

## **RE-READING GANDHIJI'S RAM RAJYA: MEDIA DICHOTOMY IN REPORTING COMMUNAL AFFAIRS**

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This paper is a tacit culmination of two gigantic episodes—one of these episodes can be traced back to a historical juncture and the other is in continuum, making us a part of it--the repercussions of which is affecting us in more ways than one.

We are living in turbulent times—nationally, communally, socially. The implications are wide and far reaching, often at contradiction with the very democratic structure of the polity. The ball of globalization that was set rolling since the 90s have brought with it unprecedented changes—changes in technology, economic liaisons and popular culture. We have witnessed giant leaps in science and communication, the opening up of the public sphere in a virtual world, social networking sites like Twitter, Facebook literally transforming the way information is disseminated. Time and space have been redefined in this information rich multimedia super-highway. New platforms for the exchange of ideas are being formed, e-commerce to cyborgs, digital steroids to micro blogging, we have it all. We can finally say that postmodern media has arrived with a bang.

The Indian media now juggles between religiosity in the name of reporting communal clashes, and populist strategies adopted by politicians to perpetuate the mass hysteria after the coronation of Narendra Modi as the Prime Minister of India. Essentially, media has become an extension for both, assuming newer forms of power in defining the future courses for a more assertive Indian polity. They have a strategic position in reporting, particularly communal affairs, and are the key determinants for fostering amity and peace. What is reported in newspapers, or shown on TV, or circulated on social media, determines the

relation structure between communities, whether they interact with hate, or restraint. Media can be an accelerating factor in fostering secularism, it can also be an agent provoking riots and destruction.

### **Gandhiji's Ram Rajya: Then and Now**

Gandhiji's experimentations on polity, his take on collective protest movement, secularism, non-violence has received renewed attention among media and social scientists in present times. What makes Gandhi so pertinent in today's scheme of things is that he had envisaged a society that would foster on secular lines. He also spelt out the ways in which they could be achieved. Scholars are debating on various issues that Gandhiji depicted from his daily activities. Whether his thoughts would be spurned or accepted by the Y generation remains to be seen, but the undeniable fact remains that Gandhi was the most popular leader of his time, who was able to keep aside caste and religion, and build a true mass following rallying behind him. His vision of building India on secular lines, a country ruled by Divine Wisdom has been coined the Ram Rajya or a country where everyone is equal, where the Harijans sit in line with Brahmins and eat food. Ram Rajya, as later asserted by historians, is a metaphor, an idea, associated with wise and just governance. It is a conceived nation of many cultures, many people and many voices.

In the very words of Gandhiji, "By Ram Rajya I do not mean Hindu raj. I mean by Ram Rajya a divine raj, the Kingdom of God. For me Rama and Rahim are one and the same deity. I acknowledge no other God but the one God of truth and righteousness". On the eulogy of the word Ram, he goes on to say, " Whether Rama in my imagination ever lived or not on this earth, the ancient ideal of Ram Rajya is undoubtedly one of true democracy in which the meanest citizens could be sure of swift justice. Even the dog is said to have received justice under Ram Rajya....How can it happen when we all along have been nursing violence in our hearts under the garb of non-violence?"

Critics to this date are debating on the purposive use of the word Ram by Gandhiji, particularly in his biography "My Experiments with Truth" in 1925, where he spoke about the significance of chanting the Ram Naam 3 times a day.

The name "Ram" in Gandhiji's Ram Rajya has been hijacked by different communal parties with an eye to the vote bank since the last two decades, as liberalization set in. Any

party that has been voted to power has given their own versions of “Ram” and “Rajya”. The nomenclature of Ram Rajya has been given a distinct identity as Ram has been identified with Right wing Hindutva, and Rajya has fostered separatist tendencies.

The very name of Ram has religious and cultural connotations, and both left and right wing parties have left no stones unturned to idolize Ram as a Hindu icon. Ram has been communalized, keeping in mind that it evokes not only respect and awe in Indians, but also creates a deep Hindutva sentiment in the minds of the non-Muslim populations, to the extent that anything remotely connected to this name creates mass hysteria, religious extremities, as well as a rooted antipathy towards all things non-Hindu. It is an interesting fact that Gandhiji is said to have uttered the words “Hey Ram” when he was shot by Nathuram Godse, though many allege that it was a communal strategy of the Congress to idolize Gandhiji as Mahatma.

What is important here is that Ram has not only been cited in Hindu contexts by the Bharatiya Janata Party when it came to power in 1992 or even now that it has been voted at the center. The name Ram has been used by other parties as well, even the Congress way back in 1989, when the then Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi inaugurated the Congress Party’s election campaign from Ayodhya citing that it was the birthplace of Lord Ram, and spoke about his exemplary character and governance.

Today, mass Media has become a new battleground for venting the ire of communal bickering. The BJP had earlier adopted a novel tactic to spread Hindutva among masses, promoting soaps and serials on television. Right after their ascendancy to power in the mid 80s, there was a surge of religious drama on Sunday morning TV. The serials “Ramayan” and “Mahabharat” surpassed all other serials in terms of sheer viewership. It can be recalled from a press clipping in TOI during this time that the busiest streets and roads of India had only some passer by’s. All places earlier thronged by people used to have a deserted look. The womenfolk in the houses got up an hour earlier to finish their daily chores. Just as the clock struck 10 in the morning, all eyes used to be glued to the television set to watch the serial “Ramayan”. People shed tears seeing the plight of Seeta Maiya, and revealed when Lord Ram fought Raavan with heroic elan.

Print as well as electronic media ran many stories relating to Ramayan. Interestingly Arun Govil, who played Rama in Ramayan was adulated in different states. The way Lord Rama carried himself, his image cut across economic and social barriers. Urban and rural

people feel at Rama's feet, thinking him to be the real Ram, such was the frenzy that caught on to the masses. The Tribal's of Gujarat put their babies at Ram's feet, to get his blessings. The character who played Seeta (Deepika) and brother Laxman (interestingly he was a Muslim whose name was rechristened as a Hindu name to maintain the religiosity of the majority) mostly accompanied Arun Govil and this created a sort of history during those days.

This divine personification of Ramayan characters created a pathway for the projection of Ram to invoke the sentiments of Hindutva in the coming years. In recent times, Ram has found its place in the inflamed speeches of various leaders, especially Narendra Modi before being elected as the PM. Ahead of the polls, he kept on harping about the virtues of Ram Rajya, and its manifestations in the relevance to the welfare state. He ended with a distinct reference that India is the holy land of the Hindus and he politely asked the Muslims to return to Bangladesh, as they had illegally migrated to India as refugees' way back in 1971.

Nitin Gadkari also used to name of Ram to evoke Right wing Hindu fundamentalism when he glorified the Ram Navami and declared it to be a national holiday. According to a scholar, Gandhiji's Ram Rajya had a sense of mystique around it, it was a Utopian concept held closely by Gandhiji, but in course of time, Ram became iconoclast with religiosity, assertion of Hindutva philosophy and a deep rooted hatred towards non-Hindus, inciting feelings of communalism and separatism. In his words, "many Gandhis have been formed in the public realm" with each trying to supersede the other as how much of a Hindu icon Ram could be made out

BJP's ascendancy in the power structure was based on a two-fold agenda, corporatization of the different economic sectors and the manifestation of a symbolic Hindutva. On closer introspection, a very interesting trend in post-global communal culture can be found—the punching of 2 opposites, modernity and tradition. Critics point out that this is a neo capitalist ploy to find a foothold in both the areas that is religion and economy. Once both of these become interconnected, the by-product becomes a hybrid. There has been tremendous growth of economy in some pockets of India, other states are catching up. But somewhere down the line, the illiteracy, poverty, uneven development, gender issues, health and nutrition largely seem to have been neglected. Along with society, a micro society has

also been formed, where religiosity fills in the lacuna. In time, it creates a deep attachment towards religion, where any deterrence is not tolerated. Symbolic Hindutva has found a viable market here, and it has been lapped up by politicians to propagate their own agenda.

The BJP have many other sister agencies who preach different philosophies coated with communal agenda, packaged for particular areas. So there is the VHP or the VishwaHindu Parishad which believes in ethnic cleansing, as India witnessed the exodus of the Kashmiri Pandis in 1990, Babri Masjid demolition in 1992, anti-christian violence in 1999, Godhra riots, and the Akshardham massacre in 2002. The Shiv Sena which is a Hindu fundamentalist organization, and numerous such others have with the help of the media propagated their communal ideology. Therefore, polarization as far as religion is concerned, happened at the backdrop of another slogan—economic development.

### **Mass Media, Re-creations and Overexposure of Communal News**

Journalism has been called by many “a compelling medium for influencing a normative national consciousness of language, image and sound. TV (reproduces) a vision of the world for its audiences. These productions link TV with the communal economy of nation building. The medium can work to socialize people, foment material desires, and normalize consumer relations.” But the question of nation building and the relation of media as the constructor is posed with serious maladies in the present times. It is natural for old values and ethics to be eroded with time and new measures root in its place. But when the very moorings of journalistic conscience becomes embedded in the money raking quickie form of instant journalism, questions are bound to arise.

To attract favorable attention to their clients, communal parties often organize media events, a practice that is known as staging news. These are designed to be irresistible to journalists. Rallies by celebrities and intellectuals on topical communal issues such as Muzaffarnagar riots and Purkhonkighar Wapasi, find their way onto front pages, magazine covers and evening newscasts because their photogenic and curiosity prompting qualities give them an edge over less visual although sometimes more significant events. The ethics question is less important for publicists, who generally are upfront about what they are doing. The ethics question is more serious for journalists who claim that their job is to present an accurate and balanced account of a day's events but who regularly overplay staged events that are designed by publicists to be photogenic and easy to cover.

Then there are re-creations in news. Some TV based news programs feature re-enactments that are not always labeled as such. In recent times newspapers poured out stories about the Nirbhaya Rape case and gave various interpretations, based on their latent communal affiliations and editorial policies. It was not a chance practice that the rapists, of them one was a Muslim as shown as a violently ugly face, with a sinister body language. These create an instant hatred among vulnerable minds, who think that all Muslims are beastly and criminals. Mounting pressure from different communal parties too cannot be ignored, especially during the run-up to elections. We have all witnessed different versions of the Nirbhaya rape re-creations, with each channel claiming their story to be based on original facts.

It was the same in the case of the Rizwanur murder case, which grabbed the headlines of leading dailies for weeks, along with the communal-bureaucratic-businessmen drama played out to the fullest. From subtle persuasive techniques like dialogues, to background shadow playing, all possible techniques were used to drive home the reader a certain line of thought, essentially communal in character. And more recently, the different interpretations of communal personalities Burdwan blast case involving the Jamaatul Mujahideen Bangladesh and the subsequent crackdown on Madrasas statewide, to the “bilateral” mudslinging regarding the deaths, are all played out like a sitcom on television news channels.

Philip Weiss, writing for ‘The Columbia Review’, gives a brilliant picture of how news is re-created to extreme measures for public consumption over TV—“....shadows on the wall of a man taking a hammer and hilling a woman of a different community in the backdrop of a Mosque, a faceless actor grabbing a tin of kerosene to blow up Hindu shrine, a corpse in a wheelbarrow with a hand dangling, a detective opening the trunk of a car and reeling from the stench of a decomposing body.”

“Communal News Propaganda” often warps Public opinion. The public may accept as fact one-sided information in the news columns. It cannot form intelligent opinion regarding national issues from a newspaper which fills its news columns exclusively with facts favorable to one party and unfavorable to the other party. The full truth was not told about World War 1 until many years afterward, although on the other hand much of the “debunking” of America’s idealism in that war was wide of the truth. Even in our daily

newspapers, we see such lopsided views of certain news stories that often harp on the illogical. In recent times, before the Bidhan Sabha elections in West Bengal, the mass media launched a vehement campaign of communal leaders maligning the Muslim community, saying they are outsiders in different channels. Slanderous comments were made, finger movements aggravated, character assassinations done, with a dose of humour here and there made by politicians in jest.

## **Evaluation**

This paper is a tacit reflection, an overview about the framing effects of communal news coverage on Print and Television, and to an extent the consumption patterns of audience, their evaluation of communal conflicts as depicted in a packaged format. Several angles about the framing effects of communal news was discussed—hinging on 4 basic concepts: how communal conflicts are perceived in the real world and in the world of television news, what are the differences between subjective and objective representation of communal news in terms of complexity, intensity and solvability. Secondly, whether people can differentially perceive communal conflicts in the realm of TV news within the context of social reality. This question was based on the assumption that all media contents are the results of the complementary processes of selection and composition so that the presentation of communal conflict on TV news cannot be identical with real communal conflicts. Apart from that, peoples' experiences with the mass media have conditioned them to notice the discrepancies between the real and the symbolic world. This is directly opposite to the cultivation analysis theory and more in line with the concept of mainstreaming that was later propounded by Gerbner, Gross, Morgan and Signorelli in 1980.

Therefore, it reintroduces the theory of proximity that influences perceptions of communal conflicts, and how the audience relates differently to communal situations. Lastly, based on the concept of media dependency, it is understood that the more remote conflicts are from a person's experience, the more there is a likelihood of congruity between the individual's perceptions of communal conflicts in reality and the manner in which they are presented in TV news. Conversely, the more the proximity of the conflict touches the mind of the viewers, the less is the linkage between the 2 realms of reality.

According to a noted social scientist, the role of mass media in the past half century suffers from the concept of "embarrassment of riches". This phenomenon has been typified

with a generation of differing, and even contradictory hypotheses concerning the communal effects of mass communication process. Perhaps as a result of this diversity and effluences of perspectives, the intellectual history of framing of communal news in TV channels has often been too compartmentalized. Some speak of the policies of media institutions, whereas others of media contents. These are separate domains in themselves. Comparatively, however, critical approaches that have long aspired and developed a more composite picture of news framing have rejected any empirical tilt in the investigation of their ideas.

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