COVERAGE OF CRIME IN NATIONAL DAILIES: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

The coverage of crime by the media has a long history in India, with crime being a staple of Indian news coverage as far back as the early 1800s. When the Bengal Gazzette became the first newspaper, Hickey confessed that he allowed it "to become the channel of personal invective, and the most scurrilous abuse of individuals of all ranks, high and low, rich and poor, many were attacked in the most wanton and cruel manner.....His utter ruin was the consequence" (Hickey Memoirs Vol.II p176).

Because of the immense popularity of crime as a topic of news, there has been no shortage of research on how crime is covered by the media.

The present study examines crime news coverage in the four national dailies - Times of India, Hindustan Times, The Indian Express and The Tribune. The national dailies have been examined against the backdrop of Indian culture and social settings. Content analysis was followed to study the objectives and hypothesis. Some prominent facts came into light through this research like Hindustan Times had covered more number of stories than the other three national dailies while The Indian Express gave maximum coverage to the crime news, maximum stories related to terrorism were published in all the four national dailies focussing on Pakistan involved in terrorist activities.

INTRODUCTION

Man by his very nature is a belligerent human being and hence to think of a crimeless society is a myth. Ever since the first light of human evolution, crime has been a perplexing problem. There is hardly any society today which is not beleaguered with the problem of crime. Rising levels of insecurity, aggression, danger of public disorder, rioting, household robbery, bomb blasts in the metro
Definition and Characteristics of Crime

Sir James Fitzjames Stephen in his book ‘A General View of the Criminal Law of England’ defines crime as an “act which is both forbidden by law and against the moral sentiments of the society”. The main characteristics of crime are as follows:

- The basic ingredient of crime is the guilty mind or mens rea.
- The next main constituent of crime is the act or actus rea.
- The act must be prohibited by the law of the land.
- There must be punishment for the criminal offence.
- It must always cast negative impact on the society.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

According to an article, Media on trial: Driven by sensationalism (published in The Hindu on August 3, 2008 by Indira Jaisingh), the SMS polls were run by the television channels on controversial matters like whether Afzal Guru should be given the death penalty? The poll acted as a path to gather the public opinion. Such trials by media do affect the decisions taken by the judges and is crystal clear from the fact when the judges who decided the case said that the “collective conscience of society was outraged by the attack on parliament!”. The media in order to attain the attention has even stepped into obscenity. Take the example of the kind of media coverage given to The Arushi Murder Case which went to the level of recreating a sexual encounter between Arushi and the domestic servant. The police released the e-mails exchanged between Aarushi and her friends to the media who spread the matter over and over again to give an inkling that the 13 year old girl was of loose character. The writer has held Information and Broadcasting Ministry responsible for not making strong media laws. The need of the hour is that the print and television media should be put under scrutiny for the way in which they report the news items. The author further detected that the reason why people are hesitant to put case on such media units is the hefty court fees which they have to pay for suing the media.

Tridivesh Singh (2009) report: Indian Media’s Coverage of Communal Riots: A Comparison of 2002 & 1984 studied the media’s coverage comparing these two episodes. Violence has always dominated the media because suffering makes a good story. India has been seeing violence ever since the last three decades. First, the anti-Sikh riots in 1984 after Indira Gandhi’s assassination and then Gujarat riots where several innocents were killed in the reverberation of the Godhra episode in 2002. The researcher mentioned in the study that Gujarat riots were India’s first television riots. As compared to artistic words of newspapers, the impact left by the audio visual medium was surely magnificent. While comparing the coverage of these two incidents, the researcher explains that the 1984 riots was given coverage after a full day of rioting because at that time correspondents were busy in covering Mrs. Indira Gandhi’s funeral along with other state dignitaries. The situation was aggravated by the negative role played by the DD Channel broadcasting scenes of the people staging protests in front of the Prime Ministers House shouting Khoon Ke Badley Mei Khoon and the reporting further paved the way for inciting riots in Kanpur and other cities of India. In Gujarat Riots, live coverage was being provided by the media units. NDTV was accused of naming communities and enhancing the communal riots. However, it is interesting to note that when Godhra incident took place, the Government was silent on any sort of restraints nor did it object to the naming of the communities.

Priyadarsini in Crime News in Newspapers: A Case Study in Tamil Nadu, India (1984) described that crime news coverage in newspapers in Tamil Nadu is similar in nature to the pattern found in countries like USA. Crime news is a staple food for the reader although allocated a small portion of the
newspapers’ space, closer to the lower percentages in Western newspapers. But unlike Western newspapers, the main focus is on the illegal conduct of public officials and public disorder events, e.g., riots and demonstrations. Personal crime coverage tends to receive less attention in Indian newspapers than it does in USA. To some extent, as in the Western world, the Indian newspapers present a pre-mediated image of crime in that although property crimes are the most frequent offences recorded in official statistics, however, they do not receive the most coverage.

In an article published in The Hindu “Media reportage: Interview with Mark Tully” on 20 February, 2000 Mark Tully expressed his views stating that the Indian media is trying to dodge everything by showing riots between two communities without even mentioning their names. Media instead of community naming should focus on how the whole event happened, what led to the incident, what can be the probable reasons, etc. The local people may become more well informed about the happenings when badmash and goondas come into their area creating troubles. The values of media have changed with the passage of time. Now they are more interested in commercial interests rather than the traditional editorial values. They are busy in creating crispy and sensational news items. Media has also become metro-centric by covering even the smallest of events happened in Delhi or in other metro cities but anything happened in other cities will not get much media attention. Certain disasters like bus accidents and people who get killed at railway level crossing do not get much coverage, though the incidents occur frequently. The railways should be held responsible for such lack of safety measures.

Police Commissioner V.N. Singh in an article Media is projecting a rise in crime, The Indian Express, July 27, 1998 stated that the media shows reports about the robberies in Delhi, loaded with facts, figures and graphs. The author is of the view point that the media reports about does not match with the ground realities. However, there is surely a rise in robbery cases and that is because of the fact that the criminal groups based in neighbouring states like Haryana and UP had become active in the Capital. While reporting the rise in crime, media does not take even a second to condemn the police and becomes blind to the fact that there is a rise in population, proliferating slum areas, insufficient basic amenities and the criminal gangs coming to the capital from other states and creating disturbances. Sometimes fake scenes are also created to lure the readers. The author states that “I had gone to Chandigarh in 1987. The impression I got from newspapers was that the city was on fire. But when I went there I discovered that the city was safer than Delhi.”

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

This study analyzed the contents of four national dailies (The Indian Express, Hindustan Times, Times of India and The Hindu).

The present study investigates and evaluates the content through Random Sampling. Random Sampling has been done for a period of one year, i.e., from 1st January, 2009 to 31st December, 2009. A starting date was randomly selected (1st January, 2009) and all the newspapers were selected every week over a one year period.

OBJECTIVES OF RESEARCH

The research has been conducted to study the following objectives:

1. To study and critically analyze the nature and type of crime reported in the newspapers.
2. To study the crime stories most often reported in the newspapers.
3. To study the crimes done by women, youth and children.
4. To study the crime done by bureaucrats, politicians and influential people.
5. To study the crimes committed on women which are reported by newspapers?

HYPOTHESIS

The research has been conducted to test the following hypothesis:
1. Criminal cases are reported more than the civil cases in the newspapers.
2. Crime stories relating to street crime far exceed those relating to white collar crimes.
3. There is a tendency to over report higher social class offenders.
4. The crime stories relating to drunken driving by the youth are far less than crime stories relating to rape and eve teasing.
5. Crimes committed against women and reported in the newspapers including incidents of gang rape, rape, female infanticide, dowry deaths, social abuse, etc. are covered adequately by the newspapers.
6. Crime stories relating to political leaders will be far more than crime stories relating to film personalities and business tycoons.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The present research studied the following objectives:

1. To study the nature and type of crime reported in the newspapers:

From the research study, it came to light that in Hindustan Times highest numbers of crime stories were reported (891) followed by Times of India (792), The Hindu (744) and The Indian Express (744). However, The Indian Express (98,099.91 sq cm) gave highest space coverage to crime stories followed by The Hindustan Times (81,256.24 sq cm), Times of India (79,549.05 sq cm) and The Hindu (68,289.92 sq cm).

In the four national dailies (The Hindu - 168, Hindustan Times - 153, The Indian Express - 193, Times of India - 153) crime stories related to terrorism were given maximum importance.

2. Crime stories most often reported:

The stories which are most often reported related to terrorism. Total number of stories covered in the four national dailies are 667 out of which The Hindu covered 168, Hindustan Times and Times of India reported 153 each while The Indian Express covered 193 stories. The terrorism stories related with Pakistan are reported more frequently.

3. To study the crime news published:

Highest space coverage is given to stories related to terrorism (Hindu - 20,466.72 sq cm, Hindustan Times - 21,533.90 sq cm, The Indian Express - 34,510.08 sq cm and Times of India - 20,133.69 sq cm) followed by crime involving politicians (The Hindu - 7,474.30 sq cm, Hindustan Times - 6,411.81 sq cm, The Indian Express - 11,731.15 sq cm and The Times of India- 6,944.32 sq cm). Least coverage is given to eve teasing cases (The Hindu - 22.57 sq cm and The Indian Express - 80.18 sq cm) followed by drunken driving by the youth (The Hindu - 122.50 sq cm and The Indian Express 61.06 sq cm) and female infanticide cases (The Hindu - 27.72 sq cm, The Indian Express -18.50 sq cm and Times of India - 175.75 sq cm).

4. Crimes done by women, youth and children:

a) Crime done by women: Not many stories about crime done by women are covered by the four national dailies. Times of India (44) published the maximum number of stories under this head followed by Hindustan Times (42), The Indian Express (28) and The Hindu (20). The published stories are related to murder, suicide, fraud and terrorist activities. Murder and suicide are generally done by middle aged women due to family problems and extra marital affairs.

b) Crime done by youth: It was studied under four categories - Eve teasing, Rape, Drunken Driving and Others. In The Hindu the space coverage to such stories was 6.85%, in Hindustan Times was 4.93%, in The Indian Express was 4.56% and in Times of India was 10.85%. In terms of the number of
stories published covering crime done by youth, the coverage given to such stories in The Hindu was 4.66%, in The Hindustan Times was 5.37%, in The Indian Express was 2.14% and in Times of India it was 3.82%.

c) Crime done by children: Such stories have been least reported by the newspapers. Only two stories were published under this head in The Hindu. The first story related to a suicide case and the second story related to eight juveniles who escaped from jail. In Hindustan Times 10 stories were published. Some serious offences were also published like threatening the minister, murder, suicide and children involved in making bombs. In The Indian Express, 4 news stories were published during the year. Stories related to serious offences by children were published like murder and terrorist activities. In Times of India 15 stories were published and almost 98% of the stories were related to crime done by children in foreign countries. Serious offences like murder were also published. It is to be noted that students who made a hoax call to get an off from the school was published in three newspapers - Hindustan Times, The Indian Express and Times of India.

5. To study the crime done by bureaucrats, politicians and influential people:

a) Crime done by bureaucrats: The Indian Express (47) published the maximum number of crime stories under this head followed by Hindustan Times (38), The Hindu (37) and Times of India (28). The news which was covered by most of the national dailies was related with SP, Auraiya who was suspended and which was published in Hindustan Times and The Hindu on 1st January, 2009. News related with Virk, Police Chief of Maharashtra who was allegedly involved in poll malpractices was published on 6th of March in three national dailies, i.e., Hindustan Times, The Indian Express and Times of India. Narnaul’s suicide case was published in Hindustan Times and Times of India. The prominent news which gained media attention under this head was related with SP, Auraiya who was suspended and the arrest of BSP MLA Shekhar Tewari. It was published in The Hindu and the Hindustan Times. Ex-DGP Virk who was arrested by the Punjab Vigilance Bureau under the Prevention of Corruption Act in 2007 when he was repatriated to his parent cadre, the Maharashtra Police -- had applied for a Congress ticket from Dasuwa for the Assembly elections.

b) Crime done by politicians: Maximum attention to this head was given by The Indian Express (77), followed by The Hindu (68), Hindustan Times (64) and Times of India (62). The prominent news which gained media attention under this head was related with SP, Auraiya who was suspended and the arrest of BSP MLA Shekhar Tewari. The news was published in The Hindu and the Hindustan Times. Ex-DGP Virk who was arrested by the Punjab Vigilance Bureau under the Prevention of Corruption Act in 2007 when he was repatriated to his parent cadre, the Maharashtra Police -- had applied for a Congress ticket from Dasuwa for the Assembly elections.

c) Crime done by Influential People: Maximum number of stories were published by The Hindu (37), followed by Hindustan Times (35), Times of India (34) and The Indian Express (25). The stories which received maximum coverage in most of the national dailies were related to Salman Khan and Ajay Devgan who was handed 5 challans for smoking. The news was published in The Indian Express and Times of India on 9th of January, 2009. Muthalik (who is the Chief of Rashtriya Hindu Sena) was to be produced in Virajpet Court. The news was published in Hindustan Times and The Indian Express on 2nd of February. Gurmeet Ram Raheem Singh who is the Chief of Dera Sacha Sauda was granted anticipatory bail and the news was published in Hindustan Times and The Indian Express on 6th of March, 2009. A car banged into the Dutch Royal parade in which four people died and this news was published in Hindustan Times and Times of India on 1st May of 2009. NCSC Chairman, Buta Singh’s statement that he will end his life if he was asked to resign was published in Hindustan Times and The Indian Express on 5th of August. The news of the CLB member who was held taking bribe was published in Times of India and The Indian Express on 25th of November. PSEB Chairman’s son who
was arrested and put into police custody was published in Times of India and The Indian Express. The news about Dinakaran being hounded for being a Dalit was published in The Indian Express and Times of India on 19th of December. The news of Charlie Sheen who was arrested for assaulting his wife was published in The Hindu and Hindustan Times on 27th of December, 2009.

7. Crime done to females:

The maximum number of stories published under this head were in Hindustan Times (64), followed by Times of India (62), The Indian Express (44) and The Hindu (45). The prominent news which gained media coverage was of an acid attack published on 1st of January, 2009 in all the newspapers. Another news story which was highlighted by the national dailies (The Hindu, Hindustan Times and The Indian Express) was a dowry death case on 2nd of June, 2009 in which husband and in laws burnt the bride to death for dowry.

8. Coverage and content of high profile cases involving people of fame:

To study the coverage and content of high profile cases involving people of fame, the four national dailies have been studied throughout the year. It is noted that all the four national dailies have not covered much of the same stories. Only Ramalinga Raju and Kasab news stories have appeared in all the four newspapers. Both the stories have been followed. The story of Ramalinga Raju had appeared 9 times in The Hindu, in Hindustan Times it appeared 11 times, in Times of India and The Indian Express it appeared 8 times each. One more striking feature of both the cases was that the news story headline appeared in more than one deck. The Hindu covered more high profile cases followed by Times of India. Hindustan Times and The Indian Express did not cover much of such stories. Stories related to Hasan Ali, BV Seetaram, Salman, Lalu Prasad Yadav, Diggijay Singh, Medha Patkar, Imran Nazir, Manmohan Singh, Vishal Yadav, Dinakaran, Hooda and Jayapradha appeared in a single newspaper only once. Not enough coverage is given to such stories. The story related to Virbhadra Singh appeared in The Indian Express, Hindustan Times and Times of India but not in The Hindu while the story related to Madhu Koda appeared in The Hindu, The Indian Express and Times of India but not in Hindustan Times.

OBSERVATIONS WHILE STUDYING THE HYPOTHESIS

The following points came into light while studying the hypothesis:

1. Criminal cases are reported more than the civil cases in the newspapers:

The statement has been proved true. The number of criminal cases which appeared in The Hindu was 744, in Hindustan Times was 891, in The Indian Express was 744 and in Times of India it was 792. However, the number of civil cases which appeared in The Hindu was 13, The Hindustan Times reported 10, The Indian Express reported 8 and in Times of India only 3 cases were reported.

2. Crime stories relating to street crime far exceeds that of white collar crimes:

The statement has been proved true. Total number of street crime stories (1021) is far more than the white collar crime stories (236).

3. There is a tendency to over report higher social class offenders:

The statement has been proved false. For this purpose, the whole year was taken into consideration. It came into light that only few cases like Ramalinga Raju and Kasab have appeared in all the four newspapers. Both the stories have been followed. The story of Ramalinga Raju had appeared 9 times in The Hindu, in Hindustan Times it appeared 11 times, in Times of India and The Indian Express it appeared 8 times each. Stories related to Hasan Ali, BV Seetaram, Salman, Bindra, Hewitt, Gupta, Lalu Prasad Yadav, Diggijay, Dhoni and Harbhajan, Medha Pathkar, Imran Nazir, Manmohan Singh, Vishal Yadav, Dinakaran, Medha, Hooda and Jayapradha appeared in a single newspaper only once. Not enough coverage is given to such stories. While crime stories related to Virbhadra appeared in The Indian Express, Hindustan Times and Times of India but not in The Hindu while story related to
Madhu Koda appeared in The Hindu, The Indian Express and Times of India but not in Hindustan Times.

4. The crime stories relating to drunken driving by the youth is far less than raping and eve teasing:

The statement is partially true. Crime stories relating to drunken driving by the youth is far less than raping. Drunken driving cases reported in The Hindu was 1, Hindustan Times was 0, The Indian Express was 1 and Times of India was 0. However, news related to rape cases was far more. In The Hindu, news stories covering rape by youth were 3 while other than youth were 17. In Hindustan Times, news stories covering rape by youth were 6 while rape by others were 29. The Indian Express reported 4 stories of rape cases by youth and 19 by other than youth. In Times of India, rape cases reported by youth were 13 while others were 29. The Hindu and The Indian Express published 1 eve teasing cases each while Hindustan Times and Times of India published 0 eve teasing cases. So, eve teasing cases and drunken driving cases published during the year are equal.

5. Crimes committed against woman and reported in the newspapers including incidents of gang rape, rape, female infanticide, dowry deaths, social abuse, etc. are covered adequately by the newspapers:

The statement is partially true. Cases related to rape, gang rape, social abuse and dowry deaths have been adequately covered but cases related to female infanticide cases are not reported adequately.

6. Crime stories relating to female infanticide cases will be more than rape cases:

The statement has been proved false. Rape cases (The Hindu - 20, Times of India - 42, The Indian Express - 13 and Hindustan Times - 35) far exceeds coverage of female infanticide cases (Hindu - 1, The Indian Express - 1, Times of India - 2 and Hindustan Times - 0).

7. Crime stories relating to political leaders will be far more than film personalities and business tycoons:

The statement is true. News stories covering total cases related to political leaders in The Hindu were 68, Hindustan Times were 64, The Indian Express were 77 and Times of India were 62. However, news stories covering cases related to film personalities in The Indian Express was 1, Times of India were 3 and Hindustan Times was 1. News stories covering cases related to business tycoons reported in The Hindu were 26, Hindustan Times were 26, The Indian Express were 28 and Times of India were 34.

CONCLUSION

1. Hindustan Times published maximum number of crime stories.
2. Maximum crime stories were related to terrorism.
3. Female infanticide cases, dowry cases, sexual harassment and rape cases were not adequately reported by the newspapers.
4. Actual crime cases cannot be compared with the crime stories published in the newspapers.
5. High profile cases are not adequately published by the newspapers.
6. Criminal cases are reported more than the civil cases in the newspaper.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

While doing the research work, one main limitation that was come across was that actual crime rate cannot be compared with the crime stories reported in the newspapers. It cannot be proved as all the crime stories are not reported in the police station. National Crime Records Bureau keeps record of only those crime stories which are reported in the police station. People generally do not go to the police station and report every matter. Moreover, the researcher has studied only the national dailies.
National dailies do not cover all crime stories of India. Crimes done in remote areas are most often missed by the newspapers. So, actual crime rate in India and the proportion of crime reported in the newspapers cannot be co-related.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE STUDIES

It is suggested that further studies can be conducted on the basis of the findings of this study. More newspapers, especially local newspapers should be examined to reveal different patterns of reporting of crime news. The findings obtained could be compared with the present findings.

Studies of the public perception of the phenomenon of crime and the criminal justice system should also be conducted to explore the effect of the media on the audience. For this type of study, Doris Appel Graber’s study may help determine the degree to which the public relies on crime news to form their opinion about crime issues and if there is fear of crime among the public that is caused by the media.

REFERENCES

Books


Websites