

Media and Politics of Representation: A Comparative Study of two Mobilisations in Delhi

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Abstract

News Media derives its legitimacy, explicitly or implicitly, by projecting itself to be fair in its representation of various section of society. The representation can be understood at least in two ways. First, it means the act of speaking on behalf of someone or representing someone. Second, it also means the portrayal, presentation and depiction of someone in a particular way. This paper seeks to argue that media and its representation in both these senses have to be understood through the lens of politics as it is not devoid of power matrix. By analysing the representation of two mass mobilisations, i.e. coverage of 'India Against Corruption' (2010-11) and a 'Farmers Protest' (2009), in the Times of India, the most circulated daily of the country, this paper argues that the representation of different 'categories' of people by media is far from being fair. The comparative study of media's coverage of these two mobilisations provides an entry point to explore the larger nature of the functioning of mainstream media in India.

Key Words: Mainstream media, Political-economy of media, Times of India, Farmers' protest, India against corruption.

Introduction

Politics is defined as the art or power of deciding 'who gets what, when and how' and state is considered as the major actor to decide upon the allocation of resources. On the other hand, in democracies claiming to work in the name of people, it is important that the allocation of resources made by the state is accepted by people. Thus, a range of issues and concerns in political arena are in a perpetual contest for attention of both state - to have favourable public policies - and people to in order to acquire acceptance of being democratic. Due to this contestation, a constant process of 'organizing in' and 'organizing out' of issues takes place. How various issues are included or excluded from the dominant political discourse? Answer to this question, to a great extent, lies in working of the mass media.

In between the two ends of policy and people, there exists a media creating a sphere of contestations and concord. Media provides both channel and language through which interaction between people, policies and issues takes place. In this process, media assumes agency of its own and uses it to shape opinion in favour or against the state's decisions. Media's power of shaping perception as a mediating agency through framing issues and debates in a particular manner grew exponentially in modern time with the advent of mass media.

Scholars have termed the history of modern mass media, owing to its power, as an integral part of the history of modern civilisation. During Enlightenment, the print medium was instrumental in building up discontent against the king and the Church. Also, it helped in creating a modern nation-state system with industrialized societies. Most importantly, print medium as observes helped in creating a homogenous society which is an essential part of modern politics and economy. Benedict Anderson also renders great importance to print medium as it did not only define 'public' but also established 'nation' by creating a narrative of 'nation' through providing them with symbols like national flag, national anthem etc. In a nutshell, for both Gellner and Anderson, the print medium was a crucial factor that contributed to the creation of modern institutions of politics and economy.

Many Public relations scholars also give media a centre stage in explaining how public opinion is built

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through media in order to make people believe what they are reading or seeing is factual and right. Both private and public sector policy making use the tools of media in order to convince people and create public opinion in favour or against policy decisions. Through the processes like normalization, authorization, moralization, narrativization etc., as Vaara et. al. argue, mass media legitimise one set of values and delegitimise others. It is thus important to understand that the mass media has enormous power of setting agenda and mould public opinion. In other words, people go through a process of normalisation through mass media and believe what they see and hear through different media. Such a power calls for greater scrutiny as to what and how it 'organises in' or 'organises out' certain issues.

Despite explicit or implicit claims of 'fairness', there are deeper reasons which work behind the representation of various issues in media. The mainstream media works within the larger political-economic structures. These structures determine the compulsions of media to represent and cover a particular issue. Some of these structural and ideological compulsions are discussed by Noam Chomsky in detail as his five filters namely ownership, advertising, media elite, flack machinery and ideology. All these filters make sure that news business does not radically harm those who own or benefit from the media.

This paper, by studying the coverage of two mass mobilisations in the capital city of India, New Delhi, seeks to analyse why different demands meet with different types of responses by the media. The comparative study of India Against Corruption (IAC) and farmers' protest (spearheaded by Bhartiya Kisan Union (BKU)), explains that media, due to its location in urban centres and its market compulsion, approach different 'categories' of people and their demands differently. This representation, both in terms of the voicing of concern and in its depiction of an issue, by media is far from being fair. The comparative study of media's coverage of the above-mentioned mobilisations provides an entry point to explore the larger nature of the functioning of mainstream media in India.

India Against Corruption (IAC) was an anti-corruption movement that primarily refers to the protest of 2011 and 2012. It mobilised a large number of people on the issue of 'Jan Lokpal Bill', a bill to create a position of the ombudsman with powers of charging government officials accused of corruption. The other mobilisation of farmers was led primarily by Bhartiya Kisan Union (BKU), a farmers' organisation that claims to be 'apolitical' and committed to raising farmers' issues. The organisation received much popularity during the 1980s and especially made its mark in 1987 with protests in Meerut and Muzaffarnagar and then with various protests in Delhi including the case analysed in this paper. During this particular agitation, the organisation raised a specific demand to roll back the union government's 'Fair and Remunerative Pricing' (FRP) policy for sugarcane. The central government in 2009 declared that it would time to time declare 'Fair and Remunerative Price' for sugarcane grower and if any state declares 'States Advised Prices' (SAP) more than centres' FRP, which used to be the case in states like Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, Tamil Nadu etc., then the state has to bear the difference. 2009 farmers' mobilisation was against this new policy regime and demanded to drop the clause that states would pay the difference of FRP and SAP.

Coverage of India Against Corruption (2010-11): 'The Second Freedom Struggle'

India against corruption, going by its overall coverage got much appreciation in the media world. The site of Ramlila Ground - main protest site - during Anna Hazare's fast unto death would show a crowd of Outside Broadcasting (OB) vans and print media journalists talking to people, exhilarating about people's participation in politics, supporting the 'Doosri Azadi' claim made by IAC. Similar to the BKU protest, one could see pages in each day's newspaper devoted to the protest but unlike BKU protest – which is discussed later in the paper, this protest was much admired and appreciated by the news media. The coverage without a doubt suggests pan-nation support to the protest; people were ready to pay the price and suffer to alleviate corruption from the state system. In a 13 days period, Times of India covered above 400 news stories (401), 34 opinion pieces, 556 photographs and 29 cartoons and strips. Values like 'Communal Harmony', 'Women's safety', patriotism etc. were frequently highlighted.

India Against Corruption is a relatively less complicated case to examine as most stories brought out the same sentiment. One finds a story wise analysis of IAC rather unproductive as barring a few opinion pieces that reflected critically on one or the other aspect of the mobilisation, most hailed the mobilisation as a celebration of democracy.

This observation can be substantiated through some examples. For instance, many stories on August 17th like 'Govt. Can't Stop August Kranti' as lead headline discuss that arrest of Anna Hazare is going to be counter-productive for the government as people are awakened and building the movement even in the absence of their leader. Further, emphasis on the fact that Anna Hazare refuses to leave Tihar (the biggest and most important jail in Delhi), if not allowed to protest created a moral high ground for Anna Hazare in peoples' imagination. 'A million Mutinies Erupt Across India' discusses how people all over the country in various cities of Delhi, Bangalore, Mumbai, Kolkata and many more are coming together to fight the 'cancer of corruption'. On the same day another story, 'Sri Sri Ravi Shankar: The Government is Being Arrogant' describes that the spiritual leader also extends support to Anna Hazare movement. The story stated that 'people have the right to express opinion and change the law when needed'. The story also very clearly mentions that the spiritual guru refuted the theory that the campaign had a political agenda and was being leveraged to malign the ruling party. In Times of India's opinion poll 92% of people said that the government's handling of Anna is very undemocratic, however no methodology or description of the poll is provided with results.

August 25th paper had 8 pages coverage of the movement with 30 news items, 4 opinion pieces, 38 photographs, 2 cartoons. Stories including a High Court judge's speaking his conscience and making a case for Lokpal Bill; free auto rides to Ramlila Maidan as auto drivers'; '542 VIPs are making a fool of 120 crore people', were found in support of the movement. 26th August lead headline says 'PM walks extra mile, Anna unmoved', 27th August headline 'Downcast but Steadfast' establishes Anna as a real crusader.

Like the stories mentioned above indicate, India Against Corruption was covered in a very positive manner barring a few pieces written by Aruna Roy and Arundhati Roy. It is interesting to note that such pieces fall only in the category of opinion pieces and no reporting would be found to critically engage with the movement. Just a cursory look at the headlines or few stories is sufficed to clearly see the narrative the newspaper is trying to create. In its support to the movement, the newspaper completely turned its back from questions of movement's funding, management, political dynamics etc. It used all the process from narrativisation to moralisation to establish India Against Corruption as struggle for 'Doosri Azaadi' (second freedom struggle). It termed the movement as 'Kranti' (revolution) suggestive of radical move from the people; in about a two weeks coverage it tried to normalize the protest by showing that every citizen of India supports this movement, not a single person is heard of complaining about traffic jams in central Delhi, no one cared about profits or one's own interests but participated in the 'festival of democracy'. The Times of India very strongly established that people are ready to suffer if they need to for a better, corruption free India. From farmers to fashion designers, every one according to Times of India, stood in support of IAC. There is also generally a strong moral overtone in the coverage of this movement. As it has been said already that the newspaper completely supported the movement and refrained from any critical engagements on the issue. It almost took everything on its face value that is suggested by the movement. The narrative Times of India tried to build is that the government is ineffective and political leadership of the country is incapable of handling it as it is neck deep in corruption itself. The entire exercise of legitimising this movement can be seen as a hollow rhetoric as after the movement is taken back and the regime change took place, the Times of India did not discuss Jan Lokpal Bill with any assertion nor did it ask any question about delays by the new regime on discussion and execution of the bill.

Farmers' Protest (2009): 'Nuisance in the City'

Contrary to the coverage of India Against Corruption, the coverage of farmers' protest, primarily led by Bhartiya Kisan Union, invited rage of the Times of India for being a 'nuisance' in the city. Reporting the first day of the protest, the headline on the front page of Times of India says 'Kisan Jam' (20th November) indicative

of the trouble farmers created by coming to the city. The other news headlines too criticised the protest with similar vigour. For instance, the story 'Farmers Run Riot in the Heart of Capital' (20th November) says that 'no less than 12000 farmers descended on Delhi and ran riot in the heart of the city - Connaught Place. Damaging public property looting shops and teasing women with cops watching silently...Delhites were left wondering if the point was to be driven home by holding the city to ransom...'

The headline of the 4th page - 'Caned! City Under Siege' (20th November) – informs that farmers were 'Brandishing sugarcane with some cane stalks tied to buses'...they ruled the city from morning to early evening' (20th November). The story informs about the frustration and anger of farmers by providing some quotes. For example, through a quote, it states, 'because of faulty government policies our sugarcane is still standing in the fields', fumed Yashbir Singh of Meerut, '...sowing of wheat is delayed by three months. We are all waiting for the worst to happen next year when the wheat price will skyrocket'. 'Don't shout slogans against Mayawati or anyone else, it is Delhi' warned an old farmer with a Gandhi cap but it had no impact on the youth. They marched from Ramlila Maidan to Jantar Mantar shouting and dancing the folk music of 'Jat land' in UP and Haryana, Ragini could be heard at the venue. They waited for Ajit Singh's address and within minute their leader giving the marching orders they were back on the streets', said the story.

Second news on the page by Dipak Kumar Dash - 'Ajit, Tikait heap threat on threat to teach Delhi a lesson' says that Samajwadi party general secretary Amar Singh joined RLD chief Ajit Singh who mobilised over 10000 sugarcane growers from Western UP at one venue. At another venue nearby 'Jat leader Tikait' blocked Parliament Street with his supporters. The story also mentions Ajit Singh's threat to Delhites. Singh says, the story states, that 'you need not come to Delhi every time. We can jeopardise capital's life sitting in our villages'. Bhartiya Kisan Union leader Mahendra Singh Tikait said farmers would do what they feel necessary: 'paani kaatne ke liye dilli nahi aana padega, jo kisan marne ke liye tayyar hai vo tumhe bhi maar sakta hai' (we don't need to come to Delhi to cut the water supply, farmers who are ready to give their lives, can also take yours), he 'threatened', according to the newspaper.

Interestingly, the issue and the demand for which the protest was called appears much later in the same story. The reason for the protest is discussed in the 7th paragraph. Through a farmers' statement, the story provides some details of the issue and demand for which the protest was called, 'this year the sugar price has shot to rupee 45 and the price of sugarcane has been slashed. Officials have got the benefit of sixth pay commission and we are being ignored' said a farmer. Another story, 'Central Delhi Feels the Heat: Traffic Thrown Out of Gear' (20th November) discusses the traffic situation due to farmers' protest. It informs "VIP movement to Rajghat on Indira Gandhi's birth anniversary, a farmer rally from Ramlila Maidan to Jantar Mantar and the first day of trade fair brought traffic to a complete halt in central Delhi. The entire road network in the area and important routes leading to East Delhi were choked in the morning leading to major delays for office goers. 'Those on the roads got caught in delays, said Priyanka Sharat, a designer 'I was stuck at IP flyover for about 45 minutes. When they can't handle it why does the police grant permission for such protests? Can't such activities take place in the outskirts?(suggesting that farmers' problem is not our problem). These were the dominant themes of the reportage.

Next day coverage carried the same tone of the reporting. 'Farmers Win, Govt. Backs off on Cane Pricing'(21st November) was the title of the news item that reported about government's response to the farmers protest. The story mentions that 'pushed to the back foot by opposing protests, the central government on Thursday blinked and announced it will roll back the controversial clause in the sugarcane related amendments which shifted the financial burden of sugar mills on the state governments. This may end the deadlock which has not let the winter session of Parliament get underway beyond customary invocation of the National Song and oath'. Same day, page 8 shows a story that Archeological Survey of India (ASI) was upset with such protests and now seeks ban on protests being held at Jantar Mantar which is a heritage site. On the first day of World Heritage Week, people, especially women, were sent back from the historical site as 'thousands of protesting farmers were creating havoc at the site'. The ASI has been left to deal with the aftermath of agitation and was fuming at the vandalism the protestors resorted to. 'The officials informed the

reporter that there are two guards in the Jantar Mantar and how can two guards deal with such a mob?', newspaper asks.

Even the female security officers were called off as farmers were misbehaving with the staff. The official said 'we have seen violent protests at Jantar Mantar before but this protest was completely unmanageable', it would also greatly affect the way Indians are perceived by foreign tourists. The official in the report also said that ASI has made a police complaint and also that police did not cooperate at all. The police, however, denied that any such First Information Report was registered but it said that it received a complaint after public outcry and they are looking into the matter. The ASI official also informed that they have written several times to the government that a historical site should not be used for protests...'.

Thus the coverage of farmer's protest in the Times of India gives a completely different picture as compared to 'peoples' protest' of IAC. Whereas critical reporting was absent in case of India Against Corruption, the paper portrays farmer's protest in absolute negative terms. A reader of the newspaper cannot help herself but imagine farmers as self-interested, powerful, fairly well to do and unruly chunk that arm-twisted the government, being a consolidated vote-bank. They are shown as people unconcerned for citizenship ethos and democratic values. The lead story describing the first day of protest very clearly distinguishes city and village when it refers to farmers as 'they'; and informs its readers that 'they ran riot in the city'; 'they...held city to ransom' and when the fashion designing student complains that if police 'can not handle them, it should not allow them to come to the city'. Clearly the 'us' and 'them', 'self' and 'other' distinction underpins the reportage of the newspaper. The 'self' is presented as 'urban', representing the civic ethos and the other as 'rural'/'agrarian' representing the 'uncivilised' and 'unruly'.

In the coverage of India Against Corruption the issue and demand raised by the movement was an inseparable part of the narrative and information provided in the news items. Comprehensive information about the various Lokpal bills was provided to make people aware about the gravity of the protest. In contrast, farmers' protest's issue and the demand goes almost undiscussed in the newspaper. Only once farmers' concern was mentioned in a page 8 story, in the 7th paragraph, which is most likely to go unnoticed by an average reader.

Conclusion

Scholars of media have employed political-economy approach to explain the nature of coverage by mainstream media. In the cases explored in this paper also, one plausible way to explain the biased coverage given to two mobilisations, India Against Corruption and farmers mobilisations, by the Time of India, is through the political-economy approach. According to this approach, mainstream mass media, as profit making organisation, faces compulsions of market that determines the politics of news and news making. Slants and frame of any news is then decided in accordance with the market needs. Chomsky and Herman explains ownership and advertisements as key factors setting the agenda of news-making which are further complimented by factors like dominant ideology, flack machine etc. These factors in turn generate processes of normalisation, authorisation, radicalisation, moralisation and narrativisation to 'organise in' or 'organise out' any issue in the media space. Since mainstream media earns its profits through advertisements, it is important that it 'organises in' the agenda of the advertisers and their consumers. As R. Jaganathan observes that 'in this scheme of things, the advertiser is the king. And TOI believes its mission is to promote the advertisers' interests by facilitating consumption'. Readers/consumers of the Times of India is the same class which is also consumer of range of products it advertises thus it is necessary that concerns of this class are depicted not only as important but their inconvenience also finds a prominent place in media coverage. Furthermore, this class is shown to be aware and working for the larger good, as evident in portrayal of this class in IAC, to ascertain a 'feel good' factor in the urban middle and upper middle classes. On the other hand farmers' mobilisation hailed from rural areas who are not the 'target audience' of Times of India naturally find a biased representation. Nor are they the readers of the newspaper, therefore their demands do not attract same treatment. Thus the representation, seen both as the act of speaking on behalf of someone and the portrayal, presentation and depiction of someone in a particular way, in the Times of India, is biased in favour of its 'readers' (or 'consumers'?)

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