

Analyzing Terrorism Through the Lens of Media Reporting

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Abstract

Terrorism is a complex phenomenon and is characterized by the use of violence. The relation between terrorism and the media is being debated, more so in the West. Numerous questions are being raised in this regard. Are the terrorists using the media to spread their message? Conversely, do the media publicize terror incidents and terror messages and interview the terrorists, to boost their TRPs? Both these questions, independent of each other, are not unjustified. These are based upon certain recognized values. The readers or viewers of terrorism are not merely those who could be its potential targets, but also those whom the terrorists want to attract in their folds. One of the clear objectives of Bin Laden and allied terrorist organisations in sending e-mail, video tapes and giving interviews is that they could establish themselves as “legitimate representatives” for a “proclaimed objective” in the world and amongst potential converts to their ideology.

The rapid growth of the media during the 20th century has fuelled a competition for news at a commercial level. The terrorists try to take advantage of this. It is also for this reason that they derive pleasure from the terror and despair their act generates, more than from the act itself. It is for this reason a few critics and politicians, including former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, view media as the “oxygen of the terrorists.”¹

“How can the media avoid being exploited by the terrorists?” This theme has become the pivot of the debate on media and terrorism in the West. While some feel that censorship should be applied to terror news on media, many others view this censorship as completely unjustified.

Any restriction on the media is unethical, feels Paul Wilkinson.² Media should be left alone to report about terrorism, which is analogous to the principle of Laissez Faire in economics. The democratic governments of the West, fearing the ideological potency of terrorism, have often intervened in the editorial policy of the media. In the aftermath of 9/11, the US Deputy Secretary of States, Richard Armitage had requested the management of Voice of America not to telecast the interview of Taliban Chief Mullah Omar immediately. The request was accepted but under pressure from the journalists, it was telecast a few days later.

The American television channels were requested by the US administration not to telecast the interview of Osama bin Laden. Though the request was accepted, journalists opposed the move but “social pressure” turned the appeal of the US administration into an order.³ The third example

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belongs to Russia where the state media prohibits the Chechen terrorists from broadcasting their messages.⁴ It is possible to have reservations against the action of such states. This is seen as unnecessary and suppression of democracy. Robin Gerrits feel that although media might provide the oxygen of publicity for the terrorist, but censorship would provide “narcotic of secrecy”, an even greater danger for democracy.⁵ But one of the positive aspects of this debate is that government, civil society, and newspapers are getting acquainted with the intention, mission and mind-set of terrorism. Hence the media is applying its discretion and self-regulation to report about terrorism.

There are no two opinions that the respectability of terrorist organisations and its sympathizers have been marginalized in the society and newspapers. It is for this reason that the US and Britain had turned terror incidents on its soil to “exceptions” and “accidents”. Europe has made strong and successful initiatives to prevent terror from being imported. It has not allowed the “home grown” terrorism to flourish. It is for this reason that top terrorist organisations feel frustrated in Europe. The “search and destroy terrorism” in the US and Britain post-9/11 was never branded as anti-minority or Fascist.

Two researchers tried to find out in a survey if newspapers have some definite editorial policy against terrorism. Out of twenty, only five said their newspapers had no definite guidelines, whereas rest of the fifteen said they had voluntarily framed clear guidelines on reporting about terrorism. Out of these fifteen, in turn, only three admitted to have put these guidelines in writing, whereas the remaining twelve said these were conveyed verbally.⁶ The situation of India with respect to terrorism is more complicated. Kashmir has become a laboratory of Jihad for the last about three decades. Unfortunately, terrorism is flourishing due to troubled Indo-Pak bilateral relations, questions of human rights, and appeasement of radical elements in the valley. The Indian media perceived terrorism in Kashmir as product of extraordinary circumstances and special factors; and considered it as localized. The media never allowed the police, military and citizens battling terrorism to be ignored. If terrorism has weakened in Kashmir, one of its reasons is depletion in its local support. Thus one thing is clear; the imported terrorists can never succeed in their mission until they receive local support. Hence, terrorists try to play up religious and emotional issues. They try to instigate and traduce the co-religionists troubled by local and contemporary issues.

Hence, the responsibility of the media is to uncover the acts of terror and intentions of the terrorists. The manner and extent of the publishing and broadcasting the news related to terrorists should be best left to the discretion of the media. The media, after 9/11 or 26/11 in India, has kept into consideration the aspects that can adversely affect the national interests and social harmony.

Terrorism in India is no longer restricted to Kashmir. It is slowly spreading out to the other parts of the country, especially the metros. The security of industrial, scientific and military establishments, railway stations, luxury hotels, hospitals and religious places is becoming an issue of worry. But the most important question is whether terrorists are risking their lives to commit such hideous acts just to derive pleasure. The answer to this question can help us reach the roots of terrorism. Robert Anthony Pape is considered an authority on terrorism. His conclusion was that 90 percent of suicide

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bombings since 1980 were for strategic rather than religious reasons. Their purpose is to force the democratic countries to remove their military presence from those areas that terrorists consider their homeland. But this conclusion does not appear fully convincing. Will the terrorists become complacent after the occupying soldiers are recalled? It must be understood that contemporary terrorism is acting according to an ideology. Terrorism by itself is nothing. Such violence is being committed to disrupt democracy and an open society under the influence of a particular ideology. Till this ideology is dispassionately debated, its solution will elude us.

The media can play an effective role in defeating terrorism by exploring the source of this ideology, the intellectual and material resources received by it, its power and extent of appeal. India has twin challenges towards terror. One, it has to combat the extraneous terrorists. Secondly, it has to neutralize its relationship with domestic terrorists. Terrorists want to turn India into a laboratory of terrorism. The ideologues and spokespersons of terrorism understand the relationship amongst secularism, internal security and vote bank politics. The more confusion and imbalance occur at the social, political and religious levels of the nation the more terrorism will get an opportunity to act its drama. Some intellectuals and a section of press debated the hanging of Afzal Guru, condemned to death in Parliament Attack case, under the guise of human rights. It is not unfair to question the law and order institutions within the ambit of democracy. But when the debate is turned into an opportunity to slam them as prejudiced and communal, its only purpose is to undermine their legitimacy and moral responsibility. The mainstream media can play an important role in countering such attempts.

The Indian media's view of terrorism has changed over time. Newspapers are going into the fundamentals of terrorism, by going to the basics of terror events, and uncovering the structure and creed of terrorist organisations. There are several aspects of terrorism. The foremost amongst them are role of the agencies and the process of police investigation. The media's role assumes greater sensitivity and responsibility on this question. How much importance should be attached to police's investigation and how should be questions raised by the investigations assessed. Media has to grapple with such challenging questions.

The Indian media has visited upon by several incidents in 2008. This included the Batla House encounter, Mumbai terror attacks, and a statement given by Minority Affairs Minister A.R. Antulay casting suspicion on the killing of Mumbai Anti-Terrorist Squad chief Hemant Karkare. The question arises that what point of view has been adopted by different newspapers of English, Hindi and Urdu on these issues. The character of English, Hindi and Urdu press has been divergent in India. They had been on loggerheads on certain issues right from the colonial era. The conflict of opinion amongst them on important national and social issues surfaced on several occasions. For instance, English and Hindi press were at loggerheads on Ram Janmabhoomi movement issue. English and Hindi press have often been compared, but Urdu press has mostly remained outside the scanner. Should this be considered negligence or mistake is certainly another issue. But there is another aspect to it. Urdu newspapers have a committed readership. Once that readership had a broad social base but now it has shrunk. But slowly its readership has contracted to a particular religious community. Zafarul

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Islam⁷ wonders if any non-Muslim read Urdu newspaper.⁸ Urdu is spoken in 17 states of the country and its newspapers have a geographically wide reach. Hence to become the community-specific journalism is a proof of contraction of Urdu. Such journalism, acting in the name of independence and impartiality, tend to assume unaccountable and communal character. Dr. Zafarul Islam Khan assails the Urdu newspapers by calling them sensational, spicy and one-sided.⁹

How impactful can such sensational news items being worth examining? Khan believes that Urdu newspapers recreate the mind-set of the Madrasa-produced Maulavis who have the leadership of Muslim communities.¹⁰ But whether it is Urdu newspapers or Muslim affairs periodicals, which includes Milli Gazette, published and edited by Dr. Zafarul Islam Khan little qualitative difference is noticeable in views.

With reference to the three episodes kept in the ambit of the study viz. Batla Encounter, Mumbai terror attacks of 26/11, and Antalya's statement the views expressed by *Milli Gazette* or *Radiance* (both English) are similar to Malayam publications *Madhyamam* (Jammata-i-Islami Hind), *Thejas* (NDF) or *Chandrika* (Muslim League) published from Kerala. Like Urdu newspapers they considered the Batla House encounter as fake.¹¹ *Milli Gazette* has claimed the encounter to be fake.¹² Communalism Combat has done the same.¹³

If mainstream newspapers saw the 26/11 attacks on Mumbai as Jihadi mechanism, the Urdu newspapers tried to project it as conspiracy hatched by Jews, Mossad, CIA etc. Their views remain basically unchanged even after the Mumbai Police filed 10,000 plus page chargesheet in the attacks. What *Communalism Combat* said about the intelligence of Urdu newspapers is also noteworthy. Its editorial said the Urdu newspapers all are subscriber to conspiracy theory. Behind every terror attack, which includes 9/11, they see the hand of CIA and Jews.¹⁴

The difference amongst English, Hindi and Urdu newspapers comes out clearly in the study. For instance, most Urdu newspapers projected 26/11 attacks as a conspiracy to defame Muslims. Aziz Burney, the editor of *Roznama Rashtriya Sahara*, said 26/11 is a Mossad and CIA conspiracy as 9/11 was. Interestingly, the view of *Rashtriya Sahara* (Hindi), published by the same media house, was diametrically different from Urdu. Hyderabad-based *Siyasat* advised India not to view the incident through American eyes.¹⁵ By visit of American State Secretary Condoleezza Rice, the paper felt, would increase bitterness in Indo-Pak relationship.

Hyderabad-based *Ittedad* held India's refusal to conduct joint investigations with Pakistan on 26/11 as wrong. The mainstream newspapers, on the other hand, declared the Pakistani initiative as a charade. *Munsif* decreed that involving Israel in the investigations will be counterproductive because "a section of India thinks that 26/11 is perpetrated by Israel." *Siyasat* felt it is essential to strengthen the hands of Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari to combat terrorism. *Urdu Times* (Mumbai) also gave publicized 26/11 attacks as a "Mossad CIA conspiracy". *Inquilab*, a highly regarded Urdu daily, also found 26/11 suspicious. *Jadeed Markaz* saw a mystery behind Hemant Karkare mystery. Some Urdu newspapers tried to link 26/11 Babri demolition, Gujarat riots and Malegaon episode. But a survey conducted amongst Muslim saw 94 percent of the respondents did not feel there was any

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relationship.¹⁶

The intention behind writing this article is to convey that the purpose of any debate should be constructive. Sensational news repeated times and again do not become the truth, but do create confusion. The Urdu newspapers were able to captivate public attention by such news items on 26/11. Obviously, their circulation also increased. During 1919-21 the Urdu newspapers recorded a significant rise by publishing sensational news. The communal orientation that affected Urdu journalism during the British period did an irreparable harm to this sonorous language¹⁷. Litterateur Maithali Saran Gupt has mentioned several such newspapers. *Kohinoor* published from Lahore, Awadh from Lucknow, *Makhjan and Paisa* were supportive of British government and feudal lords.¹⁸ But then Urdu journalism was not a victim of one-sidedness. *Payam-e-Azadi* (estd 1857), *Zamana* published from Kanpur and *Hindustan* were written dauntlessly in favour of independence. But today is the hour of trial for Urdu journalism. It has to rediscover that element in its heritage that can redeem it from its narrow worldview.

Media can play an effective and unifying role in preparing the state and society to combat terrorism. The mainstream media lived up to this role post-26/11. How one wishes the same thing could have been said about the Urdu press. There is no full stop in intellectual work as it is a flowing stream. And fluctuations are possible in its flow. The purpose of a research piece is to take forward a debate. Its criticism will also be considered an indicator of its success.

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