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## Minority Images In The Indian Print Media

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When we speak of 'Minority Images in the Indian Print Media' there are two broad areas to be addressed. The first is the coverage in print -- and images on television and the electronic media -- of minorities and how these images have contributed to a process that has strengthened negative stereotypes of Indian Muslims, poisoning relations between religious communities (particularly Hindus and Muslims), acted as a mechanism to downgrade the level of political discourse in India, and helped political parties evade responsibility in a democratic polity. The second area is that of representation, or workplace diversity, that is, the presence of Muslims in the media.

If you look at the state of the Indian news media today, it is hard to describe it as operating as a part of the public sphere or belonging to the realm of rational discourse in society. This is true not only of media coverage of religious or communal matters but of a variety of issues, political, economic, and social. Since we are focusing on the question of minorities in relation to communalism, I would like to draw on a study that I did a couple of years ago<sup>[1]</sup> and look a little bit at the history of the Indian print media, and how, unlike what Ben Anderson and others have analysed as the role of 'print capitalism' in the creation of a public sphere (or an 'imagined community' such as the nation), our history has been a little different.

In India, the print media was a product of colonialism and was as implicated in the nation-destroying project of colonialism as was active colonialism itself. In the early 19th century, one finds the emergence of newspapers essentially as a vehicle for the articulation of community-centric grievances or concerns, sometimes in a benign way—centred on religious reform, for example—but often in a manner that posited communities as antithetical, opposed to each other. Of course, there were moments when the Indian print media tried to transcend the religious divide and strive for the elaboration of an Indian identity. One such moment in the history of Indian journalism arguably occurred in 1857, when Delhi had a very active Urdu press. In the context of the insurgency, otherwise known as the First Indian War of Independence, attempts were made to appeal to Indians as Indians, and for Hindus and Muslims to sink their differences. A number of publications played a prominent role at that time, including the *Sayyed-ul Akhbar* and *Delhi Urdu Akhbar*. The latter published propagandist sheets and was edited by Maulvi Muhammad Baqar, father of famous Urdu literary historian Muhammad Husain Azad. Maulvi Muhammad Baqar was finally shot dead by Hodson after Delhi was recaptured. In the annals of Indian journalism, he was perhaps the first editor who paid with his life for advocating a vision of an India that was based on the

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unity of people, not simply on the elaboration of sectarian interests.

From the 1880s onwards, with the emergence of the Congress and of Muslim politics, and again from the early twentieth century, the print media in north India got fully implicated in all the different trends in operation at the political level and picked up (and amplified) all the communal biases that were prevalent in the political arena.

After Independence , the print media in India continued to mirror the political biases of mainstream politics and closely followed the imperatives of leading political parties. The attitude of political parties toward minorities in the post-Independence period was problematic. They relied primarily on the identification of so-called community leaders—either at the local or the national level—and brought them into the main political fold as representatives of their particular communities. More often than not, these representatives were as backward in their approach to the socio-economic problems of the country and of their community itself as were their mainstream political mentors. What this led to was a kind of unhealthy, unenlightened political culture, and the media itself faithfully reflected this.

The mainstream media at that time did not openly espouse communal ideologies or views. Instead, one had what I call 'low-intensity communalism' —the neat identification of Muslims as a community with particular leaders, so that every utterance of those leaders then got transmitted as the belief of the 'community'. Unfortunately, most Muslim leaders in post-Partition India were either from the aristocratic elite of yesteryears or were religious leaders. Both kinds of leadership—political and religious—belonged to the Congress party and worked to further the part's interest. Some prominent religious organizations such as Jamiat-e Ulema-e-Hind had been working virtually as Congress outfits. The maulavis, as 'leaders' of the Muslims, were of course backward-looking, and their backward views were (mis)represented by the media as being the view of the Muslims as a whole.

Of course, this 'low-intensity communalism' in the media could easily get transformed into something more virulent whenever a ruling party decided to indulge in openly communal tactics. During the 1980s, communal killings were organised in Moradabad , Meerut , Hashimpura, Malliana and Bhagalpur , and especially agains the Sikhs in November 1984. These all were engineered by the Congress for different political purposes. During these communal riots, one could see open biases on display in the media, and especially in the vernacular press. In general, one could argue that the same political parties that engineer the riots motivating the bias. This type of influence is easier to apply at a local level but the national media can also succumb to it. As a test case, let us look at the way in which the Sikhs, as a minority community, were demonized by the Indian media in 1980s in the context of the Punjab agitation. If you actually read some of the writings of the newspapers and their identification of Sikhs with extremism and terrorism, it is clear that provocative material was being written on the community in 1984. Especially before and after Operation Bluestar, and in the run-up to the Delhi massacres that happened after the assassination of Indira Gandhi by her two Sikh bodyguards, the role of the print media was shameful. The media was then reflecting the

biases and the political imperatives of the Congress, the party in power, which for reasons of its own was committed to pursuing certain policies vis-à-vis Punjab and the Sikhs; the media reflected this and was complicit in it.

Unfortunately, the media readily tends to reflect whatever issue the big political parties project as the dominant news agenda. Today every political party—particularly the BJP and the Congress—has a well-structured media-briefing process in the form of party spokespersons. The Congress is perhaps less aggressive, simply because its media departments are less organized and lack conviction. But the BJP is extremely particular about this, as its organization and propaganda brigade is well organized almost everywhere, from small towns to villages. The RSS volunteers are trained in sensational propaganda-mongering and it is they who help the BJP in canvassing their agenda through the media. The end result of the RSS's organizational backing is that an agenda that the BJP sets in its evening news conference and decides to float then generates a lot of news coverage precisely due to the efficiency of this transmission mechanism.

The notion of Muslims as a so-called 'appeased community' is a product of this kind of concerted, effective projection by the RSS in the 1980s. The Ram Janmabhumi issue was very skilfully managed by the BJP through the use of media-friendly events that were also structured to capture the electronics media's need for visuals. The BJP understood this well and was able to come up with and stage 'media events'. They were able to set the terms of debate with a set of issues that perhaps were not the most important, nor the most relevant, as far as citizens were concerned. Again, the media was happy to go along with them. Another example that one can give in which the BJP was particularly successful was the issue of Bangladeshi (read Muslim) immigration into India. Bengali Hindus who came from Bangladesh were rehabilitated in West Bengal and Delhi quite gracefully in the same fashion as Punjabi Hindus were settled after Partition. But the press describes as 'infiltrators' those Muslim immigrants from Bangladesh who come here to work. This is a term that the BJP helped to popularize in the late 1980s. I had a running battle with people in my newsroom, where, innocuously and without thinking, a report could come from the Press Trust of India (PTI) or some other news agency in which a Muslim Bangladeshi immigrant is referred to as an infiltrator, suggesting that a person has come not for economic reasons but for something sinister or nefarious. Needless to say, this label of 'infiltrator' is applied when the immigrant concerned is a Muslim; a Bangladeshi Hindu migrant is called a 'refugee'. These terms have become current, and you will find references such as these in everyday discourse, and people unthinkingly use these terms without realizing their problems, meanings, and significance.

Another recent example is in the context of some of the terrorist attacks that have taken place in India. A number of newspapers have, in their headlines and the body of their stories, begun to speak about 'illegal madrasas' as being dens of terror, sabotage, and subversion. L.K. Advani, as home minister, called for a debate on the role of madrasas, saying that if General Musharraf could regulate these in his country, surely India should also be looking in that direction. But nobody points out that in an Islamic state such as Pakistan, the government has a right within its constitutional framework to make all

kinds of pronouncements for regulating madrasas – specifying what they should and should not teach. In a society and polity such as India, which is constitutionally secular, madrasas can exist to impart religious education and are run by the community. The government should not interfere as it cannot provide religious education at public expense. If children turn to madrasas for another kind of education, then it is more of a comment on the failure of the state educational system. Proper schools are not available in areas with a concentration of Muslims, and, as Syed Shahabuddin once said, the government is more willing to open a police post than a school in the vicinity of Muslims. So in the absence of schools, every debate on madrasas and their modernization is a romantic notion tinged with minority phobia and apathy.

Somehow the media has allowed itself to become a theatre or a platform where this kind of issue is debated in an insidious manner that has nothing to do with constitutional realities. If a madrasa is involved in illegal activities, or if its funds are coming in an unregulated fashion, you have the Foreign Exchange Regulation Act (FERA) that regulates conditions under which any charitable organization registered by the government can receive money from abroad and what kind of use it can put to it. Somehow, the problem of madrasas is never looked into seriously in order to discuss all relevant dimensions. They are always viewed through the lens of subversion, terrorism or, token academic activism. All these buzzwords keep cropping up, and to a large extent this is a reflection of a very effective manipulation and management of the electronic and print media by the BJP and its allies.

I want to turn now to the question of reporting on riots that sporadically break out in various parts of the country. These are the most important moments when media biases come to the fore. The damage that the media can inflict on community relations can have a long-term effect. I want to draw upon a study I published four years ago, and which might be quite helpful in terms of pointing out exactly what I mean.

Those who have studied the Indian press coverage of riots are aware of the rather quaint code of conduct that newspapers follow, which generally prohibits the identification of the communities involved in communal disturbances. For example, you can have a cryptic report that in an incident in Rajasthan members of one community attacked members of another community, leading to two deaths. At a certain level, one can rationalize this: if you are not identifying the communities involved then maybe you are not inciting people to react in a negative way. I can see the logic as to why one might choose to be 'coy', but we need to study how these kinds of 'coy' reports are actually decoded by an ordinary reader. Often, the coyness is itself defeated by various kinds of insidious markers of the community which are put into the news report. Consider an example that was reported in the Delhi papers a few years ago. The headline was a harmless one: 'Sacrilege at Place of Worship'. But the report read:

An incident took place at a place of worship in Lajpatnagar, where pieces of flesh were found in an envelope along with a letter threatening a particular community and their place of worship. The priest, Maya Ram, reportedly told the police that he saw a young woman wearing a 'shalwar qameez' with a 'chadar' enter. Later, they found the envelope

containing the flesh pieces.’

Nowhere in this story are the two communities named, yet it is clear from the naming of the priest and the description of the young woman’s clothes that the reader is being encouraged to assume that we are talking about Hindus and Muslims. In fact, reports of this kind are particularly insidious. Whenever the victim of an outrage is a Hindu and the perpetrator a Muslim, helpful clues such as names, dress, and type of facial hair are often supplied, even if the fiction of not naming the communities is maintained. But when a Muslim is the victim, more often than not the news report will be terse and lacking in nomenclature or other clues.

The media strategy of providing selective markers leads to an extremely distorted picture of communal violence. Even if majority of victims in riots tend to be Muslims, the fact that their names are not reported, while the names of the few Hindu victims are, can create a false and dangerous impression of Muslim aggressiveness and Hindu victimhood. Let me cite another incident that occurred in Hapur a few years ago: ‘More than a dozen shops were burnt in a night’s incident. According to the Police Inspector of Hapur, the police have arrested a rioter called Sikander.’

Despite overwhelming evidence that Muslims are the main victims of communal violence, why is it that the standard riot narrative as propounded by the bulk of the print media continues to revolve around the alleged aggressiveness of the Muslims? Having worked in a newspaper during incidents of communal violence, I can think of four broad reasons. The first is the average newspaper’s over-reliance on the police for news and information, given the communal bias of the police force. This is also well documented in a dissertation, *Communal Conflicts: Perceptions of Police Neutrality during Hindu-Muslim Riots in India*, by Vibhuti Narain Rai, a senior IPS officer, who has studied the pervasiveness of communal biases in the police force during riots. Given this bias, it is dangerous for a newspaper to rely on police handouts for information on riots, or on the sequence of events, when these kinds of incidents happen. Time and again, we see that during moments of riots the police often become the main source of information. Given that curfew is usually clamped, making movement difficult, it is tough for journalists to find other sources of information. But, insofar as we tend to rely excessively on the police, this is one place where this kind of bias creeps in. Since, in the bulk of riots, the majority of people killed in police firing tend to be Muslim civilians, the police narrative often tends to be aimed at sanitizing the role of the police and painting a portrait of Muslims as aggressors in order to justify whatever the police does.

The second reason why the standard narrative in the media tends to get biased in this way is because of the high financial and logistical costs of gathering news. Many newspapers, especially the smaller ones, cannot afford to have news bureau all over the country, and cannot afford to send reporters to reach a particular spot soon enough. Often, they rely on a large roster of underpaid stringers. In mofussil towns, the stringer who is a local representative of a daily paper is a very prestigious person; while some of them are conscientious, others use the status essentially to get close to local bigwigs. This means that the integrity of the news gathering process at the local area could get

compromised. In a situation of a communal riot where, more often than not, it is the local bigwig who is involved in the machinations behind the local riot, local stringers and local underpaid staffers perhaps do not find it easy to send across the real story, either because of blandishments by these forces or because of threats, or even compliance.

The third reason why riot reporting can be biased against Muslims is the prevalence of biases and unprofessionalism within the news-desks of newspapers. Unfortunately this is not so infrequent. The reporter may be biased, or the person at the news-desk who is actually editing the story or putting it together may choose to highlight something on the basis of his or her personal bias. This is also a major factor, to the extent of being decisive. Finally, there is the pressure of space and deadlines—in other words, the technique and the technology of news dissemination can also lead to communal stereotyping. Mukul Sharma and Charu Gupta, in an important study on media and communalism published a few years ago, observed that if both journalists and a majority of readers associate Muslims with threats, then reporters and editors pressured by deadlines and constrained by the little space available may simply treat the news about riots in a way that conforms to this. In other words what they are doing is to present unfamiliar events in familiar and easily digestible fashion as quickly as possible. This leads to obvious distortion and also the tendency to neglect background context. Riots are likely to appear as sudden, dramatic and unexplained, or as having a direct or immediate cause. The underlying state of affairs is ignored and easy assumptions and instinctive associations are upheld.

Stanley Tambiah has also looked at the problem of ethnic violence in South Asia. There are two terms that he uses—‘focalization’ and ‘transvaluation’—as key processes in terms of the development and ‘normalization’ of riots. What Tambiah calls ‘focalization’ occurs when local incidents, which could be a property dispute or a fight between neighbours, get progressively denuded of their local context. ‘Transvaluation’ is a parallel process of assimilating particulars to a larger, more enduring focus, and therefore beyond contextual causes or interests.

Thus, local incidents and physical disputes can be cumulatively built up to larger and larger clashes between growing numbers of antagonists who are indirectly or peripherally involved in the original disputes. Central to this process is propaganda that aims at distorting and inflating the substantive nature of micro-events, stripping them of their local context and translating them into countless and unchanging principles of communal identity interests and entitlements.

It is this role that a substantial section of the media in India attempts to play before, during, and after a given incident of communal violence.

I cannot also help but think that the major problem of media coverage of communal riots and stereotypes of Muslims has to do with the very discourse on ‘communal riots’. The term ‘communal riots’ is an infelicitous term to describe what is essentially organized and targeted violence in which the law enforcement machinery is fully implicated, either through omission or commission. Consider the riots in Delhi in 1984, in which the Sikhs were targeted and in which the activists of the Congress were fully involved. Some of the

accused individuals who had been MPs and ministers in Congress governments were exonerated as the victims of the riot could not follow the long and tedious legal battle. In turn the police and the prosecution helped the accused go free because of their political affiliations.

To what extent can you call the 1984 incidents 'communal riots'? Was it a case of ordinary Hindus killing ordinary Sikhs, or was it case of a political party using the state machinery to massacre a section of citizens? Can we describe as a communal riot the Bombay riots of 1993, in which the Shiv Sena, the state apparatus, and different sections of the ruling Congress party were involved? Was it a case of Hindus killing Muslims? Or was it a case where the political parties were fully involved in the selective targeting of a community? My contention is that the very discourse and notion of the communal riot is problematic because it posits one community fighting against another. And once you present a riot in that manner, with that language, media reports are invariably going to be biased one way or the other.

Typically the reports tend to be biased, giving the impression that Muslims were killing Hindus. This is not to say that if you have a narrative saying that Hindus are killing Muslims it would be better or more accurate. With regard to the coyness in identifying communities, a case can be made for identifying the victims because there is no ambiguity as to the fact that the victim is targeted because of his or her religion. I am very wary of saying that 'Hindus' were the ones who were killing Sikhs in Delhi in 1984, because rather than 'Hindus' as a collectivity, it was essentially the police and the ruling political party, the Congress (I), that were involved. So the judgment I would make in the newsroom would be to always name the victim community because the community has been victimized for political reasons; but since the person or the group doing the killing is not really a 'community' but invariably a political party or a faction or the police, there is no point in blaming an entire community. The state machinery is involved, and there is no need to get into the whole language of riots, saying it is Hindus versus Muslims or the Hindus against the Christians. Of course, this means the 'riot' narrative has to be complex, and it can be complex only if newspapers devote sufficient resources and do not rely on police handouts or statements of political parties to get to the truth.

The second theme that I want to stress is the issue of representation or workplace diversity. In one of his Republic Day speeches, K.R. Narayanan (then president of India ) spoke about the need for Indian companies to emulate US-style diversity polices. He was drawing upon the Bhopal declaration drafted by the Dalit Conference at Bhopal . What he said was in the context of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. The logic was that the state sector as a means of economic empowerment has perhaps run its course in this era of privatization, where the state would not be the provider of jobs, and perhaps it is time for Indian companies to take a leaf out of the book of their US counterparts, which practice employee diversity only because the government forces them to do so. If you want to do any business with the US government, you have got to include some level of minority participation in your company. The president threw up the suggestion that perhaps it is time for Indian companies to do the same thing. This got us thinking in the newsroom. In The Pioneer, there was once a very interesting column written by B.N.

Unniyal, in which he went through the list of journalists accredited to the Press Information Bureau and concluded that there was not a single Dalit in it. Similarly, if one were to count the number of Muslims involved in the 'mainstream English media', a case can be made for our newspapers to look seriously at the question of diversity in the newsroom. This is not to say that a larger number of Muslim and Dalit journalists would necessarily alter the way in which news is covered; the discourse of news is far too well structured to be undermined or changed easily. But certainly, if we are looking at images of minorities in the press, this is something to be looked at seriously. It is time for major newspapers and news media organizations in India to look inward and ask themselves whether it is in our interest to have greater diversity in our newsroom so that there are more reporters who are Muslims and more reporters who are from Scheduled Castes and Tribes, so that the newsroom itself becomes diverse and news coverage becomes richer, if not more balanced and more objective.

### **RESPONSE TO THE DISCUSSION**

In the English print media, bias against Muslims is not an intentional thing, but exists as a result of the concerted efforts of the RSS as well as because of residual biases journalists may bring with themselves. Some newspapers were funded by the BJP during its rule, and many English journalists and editors officially joined the party or flirted with it, so their bias can be understood. Nevertheless, if you look carefully and compare the English-language media to the language media, the record of the former is by and large better in terms of the reporting of communalism and communal riots. Of course, because of stereotypical images the coverage is certainly anti-Muslim at times. It is also true that the English media does not always pursue and investigate most cases related to Muslims. So the need for raising one's voice is most when a riot takes place. During the riots in Delhi from 31 October to 10 November 1984, if the English mainstream newspapers had reported the matter objectively and published the truth about political complicity on the first or the second day on their front pages, maybe the Congress would have changed course much earlier and the brutality may have been stopped. What the PUCL-PUDR (People's Union for Civil Liberties-People's Union for Democratic Rights) report highlighted twenty days later -- about the role of Congress MPs like H.K.L. Bhagat, Sajjan Kumar, Jagdish Tytler and other leading Congress leaders in connivance with the police -- should have been in our newspapers while the killings were going on. That might have made all the difference.

We can give the same argument for the Bombay riots or other riots. Detailed reports are required most when the violence is at its peak. The subtle show of disregard towards the plight of Muslims exposes the weakness of the English media. We cannot say that this is always a conscious bias, but often it is. My own experience in the Times of India was that editors did not have an anti-minority bias, but the stereotypical images they had of communities had their own negative and decisive impact in respect of Muslims. Sadly, the problem of Muslim stereotypical images is everywhere, as the RSS has been doing its bit quite vigorously for more than 80 years, and secular Indians have not done much to counter this propaganda.



If anything, most editors recognize and are conscious of the policies of discrimination against the minorities and want to reverse them. The problem is that, because of the technique of newsgathering and dissemination of news and the reliance on police reports and lack of objective sources, bias creeps into reporting. One may also ask whether there is any political control and interference in our newspapers. Political leaders do try to put pressure on the management of newspapers, but if there is an element of self-consciousness prevailing in the newsroom, political pressures can be resisted. But this is not possible all the time and everywhere—for example, a correspondent in Kashmir may think twice before writing the truth about some human rights violation for fear that he could be dubbed an anti-national on the ISI payroll. In case that correspondent happens to be a Muslim, the pressure of self-censorship may be trebled. It is my view that had I been a Muslim, it may not have been possible for me to say and write whatever I have been these past few years on communalism because there are pressures which operate. This is especially true after 9/11, where those who wanted to criticize the American reaction were equated with Osama bin Laden's Al Qaida or its sympathizers.

In this context I must mention an incident which is quite relevant. In Malegaon, Maharashtra, some leaflets were distributed entitled 'Be Indian, Buy Indian' in which Indians were asked not to buy goods from companies belonging to countries that were waging war against Afghanistan. They called for a boycott of Coca-Cola and other companies. The police put a forcible stop to these leaflets, and some people died in the firing. When this news reached Delhi and Mumbai from Malegaon, it was reported that 'pro-Osama bin Laden' leaflets had been distributed.

I don't agree with those who argue that it is the duty of the Muslims to raise a voice against all incidents of violence by Muslims. The well-known economic historian, Dharma Kumar, who rarely raised her voice or was active on any political issue, got very angry over one particular issue in 1984. This was in reaction to an article written by the editor of The Times of India, during the 1984 riots, in which he questioned why 'the Sikhs' did not condemn Indira Gandhi's assassination. Dharma Kumar wrote back to the editor: 'As a Hindu I do not feel obliged to condemn or to speak out every time one of my co-religionists does something terrible.' She added, with her characteristic wit, that if she did that she would perhaps be doing nothing else! So many incidents take place everywhere and what has to be condemned should be condemned—and is condemned—by many, but I do not at all agree with this pressure on Muslims every time.

It is the duty of the media to properly investigate and put issues in perspective. If Osama bin Laden does something or if Parliament is attacked this will be condemned by those who normally condemn such things—politicians, journalists, or writers to newspapers—but you cannot expect those who normally do not make public statements to be pressurized to issue a statement.

One last point: newspapers are run on market principles. That is definitely a constraint. There is more coverage of a film star's clothes than of the problems of education. We have to accept that reality, because we do not have a solution for now. But one should not write-off the newspapers as totally biased against the Muslims or some other community,

because there are still many, many people in the media who are professional, honest and sensitive, and who are trying to highlight genuine problems by taking up vital issues that concern the general populace. And they require the support of the thinking populace in their endeavour to do the right thing.

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