



'Partial Journalism'—A study of national media of India and Kashmir conflict

Danish Nabi Gadda

Abstract

Purpose: *The paper tries to showcase the difference of portrayal of protest strikes observed in Kashmir by the Indian national media. The researcher has tried to show how the 'partial journalism' practiced by the national media has ignored the voice of dissent from Kashmir to favour the official narrative.*

Methodology: *The study is based on the content analysis of two important and widely circulated national dailies for a period of 1989-2010.*

Findings: *The study establishes that the national press has downplayed the strikes in Kashmir Valley either by not publishing the news stories about **strikes**; by portraying the strikes as "sponsored" programmes of resistance leaders, "crippling" or "halting" the normal life; or by diluting the details about strikes.*

Keywords: *Partial Journalism, Kashmir conflict, National Media, media bias, agenda setting, status-quoist*

Paper Type: *Content analysis*

Introduction

Media has always been an important element in conflicts of every nature and intensity. It has evolved as a dominant factor in shaping up the conflicts, managing or conflating them, and eventually deciding the fate of nations. In the contemporary times of rising domestic and international conflicts, its significance is transcending limits. And the increasing accessibility with emergence of the new media is only adding to media dominance world over.

The World's first exposure to wide scope of the media came during the First World War—the first major global conflict in the history of this planet. The nations-at-war exploited media to run propaganda against the enemy nations; to garner support for the war; and for justifying the continuation of the combat till its end. The governments ensured that masses, including their countrymen, got only what they wanted them to know about the war. Truth became the first causality as media content was engineered from the power corridors to suit a particular ideology.

So, diverse and effectively-used was the media content during World War I and II that analysis of the media content to decode Nazi propaganda thriving between the two global conflicts gave the World a widely used method of media research—content analysis. Content Analysis came into light between the two world wars, and it was used to understand Nazi movement during World War II. A little closer on the timeline, the world has witnessed the media play a dominating role in conflicts in Palestine, Vietnam, Afghanistan, Iraq, and now in the Middle East.

Kashmir is a 65-year-old conflict that originated with the exit of British from the sub-continent in 1947. Like in every conflict zone, Press has had a significant role to play in Kashmir in terms of reporting human rights violations, representing the public sentiments, and keeping a check over the excesses that the civilians usually face in any conflict situation. In Kashmir, the media landscape is dominated by two major players—the local newspapers and the national press. And each has been covering Kashmir conflict from different angles, thus creating varied perceptions about the situation therein. The local media has been presenting a local view point on the history of Jammu and Kashmir, the association of Kashmir with the neighboring nations, the migrations within and beyond the valley, encounters, combats, human rights abuses, and the causalities. On the other hand, the National media has been the only source of information about Kashmir for the society outside and yet a status-quoist. National media has reported the situation in Kashmir with a partial approach, narrating only what fits the official policy, and ignoring anything, howsoever closer to reality, that hurts the interests of India as a nation or is in breach of the official policy. And consequently, the true picture from Kashmir has remained largely untold, creating a mental and ideological divide between people of the state and of the India as a whole. ‘Partial Journalism’ practiced by the National media has contributed to a large degree towards the growing sense of alienation and mistrust among the people of conflict-ridden Kashmir.

General Strikes have been a dominant feature of the resistance movement in Kashmir, punctuating the political and social developments in the state. Strikes or general shutdowns are observed in Kashmir valley to oppose the authority of India over the state, to express the public sentiments every time a human rights violation is committed, and to mark dissociation with any celebrations concerning the National state like January 26 (Republic day of India) or August 15 (Independence Day of India). During the 90's decade, strikes were observed on call of pro-freedom political groups of Kashmir, predominantly by *All Parties Hurriyat Conference (APHC)*, and various militant outfits. The strikes attained added significance when militancy went on a decline towards the end of '90s: with rallies and street protest not allowed in the state, strikes became people's commonest expression of dissent. In the recent past, the valley observed long spells of strike in 2008, 2009, and 2010.

Strikes have been of a frequent occurrence in Kashmir valley. In the militancy decade of 90s', strikes were frequently held on the call of pro-freedom and militant groups in Kashmir to oppose government's policies, human rights violations etc. And in the recent years, the valley witnessed long spells of strikes: in 2008, strikes were held for several months over the transfer of forest land to Amarnath Shrine Board (the board

managing the pilgrimage to Hindu cave temple, Amarnath) by the state government; in 2009 strikes were held over twin rape and murder in a town in the South of Kashmir; and in 2010 strikes were held for almost the entire year against the killings of teenagers by the National forces. Apart from the spontaneous spells of strikes, February 11 and October 27 are observed as strikes in Kashmir. On February 11, 1984, founder of the then militant outfit Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF) Mohammad Maqbool Bhat was hanged to death by India in its Tihar Jail, New Delhi. Bhat's mortal remains were not returned to Kashmir, and he was buried in the jail premises. Every year, Kashmiris observe strike on his death anniversary to commemorate Bhat and seek return of his remains.

On October 27, 1947, National troops landed in Kashmir to drive away the tribal invaders of Pakistan. The arrival happened under a controversial agreement between the then Hindu ruler of the state and New Delhi. Once the Tribals withdrew and the war was over, India didn't withdraw its troops, founding the base of the Kashmir conflict. October 27 is also observed as strike in Kashmir every year to oppose the presence of national forces in the state, and to seek their withdrawal.

National media has, however, always attempted to downplay this display of resentment from Kashmiris. The strikes are either not covered at all by the national media, or, if covered, are downplayed to a degree of insignificance, in accordance with the official policy that describes the strikes in Kashmir as forced events sponsored from across the Line of Control or by militants or pro-freedom groups. National media has done little to highlight the strikes as a voice of dissent from Kashmir so as to give the correct picture of the popular sentiment in Kashmir to its about one billion national audience. In this paper, a detailed dissection of the coverage given by national press to strikes in Kashmir has been done to understand its practice of *'partial journalism'*.

Review of literature

The influence of media is inevitable to a common reader ignorant of the nuances of politics and propaganda. The masses perceive the reality as it is projected by media. Majority believes the media reality of the conflicts, and thus is created a selective general perception of the conflict. Media has been controlling the perception created about conflicts through agenda setting. Agenda-Setting theory was propounded by McCombs and Shaw in the 1970s, and suggests that "the public agenda is dictated by the media agenda" (**McCombs & Donald, 1972**).

The theory puts forward the idea that the media determine what people think about. By selecting the stories which go on the front page or are included in nightly television news programmes, the media determine

what people think about (**Theaker, 2004**). Agenda setting describes the power of the media to tell the people “*what to think about*”, a related concept of framing which shapes the thinking of audience regarding a particular issue by telling them “*how to think about*” it. Framing is thus about setting priorities among various dimensions of the same issue for the media audience to think of certain dimensions and ignore the others. **McCombs, Shaw and Weaver (1977)** have equated framing with second-level agenda setting. They argue that framing is an extension of agenda setting in terms of media effects. The media can impart a certain perspective, or “spin”, to the events that they cover and this, in turn, might influence public attitudes on an issue (**Warner & Dominick, 2003**). Kashmir is a 65-year-old conflict that originated with the exit of British from the sub-continent in 1947. When imperialistic British authority over the subcontinent ended, subcontinent was divided into two major nations: Hindu-majority India and Muslim-majority Pakistan. Kashmir, then having an area bigger than that of France with 84, 000 square miles, was among the largest 562 so-called princely states in the subcontinent over which the British control lapsed in August 1947. As per the rules of the partition agreed upon by the British and the two successor governments, Kashmir like other princely states was given the option of joining either India or Pakistan (**Wirsting, 1994**). However, the circumstances that followed the exit of British, denied Kashmir the right to democratically decide its future. Thus was born, the longest standing conflict of the World. In last almost six and a half decades, Kashmir conflict has revealed itself through various violent and non-violent phases like the lengthy debates in United Nations and the armed struggle that started in 1989.

Like in every conflict zone, Press has had a significant role to play in Kashmir in terms of reporting human rights violations, public sentiments, and keeping a check over the excesses that the civilians usually face in a conflict situation. In Kashmir, the media scene is dominated by two major players—the local and the national media, which have been covering Kashmir conflict from different angles, creating varied perceptions about the situation therein. The local media has been presenting a local view point on the history of Jammu and Kashmir; the association of Kashmir with the neighboring nations; migrations within and beyond the valley; encounters; combats; human rights abuses; and causalities. For people of the state it was the most prominent source of information about the violent happenings of each day all through 90’s when venturing out on the roads was one big challenge. And when militancy took a back seat with the turn of century, the local media persisted with its predominant coverage of the local issues, specifically those with links to the politics of the state.

Committee for Initiative in Kashmir (1993), which was one of the first rights groups to respond to the excesses committed in the Valley, has in one of its reports highlighted the dual standards followed by National media in covering the situation in the valley. The committee said the National media has been the only source of information about Kashmir for the society outside, and yet a status-quoist. It has more often toed the official line regarding the situation within Kashmir. The National press has adopted an attitude “*them and us*” regarding the people of the Valley, strengthening national integration. If anything, reportage in the national press has only reinforced the Kashmir’s sense of alienation, and among the rest of the Nationals, a stereotype image of the Kashmiri Muslim as an ungrateful lot who wants to secede Pakistan.

In her book *Kashmir: A Tragedy of Errors*, author Tavleen Singh described National media as one of the reasons for prolonging of the Kashmir conflict. One of the reasons why these mistakes could be made with impunity is because the National press, out of misguided patriotism, has always chosen to tell the National public less than the whole truth about Kashmir. This has made it possible for government in Delhi to get away dangerously myopic policies. Issues which perceived to have a bearing on national interest/security, particularly those relating to defence, foreign policy, insurgency, and human rights are usually portrayed from a state security perspective, relegating the priorities and concerns of the Kashmiri people to invisibility (**Joseph, 2000**). The National media has reduced the suffering and struggles of Kashmiri people to mere statistics and hangs on the rudiments of “he said, she said” token objectivity. And not to mention the total loss of context, which is the greatest casualty. National media’s Kashmir coverage is not just a bane of commercialized news media, but it is jingoistic, sensational and nationalistic to core; pandering to the opinions of the pro-India political elite both inside and outside Kashmir. National media is causing extreme damage to Kashmiri society by misinterpreting its struggle (**Zia, 2007**). To minimize the possibilities of lost revenue, (media) outlets will tend to report news in a tone more favourable to the government and giving less emphasis to unfavorable news (**Murthy, 2004**).

Objective of the study

- To study portrayal of strikes in Kashmir Valley by national press.

Methodology

Press in India has a long history; electronic media has emerged only recently. Media in Kashmir, in particular, is still limited to newspapers since electronic media is yet to emerge in the conflict-torn region. The only channels or radio stations available in the valley are either state-

owned or run from outside the state. It is thus the newspapers that dominate the media landscape of Kashmir in terms of reportage as well as the impact. Also, magazines are uncommon in Kashmir valley, and the national magazines circulated in the state are not expected to cover the strikes regularly as the newspapers are supposed to. A content analysis of national newspapers was, therefore, carried out to achieve the objective of this study.

For the purpose of this study, content analysis of national newspapers was carried out to study the coverage given to February 11^{*} and October 27^{**} strikes from 1989 to 2010 under purposive sampling technique. News stories were taken as the articles of study. The two national newspapers chosen for the study *Times of India* and *Hindustan Times* were selected randomly from among the leading national newspapers. A three-stage qualitative and quantitative content analysis was carried out of the stories about February 11 and October 27 strikes in the valley (published in February 12 and October 28 issues of the newspapers).

In the **first stage**, the number of stories published about the strikes on February 11 and October 12 was counted along with their placement in *Times of India* and *Hindustan Times*.

In the **second stage**, headlines of the stories were analyzed using the coding technique to find out if the strikes observed in the valley were highlighted in the headlines, and, what the newspapers put impetus on in case the strikes found mention in the headlines. Accordingly, the headlines of the stories about strikes were categorized into three categories—‘Cause’, ‘Effect’, and ‘Others’—categories based on whether the focus was on highlighting the cause of the strikes observed, or whether it was to highlight the effect caused by the strikes.

And finally, the coding technique was used to study the content of the stories. Five categories were defined for the purpose as follows: (1) *strike was primary focus*, (2) *strike was secondary focus*, (3) *strike was passing reference*, (4) *negative coverage to strike*, and (5) *strike was ignored*.

Findings

The study establishes that the national press has downplayed the strikes in Kashmir Valley either by not publishing the news stories about strikes; by portraying the strikes as “sponsored” programmes of resistance leaders, “crippling” or “halting” the normal life; or by diluting the details about strikes.

^{*} Founder of the then militant outfit Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF) Mohammad Maqbool Bhat was hanged to death by India in its Tihar Jail, New Delhi

^{**} October 27 is also observed as strike in Kashmir every year to oppose the presence of National forces in the state, and to seek their withdrawal.

Quantitative analysis

The quantitative analysis of the newspapers shows that the national press reported the strikes in Kashmir Valley with inconsistency. In the time period of 22 years chosen for the study (1989-2010), strikes were held in Kashmir on 43 occasions—strike wasn’t called for on February 11, 2003, which was a day before Muslim festival of *Eid-ul-Zuha*. For the purpose of this study, 1990 was ignored due to its unavailability in the newspaper archives.

Out of the 83 stories expected to be published collectively by *Times of India* and *Hindustan Times*, the two newspapers only published 50 stories whereas on 33 occasions they ignored the strikes observed in Kashmir valley. And only 15 stories appeared on front pages of the two stories; on 35 occasions the stories were published on internal pages including the last pages of the newspapers. **Table 1** gives individual and collective details of how the stories about strikes in Kashmir Valley were deprived of space by the newspapers.

Both the newspapers published stories about strikes in Kashmir Valley mostly on the inside pages; only rarely did the stories find mention on front pages of two of the largest circulated Newspapers of India (**Table 2**). Of the 50 stories published together in the two newspapers, only 15 appeared on the front pages. An argument could be made that front page may have been occupied by other more important news, but an entire region observing strike against an act like landing of national military in the Valley or the hanging of a man charged with killing of a police officer but is hero of armed resistance in Kashmir Valley certainly deserved better placement than being placed, on some occasion, on the last pages of the newspapers. It goes on to show that the National press has accorded lesser value to expression of dissent of the people of Kashmir via general strikes, which had brought normal life to a grinding halt.

Table 1

Newspaper	Ignored stories	Published stories	Expected stories
Times of India	17	24	41
Hindustan Times	16	26	41
Collective	33	50	83

Table 2

Newspaper	Inside page stories	Front page stories
Times of India	16	09
Hindustan Times	16	06
Collective	32	15

Qualitative analysis of headlines

In second stage of this study, qualitative content analysis of headlines on the stories carried by *Times of India* and *Hindustan Times* was carried out to understand what the focus of their reportage of strikes observed in Kashmir Valley was. A code sheet was devised for the purpose with three coders listed in it: 'Cause'—wherein the focus was on the purpose for which strikes were held i. e., hanging of Maqbool Bhat for strikes held on February 11, and landing of National military in Kashmir valley for strike on October 27; 'Effect'—under this category were listed the headlines in which focus was on effect of the strikes held, rather than the cause for which the strike was held; and finally a third category 'Others' was notified for the headlines in which strike found cursory mention without focus on either cause or effect of the strike.

The study showed that strikes were mentioned in only 66 per cent of the headlines of the stories related to strikes published in the two newspapers (**Table 3**). The 66 per cent, however, includes four stories (two in *Times of India* and *Hindustan Times* each) in which the focus was on "little" or "no impact" of the strike. In 34 per cent of the headlines strikes were not mentioned at all even though the strike was mentioned or described in the body of the story.

The 'Cause' and 'Effect' categorization established that the major focus of the reports carried by National press was on effect caused by the strike called by resistance leadership of Kashmir valley, rather than on the fact that people responded to their calls and observed strike. Of the *Times of India* and *Hindustan Times* headlines that mentioned strike, 64 per cent highlighted the effect of the strike, mostly by writing "bandh paralyses life" (published in *Times of India* on October 28, 1992), "strike hits life in valley" (published in *Hindustan Times* on October 28, 1997), "strike paralyses life in valley" (Published in *Times of India* on February 12, 2005), or "strike cripples life in Kashmir" (published in *Hindustan Times* on October 28, 2006).

Cause of the strike was highlighted in 30 per cent of the headlines that mentioned strike while 6 per cent of the headlines made only a mention of the strike without highlighting either cause or effect. Interestingly, however, the call from militant or resistance groups was usually mentioned as the cause of the strike. Like the headline of February 12, 2004 story published in *Hindustan Times* reads: "Shutdown in valley on JKLF strike call". Likewise, headline of February 12, 2009 story in *Hindustan Times* reads: "Kashmir shutdown on separatists' call". Both the stories fall under 'Cause' category in the study.

Table 3 Depicting how strikes were selectively mentioned in headlines

Newspaper	Mentioned strike	Non mentioned strike	Cause	Effect	Others
Times of National	13	11	2	10	01
Hindustan Times	20	06	08	11	01
Collective	33	17	10	21	02

Qualitative analysis of stories

In the third and last stage of this study, qualitative content analysis of the stories was done using the coding technique. Here four categories were identified as follows:

- 1) **Strike was main focus:** In this category were listed the stories that provided elaborated details on the strikes observed in Kashmir without diluting the focus by mentioning strikes alongside other developments in Kashmir valley.
- 2) **Strike was secondary focus:** This category is for stories that mention strikes alongside other developments in the Valley with the former being the secondary focus.
- 3) **Strike was passing reference:** In this category were placed the stories that only mention strikes without providing details of the situation caused by the strike.
- 4) **Negative coverage to strike:** This category was for stories in which the Newspaper described the strikes as one with “little impact” or “failure” without substantiating the argument with ground details as evidence.
- 5) **Strike ignored:** This category was for stories in which strikes found no mention but other political programmes (like protests or rallies) held with regard to February 11 or October 27 were reported.

Table 4: Depicting how focus of stories evaded strikes in Kashmir

Newspaper	Strike Ignored	Negative coverage	Strike passing reference	Strike secondary focus	Strike primary focus
Times of India	02	02	04	10	06
Hindustan Times	01	01	09	08	07
Collective	03	03	13	18	13

The strike was found to be the primary focus in only 26 per cent of the stories. In 36 per cent of the stories the strike was made the secondary focus by highlighting other developments on the day in the body; 26 per cent stories mentioned the strike only as a passing reference, avoiding any details from the ground about its impact; and strike was given negative coverage without supporting evidence in 6 per cent of the

stories while another 6 per cent ignored the strike completely but highlighted the political programmes held by resistance leaders on the day (**Table 4**).

Conclusion

A general perception has developed about National Media in the Kashmir Valley that it crushes professionalism and objectivity to serve what it usually describes as the country's 'national interest'. Truth is often made the causality, and National media is often held guilty of this offence when it comes to reporting situation in the Kashmir Valley to serve the vaguely-defined 'national interest' which should have no role whatsoever to play in the supposedly objective institution—Media. National media has adopted 'partial journalism' policy when it comes to reporting Kashmir conflict.

Sixty years of cataclysmic conflict in Kashmir valley have seen people's anguish and disagreement over the National rule exhibited in diverse forms. A non-violent political battle across the state reflected public sentiment for resolution of Kashmir issue till 1989 when armed resistance was born out of rigged elections and sparked off by the hanging of Maqbool Bhat in Tihar jail. And then, as the guns stopped roaring towards the latter half of the '90s decade, the people turned to peaceful mass agitations to oppose human rights violations or the draconian laws like AFSPA and PSA.

The National media chose to overlook the sentiments of people of the valley in whichever way it appeared, and selectively highlighted the developments that suited the official narrative. The fake encounters and human rights violations committed by the forces were ignored, but operations against militants were overplayed to justify the presence of military in Kashmir Valley; speeches and official functions remained proffered focus of the news reports in the National media over strikes observed in Kashmir Valley on Republic Day and Independence Day of India. '**Partial journalism**' of the national media has confined the sentiments of Kashmiri people to the Valley, and National society has become aware of only the media reality of Kashmir conflict.

This study has established that the National Press narrowed down the reports of strikes, which have been the commonest expression of dissent in Kashmir Valley. The strikes observed against the hanging of Maqbool Bhat and landing of the National military in Kashmir Valley were downplayed through reduced-frequency, recessive-placement, and by choosing the language and description that conceal the facts about Kashmir Valley. Bhat was hanged on charges of killing a police officer. To national media, he remains a criminal, but he has been a hero to a generation of Kashmiris. Landing of National troops in Kashmir Valley was

an act of pride for India, but Kashmiris see it as the beginning of the end to their short-lived and hard-earned freedom from anarchy. Clearly, the strike observed in opposition to National narrative on the importance of these two days deserved impartial reportage so as to make one billion people of India aware of the public sentiments in Kashmir Valley. For a humanistic and realistic stand on Kashmir conflict, the National society needed to be aware of the sentiments of people of Kashmir, and it could only be possible through fair and objective reporting by the National press. But the National press chose to tow the official line, denying its audience a fair picture they ought to see of Kashmir conflict. It is a dangerous scenario that may have played the catalysts in prolonging the Kashmir conflict and the consequent sufferings of the Kashmiri people.

References

- Committee for Initiative in Kashmir (1993). *Kashmir War, Proxy War*. New Delhi.
- Joseph, T. (2000). Kashmir, Human Rights and the Indian Press. *Contemporary South Asia*, 9 (1), 41-55. DOI: 10.1080/713658719
- McCombs, M. E., & Shaw, D.L. (1972). The Agenda-Setting Function of the Mass Media. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 36(2), 176-187. DOI:10.1086/267990
- McCombs, M.E., Shaw, D.L., & Weaver, D.L. (1997). *Communication and Democracy: Exploring the Intellectual Frontiers in Agenda-Setting Theory*. Mahwah, N.J: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Murthy, L. (Ed.). (2004). *Reporting Conflict: A Handbook for Media Practitioners*. Kathmandu: South Asia Forum for Human Rights.
- Singh, T. (1996). *Kashmir: A Tragedy of Errors*. New Delhi, India: Penguin Books.
- Theaker, A. (2004). *The Public Relations Handbook*. London: Routledge.
- Warner, R., & Dominick, J. (2003). *Mass Media Research*. Singapore: Wadsworth.
- Wirsting, R. (1994). *India, Pakistan and the Kashmir Dispute on Regional Conflict and its Resolution*. New York: St Martin Press.
- Zia, A. (2007, November 12). Reporting, the National Style. *The Daily Etalaat*, pp. A7.

Author Biography

Danish Nabi Gadda is Junior Research Fellow, Media Education Research Centre (MERC), University of Kashmir. He is currently pursuing his PhD in Media Education Research Centre, University of Kashmir, India. He can be contact at: danishzargar@gmail.com