Indian Media Framing of the Image of Muslims:
A Content Analysis of Indian English Language Newspapers

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Introduction
The media play an important role in the portrayal of image of any community, political leaders or people. Media are crucial in understanding any country, its people and communities. Navasky said that, “it is based largely on journalism that we make up our national mind” (Navasky cited in Zelizer & Allen, 2002, p.1). The images of race, caste, community and religion as perceived by the media have long been of interest to researchers as it signifies the attitude of majority communities towards smaller groups. No religious community has generated so much of heat and debate than the Muslims in the world. The basic purpose of this study is to understand how media has treated Muslims, the largest minority group in India. India, the largest democracy in the world has a free press. Media play a significant role in constructing the image of Muslims in India.

India is a secular republic where the citizens enjoy equal right to practice religion of their choice. The Indian society predominantly consists of Hindus and Muslims, Christians, Sikhs and Buddhists are in a minority. Muslims all over the world has been viewed with suspicion owing to the rise in fundamentalism and terrorism. The negative image portrayed by the media in the past reinforced public’s stereotypical and prejudiced perception of the Muslims. India has 138 million Muslim population (2001 census) constituting 13.4 % of the total population which intriguingly is the combined population of Muslims in Pakistan and Bangladesh. The secular credentials of the Indian press were questioned after the ‘Babri Masjid’ incident on December 6, 1992 where attempts were made to demolish the 12th century mosque by right wing communal forces with the tacit consent of the government. The communal forces gained an upper hand alienating the Muslim community from the mainstream consequently damaging the secular fabric of the Indian society. During ‘Babri Masjid’ incident, the language press in the Hindi language speaking belt of India was divided on the basis of religion. Mob opinion was touted as public opinion in the press paving way for ‘mobocracy’ instead of democracy. Press lost an opportunity to massage the hurt and humiliation suffered by Muslims in India in the post ‘Babri Masjid’ era. The press instead coined labels like, ‘Muslim terrorist’, ‘Muslim Fundamentalist’ on the lines of ‘Sikh Terrorist’. After a decade, India’s secularism received a jolt in 2002 with the onslaught of Gujarat riots internationalizing the plight of Indian Muslim community. The Indian media having failed to deliver after Babri Masjid made endeavors to support the cause of Muslims after it witnessed
communal riots in Gujarat in 2002. The media especially the English press was critical of the state administration and the police that it portrayed Gujarat as the shame of Indian society. However, the same cannot be said of the language press. The vulnerability of the media secularism and lack of clear cut media policy on this significant issue prompted this study. The study intends to analyze how Indian press enjoying all the freedom in the world portrays the Muslim community in the post Gujarat riots of 2002.

Media Framing
The study also uses the concept of analytical technique of ‘framing’ in mass communication research. Framing has been defined as a process of ‘selecting some aspects of perceived reality and making them more salient in a communication text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, casual interpretation, moral evaluation, and /or treatment recommendation for the item described’ (Entman, 1993, p.52). According to Gitlin (1980) media frame is “persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation, and presentation of selection, emphasis, and exclusion, by which symbol-handlers routinely organize discourse, whether verbal or visual”. So many theses have been written about framing since 1970s deliberating on the process, factors and the structure of news framing. There are different connotations of framing. An exercise of power is framing says Reese (2001, p.10). It is even interpreted as a sort of media control over content giving scope for elite opinion. Frames are the ‘indicators of power’ or “the imprint of power” (Entman, 1993, p.55). Delving on the features of framing, Berenger (2004) says that “frames make messages memorable and understandable” (cited in King & Lester, 2005, p.626).

The question is why do journalists frame news stories even when they enjoy freedom of speech and expression? Bourdieu (1998) explained that “even in countries where there is freedom of expression, there is a form of invisible self-censorship. Journalists, writers, and producers realize what is permissible in media, and they pre-edit their own work to be consistent with those perceived norms-all in the interest of remaining employed in the media companies” (cited in Straubhaar & Larose, 2002, p.54). Media frame plays a vital role in presenting, shaping or destroying picture of an even or story says Herman and Chomsky (2000).

Literature review
Muslims and media have generated lot of interest among researchers across different countries. Post 9/11 has seen a spate of studies on media treatment of Muslim community contributing to the literature. Peter Manning says that the words “Arab” or “Muslim” were associated with terrorism in 89% of articles that appeared in Sydney’s two major newspapers in the post 9/11. He further states that by and large the Australian media’s coverage of Muslims and Arabs is tainted with a racism that portrays the community negatively.(www.theage.com.au Portrayal of Muslims ‘tainted by racism’ – Ian Munro- March 18,2006). In a study on national identity in Indian cinema, the researchers found that the diversity, multiplicity and secular constructions of Indian identity being systematically narrowed into monolithic portrayals of rich, Hindu, and patriarchal cultural identity. This cultural conflation further marginalizes and often erases the experiences of religious minorities and the poor who do not fit this constructed norm. (Dreaming the nation- Sheena Malhotra and Tavishi Alagh-South Asian Popular Culture Vol.2, No.1, April 2004, pp. 19-37). The Hindu image continues to be more visible in Indian cinema than that of minorities. Western media writers fail to see the perspective of ordinary Muslims as their vision is blurred by the rhetoric of
the fundamentalists is the common thesis of all those who have reflected on this issue.

Akeel Bilgramin laments that “Some writers – Christopher Hitchens, Salman Rushdie, Michael Ignatieff, Niall Ferguson, Thomas Friedman to name just a few – clearly have when they write articles in leading magazines and newspapers with titles such as ‘Of Course It’s About Islam’ or ‘Who Said It is Not About Religion!’ These sleek writers with their fine phrases are buying into the very confusion of those whom they are opposing, and in doing so they are letting down the millions of ordinary Muslims all over the world who, in the end, are the only weapons the US and Europe has against its terrorist enemies” (Akeel Bilgrami – India’s Muslims Post – 9/11, Index on censorship, Vol. 35, Issue. 4, November 2006, pp 15-21).

Minorities in every culture are a disadvantaged lot and media treats them differently and not favourably as the language, culture and social system of majority gets reflected in the media. In non-Islamic countries, Muslims as a minority community have attracted national attention owing to global concerns with the subjects of Muslims and Islam in the post 9/11 era. “It would not be too much of an exaggeration to say that the whole debate on terrorism, Islam and Muslims are now being defined by American perceptions, articulations, and expectations” says Arun Mahizhnan.

The American media is blamed for biased and prejudiced coverage of Muslims and Islam in many books, studies and articles in both pre and post 9/11 period. The media analysis blames American media like CNN for lacking accuracy, objectivity, balance and facts in their coverage of Muslims. One such works is ‘Islamic peril: media and global violence’ by Karim M.Karim in which the author builds his thesis on media mistreatments of Islamic issues says "there is no centrally-organized journalistic conspiracy against Islam—the mechanics of the mass media in liberal political systems do not favour such overt orchestrations of information. [However,] dominant media discourses simultaneously highlight and downplay specific types of violence.” (Karim, 2000: 4).

Majority of theses on this subject criticize media inadequacies and unpreparedness in dealing with Muslims leading to bias and prejudice in their reporting. ‘The very lack of cultural depth among both conveyers and consumers of information through the mainstream media has meant the spread of the sense of having understood Islam without any inkling that their information may not have any objective basis (Arun Mahizhnan, Media Proliferation: Bane or boon, Media Asia, Vol. 29, No.3, 2002).

Mass media play a crucial role in building the image of any society. Noshima Saleem cites Galtung and Mari Holmboe Ruge call the media as the “first rate competitors for the number one position as international image former” (Cited by Noshima Saleem)(Galtung & Ruge, 1965). Traditionally, the people of India and Pakistan have grown in an environment where an ‘enemy image’ lurks in the minds of citizenry in both the countries. Partition of India in 1947, wars and constant border clashes between the two countries have led to distrust of Hindus and Muslims of each other. Saleem cites Boulding (1969) describe various factors that play an important role in the formulation of national image in international system…The national image is essentially a historical image—that is an image which extends through time, backward into a supposedly recorded or perhaps mythological past and forward into an imagined future. The more conscious a people is of its history, the stronger the national image is likely to be. Wars and hostilities among nations also formulate national images as do geographical space, past friendliness and alliances, and strengths and weaknesses of the nations in terms of military, economic and politic capacity
Traditionally, the people of India and Pakistan have grown in an environment where an ‘enemy image’ lurks in the minds of citizenry in both the countries. Partition of India in 1947, wars and constant border clashes between the two countries have led to distrust of Hindus and Muslims of each other. Some studies have blamed the text books and the education system in India and Pakistan for projecting ‘highly slanted and prejudiced view’ of minorities, particularly Muslims in India and Hindus in Pakistani. ‘These textbooks feed the minds and imagination of millions of children in both countries. They play a major role in generating hatred and animosity between the two countries’ (Zahid and Michelle 2007). In India, any anti-Pakistan cause finds ready adherents from those who were uprooted from Sindh and East Bengal and in Pakistan, any anti-India cause finds ready adherents from those uprooted from our Punjab, Haryana and Delhi (B.Raman 2006). A study of public perception of Muslims reveals that Indian TV viewers perceived Pakistan negatively and held Pakistan and not Muslims responsible for terror attack on India in 26/11 terror attack. The Indian public made a clear distinction between Pakistan and Muslims though latter are perceived as sympathizers of Pakistan (Narayana Usharani, 2009)

**Methodology**

The method of content analysis was found appropriate for this study which aims to analyse the media framing of Muslim community in English language Indian press. Three well known English dailies of India were selected for this study. The newspapers are The Statesman, the Indian Express, The Hindu and The Times of India. The period of study is 2001-05, the post 9/11 period. The news reports and other editorial content pertaining to Muslims that were published from 2001 to 2005 in the post 9/11 period were selected. The 9/11 occurred in the year 2000. All the four chosen newspapers are national newspapers and leading dailies of India. They represent the cream of Indian press and are powerful enough to influence the policies of the government. The newspapers represent northern, southern and eastern Indian regions thatcommand large circulation and are multi edition papers.

A list of stories was generated from Lexis-Nexis full database. The Lexis-Nexis strings that were used for search purposes were “Muslims” and “minorities”. The unit of analysis was the news report and other editorial content including editorials, articles and opinion stories. Two doctoral research scholars were trained in coding and were responsible for coding. Using Holsti’s formula (Holsti, 1969), an average inter-coder reliability score of 97% was obtained for the variables. The research scholars independently coded the three newspapers after the inter-coder reliability was established. The variables included a) spokespersons for the issue; b) number of muslim articles; c) overall tone of the coverage- pro-muslims, anti-muslims and neutral or informational; d) whether the issue was important for the welfare of the Muslim community – important, important to some extent, important to great extent and not important at all; e) what type of story got more coverage. The slant of the news reports was measured by coding the news reports under three categories of favourable, unfavourable and neutral.

**Research Questions:**

1. Is Indian English language press secular?
2. Does the English language press is content to toe the government line or works independently in issues concerning Muslims?
3. What is slant of news reports on Muslims in Indian English language newspapers?
4. What kind of sources the newspapers depended upon in reporting about Muslims?
5. Did the frames used for Muslims differ among different newspapers?
6. Did more stories frame Muslims unfavourably?
7. In what generic categories is news published and is there any variations in terms of generic categories?

Findings and Discussion
The content analysis revealed that the majority of news content consisted of news reports and most of them are speech reports and reports based on press releases. The large percentage of news reports reflected the pro-Muslim stance of the politicians of particular political party who have regarded the community as the vote bank. Though the reports show a pro-Muslim approach, the content are trivial in nature and rarely addressed the real problems, issues and policies in the context of its positive effect or negative effect on the Muslim community.

The news reports were coded according to three categories – favourable, unfavourable and neutral. A chi-square test was run to determine the significance in the coverage of news among different newspapers. The analysis shows that there is significant difference in the framing of news about Muslims among English newspapers. The results of this study indicate that the Indian mainstream media are rarely covering issues that are significant and relevant to the Muslim community. Quantitatively, the amount of space given to Muslim issues is hardly satisfactory. Mere reporting of speeches by politicians does not serve any concrete purpose. Instead more serious and meaningful articles, editorials and stories will ensure policy changes and help change the public attitudes and beliefs towards Muslims. The Indian media doesn’t seem to have a media policy on news treatment of Muslims as reports are trivial in nature.

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