy of Mahayana Buddhism in the studied news websites was mainly in article, feature and news report formats. It also had an editorial page article discussing the philosophy and practices of Mahayana Buddhism, its comparison with Hinduism, the status of Buddhism in India in present times and the role of Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar in it.

In another article, the journey of Mahayana Buddhism from India to Tibet has been discussed. This article also includes the discussion on philosophical and ritualistic aspects of Mahayana Buddhism, and entry and development of Tantra in Mahayana. An article was found explaining how the practices of Mahayana Buddhism can help one live a better life. During this study, a feature was also found that discussed the philosophy and ground practices of various sects of Buddhism (including Mahayana) in the context of gender equality. Also found an article discussing the concept of death and rebirth in Mahayana philosophy. Another article was noticed discussing the role of Mahayana Buddhism in the evolution of religion and culture of Kashmir.

A news report was found based on an international Buddhist seminar held in Gaya. It laid emphasis on coordination between different sects of Buddhism. In this event, the Dalai Lama acknowledges the philosophical differences between Mahayana and Theravada but says that both have the same Vinaya (rules for discipline).

The content based on 'Historical Discoveries' theme also contained a lot of information about the Mahayana Buddhism. For example, there was a news report related to the statue of Avalokiteshvara found in archaeological excavations. In this news, information was also given on many topics like who was Avalokiteshvara, what is the concept of Bodhisattva in Mahayana, what are the principles behind the practice of idol worship in Mahayana, etc.

Philosophical aspects of the Mahayana are also briefly discussed in the features based on some famous Buddhist monks and other prominent people related to Mahayana. Mention about two Chinese Buddhist monks, Hiuen Tsang (also known as Xuanzang), and Fa Hien (Faxian) who visited India were also found on these websites. The description given by both of them regarding the current conditions and prevalent traditions of Buddhism in India has also found a place in the coverage.

The most popular Buddhist personality in the Indian media was found to be the XIVth Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso who is the spiritual and temporal leader of the Tibetan Buddhists. Tibet is a major centre of Mahayana Buddhism. Through the coverage of the Dalai Lama, the issues such as rituals of Mahayana

Buddhism, its philosophical aspects, and the differences and similarities between various sects of Buddhism got some space in online Indian media.

Tourist-themed content was also found to provide little information on the philosophical aspects of Mahayana. For example, a feature about Tarapith discussed the importance of the goddess Tara in Mahayana Buddhism. Besides, brief information was also given on idol worship, entry and use of Tantra in Buddhism. In these types of content, discussions were also seen on how many similarities there are between Mahayana Buddhism and Hinduism. How many gods and goddesses are worshiped equally in both the religions.

Conclusion

Buddhism and its Mahayana sect originated in India. From here it spread to other parts of the world. But this study shows that there is very little discussion on Mahayana Buddhism and its philosophy in its own birthplace. The negligible coverage of Mahayana Buddhism in the mainstream Indian online media indicates it.

Differences were also found in the representation of Mahayana Buddhism on the basis of language. In comparison to Hindi news website, Mahayana Buddhism was represented more in English website and there was relatively more diversity in the presentation as well.

In all the coverage that has been done on Mahayana, there has been a wide variety of content on this sect of Buddhism. It contained the largest amount of material giving information about the philosophical aspects of this sect and its rituals, festivals, traditions etc. After this, materials related to tourist centers and pilgrimage places were found which are related to Mahayana in some way or the other. The third largest part of the material was based on historical discoveries related to Mahayana. Apart from this, discussion of Mahayana was also seen in themes like education, legal issues, conflict and entertainment.

Various news reports, features and articles briefly discussed various aspects of Mahayana Buddhism such as differences and similarities between Mahayana and other sects of Buddhism, historical development of Mahayana, similarities and differences between Mahayana and Hinduism, its contribution to the development of Islamic Sufism, concept of Bodhisattva, the principles of gender equality in this sect, entry and practice of Tantric worship in Mahayana, Sanskrit and Pali traditions in Buddhism, etc.

This study shows that Mahayana Buddhism is not a priority of Indian mainstream online media, hence the coverage on this subject is very less. The very small number of people following Buddhism in India can be an important reason for this. But whatever coverage there is, there is considerable diversity in its themes and presentation.

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