

Press and Social Issues: A study of two Bengali newspapers of Cachar District of Assam

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ABSTRACT

The desire to communicate, to exchange ideas, to learn about the changes in the immediate environment and to seek the truth is inherent in human nature. Communication of news and views is an integral part of human life. Man is always eager to know what is going around him and what people are thinking about various things. He used different means in different times to fulfill this need. From its fundamental importance for social development, communication has a development point of view in all societies. Communication as a means of transmission of information and as a process of development underwent many changes with the invention of the printing press.

The press plays an important role in the fulfillment of the information needs of the people and has been playing a dominant role in the dissemination of news and information. Being a major force in forming public opinion, the present study was conducted to analyse the nature and extent of coverage of socially relevant issues in two major language newspapers of Cachar district of Assam.

The paper thus explores on how language press in a remote place covers socially relevant issues and how they reflect and shape the views of societal diversity. For the purpose of this study a content analysis of two highest circulated Bengali newspapers has been considered for a period of four months. The findings of the study did not differ much as far as the coverage pattern of social issues are concerned, reflecting the prevalence of conventional and traditional media reporting practices still in existence in small towns and remote areas. Typically socially relevant issues like rape, female foeticide, prostitution, etc have appeared almost in the same numbers in both the newspapers.

However the findings also reveal that language newspapers in remotest part of the country give reasonable importance to social issues and highlight different social problems like corruption, terrorism, prostitution, female foeticide, etc in their reports.

INTRODUCTION

Communication as a means of transmission of information and as a process of development have underwent many changes with the invention of the printing press. The Indian press since its inception has been contributing significantly in bringing about a change in the social lives and culture of the people through dissemination of news and information.

Through its columns, the language press in particular contributed significantly to the social change and development. Even today, the main challenge before the language press is to sensitize the elite readership towards developmental issues affecting the Indian masses, the vast majority of which is inhabiting in the rural areas. But in the present times the press (media) coverage of social issues has turned to be a source of contention and debate. While a section of newspapers is driven by profit motives, there are still few who thrive towards bringing about a change in the mindset of the people.

As language press is a promising medium for disseminating information and knowledge about nutrition, health and hygiene, improved farm practices, family planning measures and many other vital issues, the present study conducted is an insight to the nature and extent of coverage of social issues by local language dailies. The study assumes wider importance in the present context where still a section of language press is trying to play the role of a watchdog of the society through its columns.

One of the major objectives of the research was to study the nature and extent of coverage of social issues by two leading Bengali newspapers of Cachar district. Accordingly the research questions formulated to achieve this objective were what is the coverage pattern of the newspapers in terms of placement under discussion towards the issues framed by the researcher? What are the most important issues among the social issues covered by the select newspapers?

OPERATIONAL DEFINITIONS

Language Press: Language Press here means the Bengali newspapers, Dainik Jugashankha and Samayik Prasanga, used in the study.

Social Issues: Social Issues may be defined as those issues which are related to important social processes. Moreover, social issues are matters which directly or indirectly affect many or all members of a society.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Schramm (1964) noticed change in social, cultural, religious and personal attitudes which subsequently have helped change and shape a society completely differently. The Indian society has by and large reacted almost in an identical manner. This has been amply established by some well-known studies conducted by Indian mass communication scholars such as Rao, Damle and several others. Rao emphasized that social responsibility is a concept that need to be practiced by all the media including the press. In a de-

veloping country like India, the mass media has important roles to play. That needs the media to be socially responsible. A socially responsible mass can serve the interest of the society at large.

Bhatnagar's study (1966) of women's issues in six English newspapers published in New Delhi in 1987 indicated that only 280 (1%) items in the sample reported about the problems and welfare activities about women. Important items like women's education, right and wage rates of women workers did not receive adequate coverage in any newspaper under study.

Dasgupta (1976), in her study of women's issues in four English dailies published in New Delhi in 1975, observed that women's issues received no attention in the six subject categories social, economic, political, art and culture, biographical and other issues. However, the study did not elaborate the methodology adopted for the study.

Rogers (1976) suggested a new definition of development as a widely participatory process of social change in a society intended to bring about both social and material advancement (including greater equality, freedom and other valued qualities) for the majority of the people through gaining control over their environment. The predominant role of communication has been: a) to transfer technological innovations from development agencies to the clients and, b) to create an appetite for change through raising a climate for modernization among members of the public.

Nadeem Ul Haque and Arif Sheikh in their study of daily newspapers in Pakistan found that those dailies devote extensive space to international news. Domestic news is usually entirely confined to the statements of politicians and political parties with very little space given to economic issues or court proceedings.

Aneesh Ankur (2008) a freelance journalist in a study of three newspapers each in English, Hindi and Urdu, carried out in Patna found that when it comes to giving space to news on social issues related to children and women Urdu newspapers are more generous in the coverage given to these issues than the newspapers in Hindi and English. Roznama Rashtriya Sahara, an Urdu daily leads all newspaper by giving 20% of its news space for coverage of issues related to the children and women. Hindi daily Hindustan was second in their coverage of issues covered. Another popular Urdu newspaper of Bihar Qaumi Tanzeem gives 9% of its space for women and children issues according to the analysis. Hindi dailies like Rashtriya Sahara has 13%, Dainik Jagaran 9%, Prabhat Khabar 8%, Aaj 8%, and I-next is at the lowest with its 6% of coverage to the children related issues. The coverage of English dailies like TOI is 9% and that of Hindustan Times is 7%. Mr. Ankur tallied his numbers after

monitoring various news papers for a month.

Greenwald (1990) analyzed the coverage of women in the business section of two metropolitan newspapers. She found that women were the main subjects in only 5 of 180 stories.

Hollifield (1997) compared coverage of the proposal for a National Information Infrastructure by the communication industry trade press, the general trade press, and newspapers. She found that the trade press was less likely to cover the social implications of policy proposals.

The purpose of the study by Behnoosh Payvar (2004) was to examine the coverage of gender, environment and development (GED) issues in the Indian English-language newspapers. A main hypothesis is that the high rate of gender discrimination in India contributes to a gender bias in the coverage of GED stories. The newsworthiness of GED has been examined by use of a frequency analysis. Some key concepts in the study of gender and media, namely gender typifications and gender stereotypes were used to examine the contents of articles and news stories. The results of the frequency analysis were discussed in relation to evaluations and assessments made by newspapers' editorial staff, gender scholars, international and Indian NGOs, and Indian government representatives. The possible selection biases were also discussed. Material for the study was collected through interviews and observations at the sorting desk of the Indian Express during a two month's field study in India. The results show that the press does not reflect the actual needs of people in India and is influenced by certain biases in the coverage of GED issues. NGOs, gender scholars and press watch organizations believe that the press performance regarding the coverage of GED is weak.

The comparative study done by Uppal Charu (2009) is based on the assumption that there is a marked difference between the environmental activism developed (US/ Canada as representative) and the developing world (India as representative). Social injustice is more of concern in environmental activism in the developing world. This study examines four years of news coverage in both countries to determine if those concerns are still reflected in the news coverage of environmental issues. This paper uses contextual analysis to analyze coverage of hydroelectric projects in two Indian newspapers (The Times of India and The Hindu) and two U.S. newspapers (The New York Times and The Buffalo News) in the environmental cultural context of their respective countries. Environmental activism was measured by examining the 'power of news stories to invite public participation'. Using Barton's classification of news formats, presence of 'disjunctive' news format was considered an indication of newspapers' emphasis on citizen involvement. The study demonstrates that there is a marked difference in the way environmental activism, as it relates to the hydro-

electric projects is covered in the United States and in India. Some of the key findings of the study are: 1) environmental activism appeared more potent in the Indian newspapers than their U.S. counterparts, 2) Disjunctive news formats, which create a sense of discontent and therefore potentially invite public participation were much more prevalent in the Indian newspapers. 3) The coverage of hydroelectric controversy in the US newspapers was much more complacent and seemed to discourage public participation.

The increased attention to women and to women's issues in the media in the last decade has not been free of blatant sexism and/or subtle distortions, partly as a consequence of overt biases and partly due to the very structure of the media. This article by Ammu Joseph and Kalpana Sharma looks at the coverage of all issues concerning women in the English language press between 1979 and 1988 focusing on five landmark issues-dowry deaths, rape, sex determination tests and sati. (Between the lines: Women's Issues in English language newspapers- Ammu Joseph, Kalpana Sharma)

A study by Porismita Borah employs three methods to understand media content. First, the study examines the 'peak periods' to ascertain the pattern of coverage. Second, with a sample of 4058 articles the study examines the prominent frames used by newspapers. Third, with the help of interviews of journalists from the same newspapers, the study examines the factors that influence the way these frames are created in the first place. Results show that, in general, the driving force of this coverage is marketability of the stories. This is implied by the overall coverage as well as the responses of journalists. (Examining media content: A case study of newspaper coverage of dowry in India, 1999-2006.)

A study of review of literature shows that the present study of the nature and extent of coverage of social issues by the language press of Cachar district of Assam is the first of its kind. Thus, the research findings suggest an assessment of the nature and extent of social issues being covered by the Bengali newspapers of this region in particular and the language press in general.

METHODOLOGY AND ANALYSIS

A content analysis-both qualitative and quantitative of two leading Bengali newspapers of Cachar district was used as a research method. The data were collected from the two newspapers between January and April 2010 and the news contents of social issues were analyzed to ascertain how the selected newspapers covered the social issues.

The universe for the present study comprises of all the issues of the two selected dailies during the period of four months, i.e., from January, 2010 to April, 2010. Thus the study con-

sisted of 120 copies per daily ($31+28+31+30=120$). Thus a total of 240 issues of the two dailies have been covered for the study.

Both qualitative and quantitative analysis of both the newspapers, Dainik Jugashankha and Samayik Prasanga, was done for the study.

QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF DATA

To study the emphasis of the news story 'placement' was considered based on the appearance of the news story either in the front page or any of the inside pages.

PLACEMENT

The placement or position of any news story is vital in attracting the readers to the news story. Placement also speaks of the emphasis given to any news story by the newspaper organization.

Table-1.1: Percentage of distribution of news stories in terms of placement

Sl. No	NEWSPA-PERS	PLACEMENT OF NEWS STORIES	
		FRONT PAGE (%)	INSIDE PAGES (%)
1	Dainik Jugashankha	16.91	83.09
2	Samayik Prasanga	15.95	84.05

The data reveal that both the newspapers have more or less the same patterns of coverage so far as placement of news stories on social issues is concerned. While Dainik Jugashankha devoted 16.91% of its space in the front page to socially relevant issues, Samayik Prasanga on the other hand devoted 15.95% in the front page to the same. In contrast, the remaining stories that appeared in the inside pages are 83.09 percent and 84.05 percent respectively, as shown in Table-1.1 above.

Inferences therefore can be drawn that both the two leading newspapers of Cachar district have the same patterns of placing social issues in front and inside pages.

Further analysis on issues that got prominence in the front and inside pages, the data reveal that Dainik Jugashankha has given more prominence to corruption (23.14%) followed by terrorism (14.97%), crime (12.21%), Naxalism and Maoism (8.75%) and so on as shown in Table- 1.1. Almost similar findings have been revealed after analyzing the news stories of Samayik Prasanga. Corruption (22.09%) tops the list in Samayik Prasanga, followed by terrorism (16.75%), Crime (11.50%) and Naxalism and Maoism (7.19%).

Table 1.1.1: Percentage of distribution of social issues covered in two newspapers

Sl. No.	SOCIAL ISSUES COVERED	Dainik Jugasankha (%)	Samayik Prasanga (%)
1	Corruption	23.14	22.09
2	Terrorism	14.97	16.75
3	Employment	1.13	0.92
4	Unemployment	1.15	1.36
5	Insurgency	3.89	2.88
6	Casteism	1.01	1.41
7	Communalism	1.81	1.93
8	Kidnapping and abduction	1.25	1.27
9	Women Empowerment	3.94	3.79
10	Domestic Violence	2.63	0.74
11	Sexual harassment	2.11	3.17
12	Rape	0.28	0.25
13	Prostitution	0.36	0.48
14	Crime	12.21	11.50
15	Violence	6.00	7.83
16	Communal Harmony	3.02	2.59
17	Female Foeticide	0.73	0.62
18	Education for children	3.11	2.83
19	Peace initiatives	1.93	0.87
20	Anti-terrorism	1.22	2.67
21	Anti-violence	1.20	1.29
22	Poverty	1.70	2.60
23	Anti-corruption	2.46	2.97
24	Naxalism & Maoism	8.75	7.19

On social issues that got prominence in both these newspapers, the data reveal that Dainik Jugasankha has given more prominence to corruption (23.14%) followed by terrorism (14.97%), crime (12.21%), Naxalism and Maoism (8.75%) and so on. Almost similar findings have been revealed after analyzing the news stories of Samayik Prasanga. Corruption (22.09%) tops the list in Samayik Prasanga, followed by terrorism (16.75%), Crime (11.50%) and Naxalism and Maoism (7.19%).

QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS OF DATA

Quantitative analysis of the two newspapers were carried out to find out i) the extent of coverage of news items on social issues in terms of total space in column cm and ii) frequency in terms of number of items appeared in both the newspapers on social issues.

1.1.2 EXTENT OF COVERAGE OF SOCIAL ISSUES

Social issues may be defined as those issues which are re-

lated to important social processes. These issues are matters which directly or indirectly affect a person or many members of a society and are considered to be problems, controversies related to moral values, or both. Moreover, social issues are matters which directly or indirectly affect many or all members of a society. These include issues which are categorized under: i) corruption, ii) sexual harassment, iii) rape, iv) kidnapping and abduction, v) Communalism, vi) insurgency, vii) terrorism, viii) employment, ix) unemployment, x) women empowerment, xi) rape, xii) prostitution, xiii) poverty, xiv) female foeticide, xv) untouchability, xvi) communal harmony, xvii) violence, xviii) casteism, xix) crime, xx) domestic violence, xxi) naxalism and maoism, xxii) peace initiatives

Table 1.1.2: Extent of coverage of social issues in terms of space covered in column centimeter

Sl. No.	Social Issues Covered	Extent of Coverage (in column centimeter)	
		Dainik Jugasankha	Samayik Prasanga
1	Corruption	24291.45	22062.86
2	Terrorism	15714.91	16726.29
3	Employment	1186.23	903.43
4	Unemployment	1207.22	1352.57
5	Insurgency	4083.57	2888.57
6	Casteism	1060.26	1410.86
7	Communalism	1900.07	1932
8	Kidnapping and abduction	1312.20	1261.71
9	Women Empowerment	4136.05	3781.71
10	Domestic Violence	2760.87	742.29
11	Sexual harassment	2214.99	3171.43
12	Rape	293.93	248.57
13	Prostitution	377.91	483.43
14	Crime	12817.57	11478
15	Violence	6298.56	7815.43
16	Communal Harmony	3170.28	2588.57
17	Female Foeticide	766.32	620.57
18	Education for children	3264.75	2821.71
19	Peace initiatives	2026.04	872.57
20	Anti-terrorism	1280.71	2665.71
21	Anti-violence	1259.71	1296
22	Poverty	1784.59	2609.14
23	Anti-corruption	2582.41	2957.14
24	Naxalism & Maoism	9185.40	7189.71

In quantitative aspect the extent of each social issue covered in these newspapers show that corruption (24291.45 column cm & 22062.86 column cm), terrorism (15714.91 column cm and 16726.29 column cm), violence (6298.56 col. cm

and 7815.43col. cm) , Naxalism and Maoism (9185.40 col. cm and 7189.71 col.cm)- related news items have got extensive coverage in Dainik Jugashankha and Samayik Prasanga respectively. Other social issues covered in both these newspapers are sexual harassment, rape, kidnapping and abduction, communalism, insurgency, women empowerment, rape, prostitution, poverty, female foeticide, untouchability, communal harmony, domestic violence, etc.

MAJOR FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

The findings reveal that both the newspapers have more or less the same patterns of coverage so far as placement of news stories on social issues is concerned. While Dainik Jugasankha devoted 16.91% of its space in the front page to socially relevant issues, Samayik Prasanga on the other hand devoted 15.95% in the front page to the same. In contrast, the remaining stories that appeared in the inside pages are 83.09 percent and 84.05 percent respectively.

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In quantitative aspect the extent of each social issue covered in these newspapers show that corruption (24291.45 column cm & 22062.86 column cm) , terrorism (15714.91 column cm and 16726.29 column cm) , violence (6298.56 col. cm and 7815.43col. cm) , Naxalism and Maoism (9185.40 col. cm and 7189.71 col.cm)- related news items have got extensive coverage in Dainik Jugashankha and Samayik Prasanga respectively. Other social issues covered in both these newspapers are sexual harassment, rape, kidnapping and abduction, communalism, insurgency, women empowerment, rape, prostitution, poverty, female foeticide, untouchability, communal harmony, domestic violence, etc.

Not much difference is noticed in the occurrence of other social issue-based news items in the two newspapers under study. News items on socially relevant issues like rape, female foeticide, prostitution, etc have occurred almost in the same numbers in both the newspapers.

The findings show that though regional language newspapers are often accused of being profit-driven and in the process neglect social obligations, but language newspapers

of this part of the country give reasonable importance to social issues and highlight different social problems like corruption, terrorism, prostitution, female foeticide, etc in their reports. This shows that language newspapers in this region are conscious about the social responsibility thrust upon them and their editorial policy shows the sign of being aware about their responsibilities towards the society and readers. Despite being a profit-generating business the language newspapers of Barak Valley appear to be a vibrant medium for highlighting social issues.

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