

## **Representing Minority in the Media: The Indian Case**

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This article aims at discussing the image of minorities in the media world, i.e., in the press, cinema and television. The paper also seeks to look at the influence of mass media on people as well as the considerations behind the production of the messages. It will make attempt to take a general overview on the media and minority relationship.

### **Minorities:**

#### **The International Context**

The notion of a minority evolved as an aftermath of the World War-I. In Central Europe, erstwhile Empires were broken up into smaller states and certain communities, in spite of their large numerical presence, came to be known as 'minorities' in the newly formed states. Some examples were Germans in Poland, Austrians in Czechoslovakia. Minority issues also took serious turn in Yugoslavia where, war between the two groups— Serbs and Croats became a marked feature of politics during the post-war period.

The most common misconception in all these cases is the fact that the minority groups are numerically marginal and hence can be ignored. The term does not imply lack of numerical strength. The term 'minority' implied a numerically less preponderant group, subject to discrimination on the basis of its group identity woven around religion, race, ethnicity or culture. Arnold Rose in the International Encyclopedia of the Social Science defines minority "as a group of people differentiated from others in the same society by race, nationality, religion or language, they think of themselves as differentiated group and are thought of by others as a differentiated group with negative connotations. They also lack power and hence are subjected to certain conclusions, discrimination and other differential treatment". This definition is not totally accurate, however, as

in many cases the minorities have been in power. In Africa the minority white population ruled the majority native population, in India the 'minority' British could rule the entire nation for two centuries.

The term minority, in international law, refers to a population with a characteristic culture and a sense of identity occupying a subordinate political status. It was only after the rise of nationalism in the 19th century that ethnic minority became an issue, especially in Europe. "The potential conflict arose from nationalism's equation of the nation with the identity of the dominant cultural group, with an attempt to eradicate separate identities through conformity. The minority group sought to establish its own culture as a national identity, either by incorporating with a nearby country that shared its identity or, if none existed, by seceding and forming its own nation".[1]

Before the World War I, the minority problem was especially acute in the Austro-Hungarian empire, the Ottoman Empire (Turkey) and Russia. During the war, each side promised autonomy or independence to minorities in enemy states, and revolts (e.g., of Arabs and Czechs) were encouraged. Hitler made adroit use of the minority issue to annex the Sudetenland in Czechoslovakia and to attack Poland, thus launching World War II. After the war, Czechoslovakia and Poland took the extreme step of deporting all Germans. Communist nations have traditionally asserted that they have no such difficulties because all ethnic groups are allowed full expression; this was belied by the crucial role that was played by minority national groups in the breakup of the Soviet Union. Ethnic problems and conflicts have resulted in the break down of many African countries. In recent years, Burundi, Rwanda, Somalia, and Sudan have been the sites of severe ethnic, religious, or clan-based feuding. Since the 1960s, Northern Ireland— largely Protestant, with a sizable Catholic minority— has witnessed much sectarian strife, although the late 1990s brought the hope of peace.

United States took steps to legalise efforts to stop legal discrimination against racial and ethnic minorities after World War II. "To ensure recently gained equality, the Civil Rights Act (1964) and Voting Rights Act (1965) gave a special protected status to the victims of historic injustices. Affirmative action decrees of the 1960s and 1970s mandated that race,

gender, and national origin be taken into account in employment situations. African Americans, Latinos, Asians, and Native Americans are ethnic minorities that are protected under affirmative action regulations.

Since 1945, the United Nations has been active with respect to minority problems, especially through the Commission on Human Rights. In 1948, the United Nations approved two important documents concerning minorities: the Genocide Convention and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights".[2]

The minority groups are not always equal in size. In India the Muslims form the largest minority group and thus receive the most attention by way of political overtures etc. The issue of establishing minority groups, and determining the extent of privileges they might derive from their status, is controversial. There are some who argue that minorities owe special recognition and rights, while others feel that minorities are unjustified in demanding special rights. In fact one political group in India received large number of votes asserting the latter position by articulating it as 'no appeasement of minorities' policy. Some countries follow the policy of positive discrimination and hold that minorities should be granted special privileges which they do not enjoy. In India this policy is followed for persons belonging to the lower caste groups. An example of this is where an individual of minority status is given preference in an educational institution or even government job. A minority will be given preference over a more or equally-qualified non-minority, in order to fulfill a quota of minorities in the student body. This policy has been referred to as reverse discrimination by many and they argue that they are perpetrating new wrongs to counter old ones, and now victimising the majority. The pro-positive discrimination policy group believes that such a policy gives everybody a chance for education or an occupation as the case may be.

### **Minorities in India**

The vast geographical area of India encompasses diverse cultures, languages and religions. India has mixed population of Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Zoroastrians, Jews and a rich culture of unique tribal religions. Religious pluralism implies not only the presence of assorted religions but a certain amount of exchange of cultural/religious characteristics. For

instance, the Hindu caste system has found its way into both Islam and Christianity. Many lower caste Hindus converted to these religions to escape the indignities they were suffering within their own religion. Acculturation was a result of decades of close interaction between the different communities. Several rituals pertaining to marriage and birth may be common to Hindus –Muslims and Hindus –Christians. The south Indian Christians exchange garlands and the 'thali' (a pendant tied around the bride's neck by the groom) in church as part of marriage ritual. This is an essential ritual among Hindus and the exact auspicious time is fixed for tying the thali both by the Hindus and Christians. Similarly the system of dowry has perpetuated among the Muslims, which again is a Hindu custom.

In spite of similar customs, each community has maintained its individuality and thus adding to the cultural diversity of the country. Majority of the people follow Hinduism which again can be broken down into several sects – lingayats, vaishnavite, shaivaite etc. The Sikhs, Jains, Buddhists have been incorporated under the Hindu umbrella to ease policy making. The communities are not happy with these arrangements as each feels that their customs cannot be really classified as Hindu. At the same time many of them worship the Hindu Gods and Goddesses apart from their own specific ones.

India has the largest number of Muslim population after Indonesia. Muslim presence in India can be traced back to 650 A.D. while Christianity came to India way back in 3rd century A.D.. The Zoroastrians or Parsis, as they are popularly known, are a very small community. The initial Parsis came to India after Persia was conquered by the Muslims. Most of them settled down in Gujarat. India also records the presence of Jews, albeit a small number, from the year 1170. Like the Parsis, the Jews can be said to have undergone the least number of changes. This has been mainly due to very few intercommunity marriages and thus almost no cultural contact at the deeper level. At the most they picked up the local language, and in some cases, food and dress habits. There have been arguments that there is a common thread of Indianess running through these religions and within this framework each religion maintains its exclusivity. This can be used to explain the differences in the religious practices of the Muslims in India as compared to the Muslims of Saudi Arabia. This also applies to the

Christians. The different communities have their individual space and at the same time have a shared space due to acculturation.

## **Media and minority: An Overview**

The term black in Britain denotes “dirt, poverty, low social status, low intelligence, animal sexuality, primitiveness, violence and a general inferiority”.<sup>[3]</sup> Similarly the words immigrants and black have become synonymous due to high influx of immigrants to Britain. The 1962 outbreak of chicken pox in Britain was blamed on Pakistani migrants and the general public wanted them to go back. Pakistanis were attacked which was then condemned by the press, namely the newspaper Post. According to Breichner “news coverage of American blacks by all news media constituted almost a boycott or censorship of positive, favorable news: not always by intent but by habitual intent”.<sup>[4]</sup> Myrdal in his article points out that in south there was at one time an unwritten rule that no photographs of blacks should ever appear in print.

The prevailing attitude to blacks was that they did not form a part of the audience or at least not a part worth catering for. The whites were in majority and hence all news was reported in their favour and interest. The white were not aware of the problems being faced by the blacks who were living in ghettos. The Kerner commission observed that the media has not been able to communicate to the whites the “degradation, misery and hopelessness of living in the ghetto”. The blacks were in news when they indulged in “protests, boycott, violence, demonstrations, and disorder”. “The role of the media is to be sought in the way they create awareness of issues and establish what is on the agenda for public discussion rather than what they say about these issues or in the degree to which what is said may change opinions. Media concentration is on manifestations of racial conflict and the media neglect of the distribution of scarce social resources which they regard as the underlying basis of racial conflict”.<sup>[5]</sup>Headlines about race were designed to dramatise events. The press has presented a white audience with the image of a black threat to the white society.

The terrorist activities by a number of fundamentalist groups have led to damaging reports on Islam as a religion which supports violence. Elizabeth

Poole sees this as a strategy to undermine Islamic states and to maintain the upper hand of the western world. It tries to project all Muslims as threat to the world peace and harmony and Islam as violence begetting religion. The media's approach in all this has been one of catering to a relatively homogeneous audience, all of whom will perceive a message in the same way. Thus a 'mass' message about Muslims is presented to the world a large part of the audience accepts this message. As a result, certain section in many countries accepts the projected view which by itself is dangerous. Poole analyses British print media and points out that the number of articles on Muslims is on the increase. The coverage is of that about customs, education, and political activity of Muslims. There is an attempt to forge All-Muslim solidarity. It has now become Christianity versus Islam comparative debate. This opportunity was taken to point out customs of early marriage, rigidity in religious affairs among Muslims. Though some newspapers attempted to take a neutral stand and tried to present both sides of the debate there were many who were clearly biased against Islam. This debunked the theory that the media is to there to present facts in a clinical manner and its main purpose is to pass on information to the audience. In this entire furor the voice of the practical minded, progressive, educated and liberal Muslims was lost.

A survey conducted by the American Screen Actors Guild showed that the number of minority actors in the entertainment scenario is few and the visual depiction even more less. Canada is also a multicultural country like India, yet the cinematic and television based representation of minorities is few and far between, and stereotyped. "Stereotypes act like codes that give audiences a quick, common understanding of a person or group of people – usually relating to their class, ethnicity or race, gender, sexual orientation, social role or occupation[6]" Codes are used extensively in analysis of media .The message passed on, say through television, is a combination of codes. The way a certain thing is said, even what is said has a social implication. Codes help in analysis in cultural studies. Codes also help in the transmission of verbal and visual meaning. Thus the minorities could be shown as poor, not so brave or intelligent, miserly – depending on the existent notions.

They might even provide comic relief. For example, the video game industry also has its share of stereotyping. A study conducted found that

the videos promoted the feeling that the African –American is aggressive, more inclined towards sports, while the white male counterpart was usually the hero. This was corroborated by another study where children influenced by the media saw that white male as rich , influential, educated, intelligent and the minority as being poor, lazy , not so intelligent .

This stereotyping extends to the various religious, cultural, linguistic minorities. Though it should be made clear that stereotyping occurs at all levels and not only for minorities, we have regional stereotypes also and these images are often used to make characters identifiable and to explain some actions as particular to them. When we say Red Indian an image is immediately formed— a tall, brown skinned man, with feathers as his head gear, warrior like, tuned to the nature. Most of this could be true but today the native Indians are very different but we still live with the old images. Even these are nearly absent from the American cinema and television today.

Pakistan and India share an incredible interest in each other's political happenings. The South Asia Tribune[7] reports on how the Pakistani reported on the event of a Muslim— Dr. A.P.J Abdul Kalam Azad becoming the president. The main point of interest was that the president had headed the nuclear revolution in India. The Pakistan media firmly believed that the move to have Abdul Kalam as president was to strengthen the nuclear lobby in India.

### **Media and Minority in India**

On any given Sunday morning, if one switches on the television in India, one gets across serials based on Hindu mythological stories, gods and goddesses. A decade ago a trend was started by airing the Hindu epic 'Ramayana' on television. In those days the government run 'Doordarshan' channel was the only option for viewers. Most of the programmes were centered on middle class or lower middle class families— their problems and lifestyle. The settings were not so expensive and the actors/actresses were simply dressed, as glamour was left to cinema. The success of Ramayana encouraged the making of the next most popular epic 'Mahabharata' (of which Bhagvad Gita is a part— the philosophical backbone of Hinduism). The present generation may not be so informed

about the various small episodes enmeshed in the larger story, but the children those days were fairly informed and would excitedly watch each episode. The number of channels has now increased and almost all of them have such serials.

Compare this to the number of programmes on the mythological literature of Islam and Christianity. A programme based on 'The Bible' was aired on the national channel but it came to an abrupt end. Ananda Mitra analyses the relationship between television and popular culture from the reference point of the programme Mahabharata. As mentioned earlier, the television was a medium for the middle and lower class and the programmes were made targeting these sections. The impact and the popularity of this medium even in rural areas were tremendous and the actors/actresses of the popular programmes became household names. So much so that, the actors in the 'religious' serial— Ramayana and Mahabharata— were identified by their screen names and were thought of as gods/ demons depending on their character in the serial! The reel and real image overlapped at some point with far reaching consequences. Many of these actors/actresses went on to contest and won elections due to their images created in their TV performances.

In the modern world the culture in India or any other country is projected through cinema, television, music, theatre and folk art. Mitra draws upon the relationship between religion and culture. He quotes Stuart Hall that the culture associated with religion can be regarded as high culture. In the case of India, Hinduism is the dominant religious culture or high culture and as a result other religions are relegated to the background. Another programme being aired around the same time was "The Sword of Tipu Sultan"- based on the Muslim king of Mysore. The maker of this serial was himself a Muslim and thus conversant with Muslim culture. So we had two programmes, one, a part of Hindu religious tradition and the second one, representative of the history of Muslim monarchy tradition. According to Mitra "the narrative and generic practices of 'Doordarshan' produced Hindu- Hindi centered set of practices".[8] The argument by Mitra was that the selection of programme indicated the preference of the government to promote a particular image. But there is a difference; the programmes are being shown on private channels and it is no longer the government's choice, rather the audience's choice also. Though it has to be researched as

to which age group is watching these programmes before a statement can be made. The programmes are made keeping in mind the majority religious group and at the same time refer to the practices and language shown as Indian.

The cultural-religious-historical tradition of India has regional and linguistic dimensions as well. The Ramayana and Mahabharata are read in most Hindu homes all over the country, yet the programme on television appropriated it as essentially as a North Indian historical event since the central location is North India (Ayodhya, Kurukshetra). Apart from religion, region also became a point of contention. Linguistic considerations cannot be ignored; the 'Hindu' serials contain more Sanskrit words and the 'Muslim' programmes Persian or Arabic.

Today there is a deluge of channels and programmes. People prefer serials or 'soaps' as they are known in the west. Most of the stories are based on family sagas. Invariably the family belongs to an identifiable community and in the majority of the cases they are— Punjabis, Gujratis or Bengalis. Some episodes are dedicated to depiction of rituals, religious functions particular to the community. Of course these programmes are predominantly Hindu in nature and content. The actresses sport the Hindu symbols of marriage and are almost sari clad. There are very few programmes based on say a Muslim, Christian or Parsis family, the latter two probably nonexistent. A serial was started based on a Kashmiri Muslim family; it was stopped abruptly and not revived again. The reasons could be numerous but the main point is the absence of religious variety on television. It is comparable to the Canadian situation (which we looked at earlier), a limited presence or near absence of minority representation.

Asghar Ali Engineer[9] has been analysing the print media especially of the north from the minority perspective. The north has a history of a rather volatile majority-minority relationship. It is also the hot seat of fundamentalist politics. A number of regional newspaper are printed here which are highly prejudiced and give a communal colour to events taking place. The north, it is said, is vulnerable because of the history of invasion by Muslims, Greeks and Portuguese. The long Muslim rule ensured acculturation of Hindu and Muslim culture. New languages – Arabic, Persian which produced Urdu as a new language in India. At the same

time, the Muslim stereotype of an aggressor and fanatic developed. After which came the bloodshed of partition which further reinforced these ideas especially since Pakistan became a theocratic state.

The fundamentalist spread the fear of being overpowered by the Muslims. The Muslim tradition of polygamous marriages, large families, adhering to the Muslim personal law was perceived as a threat. So when news is reported in various papers the readers rarely analyse it and take it at its face value. Engineer points out the Shiv Sena mouthpiece Samna, which openly attacks the minority communities.

The Christian community is attacked for its conversion record. The missionaries working in the tribal areas are accused of forcing conversion on the tribals. In many rural areas they are said to have paid money to the poor for converting to Christianity. There are increasing reports on attacks on nuns by members of Hindu Fundamentalist groups like the Bajrang Dal. The Staines case (Graham Staines, an Australian missionary working in Orissa, was burnt alive along with his sons) is an example of how volatile the situation has become. Conversions do take place; however, the actual figures would be needed to substantiate the claim of conversions by force, because there are many who do so out of choice. The latter percentage of people cannot be ignored in any discussion on conversion. A person is born into a particular religion but if he/she is not satisfied with his/her religion then the person should have the choice of changing it. In some cases people convert themselves in order to escape the tyranny of the caste system.

Ironically, the educational institutions run by Christian missionaries are much sought after in India. In fact quite a few matrimonial advertisement stresses on 'convent educated' brides. The number of such schools and colleges are many and if conversion as a policy was so successful then the number of Christians would be higher. The print media, in any language, should present both sides of the story. The theories on mass media, (refer to the first few pages) talk about work culture and ethics. News-reporting is one of the aspects where the question of ethics is to be negotiated by the institution. This is where we can clearly discern the inclination of the newspaper/magazine—fundamentalist, secular or neutral. In a Christian Today[10] article the Bishops from all over the country appeal to the media

to highlight the social work done by it especially in backward areas. The media could be used to change the negative image the Church and Christianity fostered by various groups.

Sabina Kidwai takes up the issue of how Muslim women are represented in the media. For her the problematic zone is that of the treatment of Muslim women as repressed and harassed by Islam in the media. In the recent Imrana case, (Imrana was allegedly raped by her father-in-law. When the case was taken to the religious leaders they gave the verdict according to the Muslim Personal Law that she had to leave her husband). The nation was caught up in the debate of how repressive and 'illogical' the Muslim laws were. The point here is the media should have voiced the concerns of the liberal Muslims who were against this verdict. A lone voice of say, Javed Akhtar (a famous poet, lyricist and screen play writer), was aired as a lone voice among conservative reform-denying millions. It seemed as if the Muslims as a community do not want to change and are stuck up with medieval mindsets. What is important to note here is that even if a thousand Muslims are on the path of change, their voices should be heard; less importance should be given to those with orthodox views that only reinforce the stereotype.

If the majority of people were randomly asked to describe the various minority groups they would categorise the people as: Muslims— bearded, traditionally dressed, rigid, low level of education, aggressive, mostly tailors or have an occupation of low income, their women are in purdah and do not have much say ;Christians— again a low income group, westernised, high level of alcohol consumption, loud, very religious; their women are outgoing; Parsis— speak any language with a strong accent, simple, helpful but stick to their own community; Sikhs— not very intelligent, hard working, mostly farmers; their women are loud, garishly dressed and not keen on education, aggressive .

Where have these images come from? From the mass media— television, print media and cinema. The last one is the perpetrator of strong visual stereotypes. Most movies put in characters based on these stereotypes for comic relief. In the 70's and 80's Muslims would be shown as loyal friends. Perhaps, as the relations between India and Pakistan deteriorated, the nature of Muslim characters also changed. Today Muslims are shown as

mafia leaders or terrorists, though protests from the secular sections ensured that another honest Muslim character should be represented in the film as the ideal Muslim. People are prone to believe Muslims as underworld dons due to the press coverage given to, for instance, to Dawood Ibrahim, Chhota Shakeel, Abu Salem or Haji Mastan. The lack of education, insecurity and good job opportunities has meant that many Muslims have taken short-cuts to make money. The stories written by Muslims also stick to these stereotypes though few make an effort to deviate. This has meant novel presentation of Muslim women— outside the purdah and as professionals, but these movies are too few to make an impact. Earlier this dubious distinction belonged to the Christians, most of the Roberts and Peters were the don's right-hand men in cinematic representations.

There are a number of Hindus who are involved in nefarious activities and this was a theme in many of the earlier movies— the targets were moneylenders, businessmen, politicians. Politicians remain the favorite ones even today and are shown to be collaborating with the terrorists across the border. The politicians belong to the majority community and the terrorists to the minority. Sikhs, Parsis and Christians provide comic relief through their accented language and not so intelligent activities. Most of them are well meaning neighbours and friends. Of late the Sikhs have voiced their indignation at being portrayed as buffoons in cinema. Jokes on Sikhs (called Sardarjis or Santa and Banta Singhs) are common in India, mostly reinforcing images of the lack of intelligence in the members of an entire community. Now these have been carried on to the screen and naturally the community is hurt due to this negative publicity. Similarly the Parsi men have been shown as being hen-pecked husbands and their women as obese and over-imposing.

## **Conclusion**

The pluralistic nature of Indian society makes things more complicated. The impact of historical events has its bearing even today— the post-partition blood-shed defines the Hindu-Muslim distrust. In India caste-based reporting is another important aspect. Dalits, the word literally meaning the repressed, have been subject to centuries of discrimination by the upper castes. In rural areas heinous crimes are committed in the name

of caste. Most people are aware of caste problems in terms of reservations (seats in educational institutions and government jobs are reserved for people belonging to the lower castes) and think that untouchability does not exist. Urbanisation has cut off people from the problems of the rural areas and most urban based citizens are unaware of the extent to which caste based problems exist in rural areas. The policy of positive discrimination has led to further embittering of caste relations. For media to perform its function ethically and effectively there is a need for unbiased and apolitical reporting of news and events. Of course certain newspapers and magazines make clear their affiliations at the very beginning so they are patronised by the sections of people who believe in that particular ideology. But lot remains to be done and partisan media representation has to be shunned. The media has to be aware of the influence it exerts on the people and take care to disseminate liberal and progressive values among the people.

### Endnotes

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