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Media Building Opinion during Crisis: Analysing Hindi Media Reports on Migrant Workers during COVID-19

Madhubanti Mitra

Assistant Professor, Department of Media Science, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad University of Technology (WB) and Doctoral Research Scholar, Department of Journalism and Mass Communication, Aliah University, Kolkata

Abstract

During the COVID-19 crisis in India, the real picture of millions of migrant workers and their alarmingly precarious lives came into focus. The announcement of a nationwide lockdown at a mere 4-hour notice violated the rights of the Indian migrant workers to fair economic opportunities and dignified life during the crisis period. Countless moving stories regarding the struggle for food, shelter and job of the migrant workers in India have surfaced during the lockdown and at the same time the inaction of the Government has been criticised over several social media platforms. Studies have shown that 3 out of 10 Indians are internal migrants (Bansal, 2016) and a considerable percentage of these migrants have moved in search of a better livelihood. The push and pull factors of migration in India have always manifested an inclination of migrating towards the developed, urban areas. However, during the COVID-19 crisis in India, the inclination had undergone a 180-degree shift as the migrant workers started migrating back to their states of origin. While this sudden and temporary “reverse migration” on foot has been one of the most pervasive and prominent narratives of the COVID-19 crisis in India, the

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mainstream media coverage of the same by and large has been superficial, biased and vague. The selection bias is by definition a bias encountered by researchers while selecting the samples of research and the outcome of the research is drastically affected because of this bias. This paper aims to analyse how the Indian media coverage of the migrant crisis in India 2020 has undergone a similar bias of selective reporting and manufacturing public opinion.

Keywords: Migrant Crisis, Migrant Workers, Selection Bias, Indian Mainstream Media.

Correspondent author E-mail address: madhubanti.mitra7@gmail.com, ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-21217449>

Introduction

Selection bias is a bias encountered mostly by the researchers when the data is selected subjectively. The resultant findings, hence, are not always a proper reflection of the population (Vries, 2017). Indian mainstream media has been reflecting a similar bias through its endeavours of manufacturing public opinion representing only the regime's voice as opposed to presenting the objective truth. Indian media's efforts at counterfeiting the reality and lack of accountability urge the people to develop an uncritical admiration for the current regime (Mishra, 2019). The population of India can be defined by Chomsky's observant statement: "The general population doesn't know what's happening and it doesn't even know that it doesn't know" (Chomsky, *The Prosperous Few and the Restless Many*, 1993).

This contributes to media's constant endeavour at manufacturing opinion that, in turn, appropriates the selection bias manifested by Indian media. One of the socio-economic aspects of India that have been largely affected by this media bias is the migrant issue. The coverage of migrant issues in the Indian mainstream media, especially in the non-English-language media, is quite rare, although there are few notable exceptions. Moreover, the individual stories on the migrants by and large reflect the common public prejudices against migrants, tagging them for crimes, imposing an otherness on them (Krishnan, 2020).

The number of migrants from villages guided by the middlemen has contributed to the faster growth in the urban population as opposed to the growth of the countryside in the last 10 years (Census, 2011). This exodus has been beneficial for the employers as the local wage is

depressed because they have also been released from the sense of accountability for security, suitable workplace conditions, or any general benefit for the migrant labours that the city labours would otherwise claim (Sainath, 2011). During the lockdown declared in India on account of the COVID-19 pandemic, similar lack of accountability has also been observed in the mainstream Indian media. In fact, the media outlets patronised by the current Government attempts to tag any media covering migrant issues as “journalism of misery” (Koppikar, 2020). Mainstream media as an ideological state apparatus inculcates such generalisation and unaccountability in the general public and the collective reaction to the COVID-19 migrant crisis thus highlights the dangerously low public empathy quotient (Kumar, 2020).

Literature Review

The migrant worker’s crisis during the COVID-19 pandemic in India has brought forth pertinent questions around the need for a prospective upgrade in the existing development and welfare policies of the State (Baijayant et al., 2020). In the process of developing a proper framework for the policy makers, the involvement of the Government representatives and Civil Society groups is quite significant. Civil society organisations during the COVID-19 pandemic pushed the government to sign memorandums of understanding (MoUs) between states to facilitate a chaos-free resolution of the issues related to a migrant worker (Sarkar, 2020).

However, the media, one of the primary sources of information for the civil society, has covered the migrant issues in India with relatively lesser importance which is not very thorough and is prejudiced. One of the major problems that journalists face while charting the migration reports is the absence of up-to-date information. The Government fails to provide accurate figures to the journalists about the origin and the destination of the migrant workers so much so that the fine line between internal migrants and migrants from other neighbouring countries becomes blurred (Krishnan, 2020).

Samir Kumar Das, a journalist and academic, who has contributed extensively on the topic of migration issues, the plight of internally displaced people and refugees opine that owing to this issue, one can trace only a few attempts at a serious analysis in the print media regarding the migrant issue as a whole, nonetheless, local print media, to some extent, has been successful to highlight the socio-economic and ethnic conflicts attached to migration. However, the Indian mainstream media significantly failed to address this issue objectively as well as in totality. The facilitation of a lively dialogue between the victims and the civil society at large

has not been possible by the Indian mainstream media (Das, 2004).

This lack of coverage became prominent during the COVID-19 crisis in India and the selection bias of the Indian mainstream media became protuberant when they were enthusiastic about reporting the plight of the internal migrants blaming the Government for their inactions and at the same time remained tone-deaf towards the plights faced by the less skilled and undocumented Indian migrant workers in the Gulf countries. The mainstream media hardly covered their ardent pleas of return (Radhakrishnan, 2020). Moreover, the negative media portrayals of intersectional migrants and portraying their presence within the national perimeters as a threat to the State and its citizens created fears among the citizens which facilitated colonial ill-treatment toward the migrant workers (Donald, 2020).

The analysis of these pieces of evidence provides the researcher with the ground to analyse the media contents related to the migrant issues and prove the hypothesis that the media was affected by a certain selection bias while reporting the migrant crisis during COVID-19 lockdown and they manufactured public opinion accordingly.

Research Gap

The Indian mainstream media often reflects the ideologies of the regime and in the process discards or distorts the objective truths to a large extent. This manufactures public opinion on issues devoid of the objective truth. This paper tries to highlight how migrant crisis during COVID-19 has also fallen prey to this media bias. Studies on the media coverage of the migrant issue in India have happened in the past. Developmental journalists have explored different aspects of migration in their earlier works. However, the migrant crisis and the trend of “reverse migration” which was typically unique during the COVID-19 lockdown represent a scope of research in terms of coverage of this migrant crisis in the Indian mainstream media. This paper analyses how important crisis stories did not get featured in the mainstream Indian media, how the ones which are published reflected a certain selection bias, and how the publication of migrant crisis stories has been discouraged by other media institutions and tries to find answer to the following questions:

1. Did Indian mainstream media cover migrant crisis during COVID-19 lockdown in an accurate and unbiased manner?

2. Did Indian mainstream media influence public opinion through their coverage of migrant crisis during COVID-19 lockdown?

Methodology

This paper analyses Hindi newspaper reports and attempts to do a discourse analysis of reports on migrant labours. This paper analyses the media contents published on migrant crisis between March 2020 and August 2020 to highlight the presence (or absence) of the selection bias discussed previously and, at length, presents a qualitative analysis of the relevant media contents to find the answers to the research questions. The theoretical framework of this research is developed from several media studies theories. The theory of Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses by Louis Althusser is a very relevant theory as the media's role as an ideological state apparatus during the COVID-19 migrant crisis has been discussed in this paper. Along with it, the Hypodermic Needle Theory by Harold Lasswell that talks about how powerful the media's influence is on the audience provide relevant grounds to further this research, especially, in the analysis of media's role in manufacturing public opinion.

Finding and Analysis

The migrants' story coverage in media during the COVID-19 pandemic was expected to inform us about not only the sufferings but also the inactions of the governments in putting an end to this misery (Koppikar, 2020). Unfortunately, sufferings during the COVID-19 pandemic were inevitable- what made a difference is the Government policies that contributed to the magnitude of the sufferings. The mainstream media while covering the tragedy has perilously made little distinction between what the Government can control and what it cannot (Abhishek, 2020). The Indian mainstream media has always covered migrant crisis stories as a tragedy or at best as a natural calamity rather than as an outcome of terrible State policies absolving the State completely. This dangerous trend in media reporting throws light upon the selection bias of media.

- **Failing to highlight the responsibilities of the Government**

Leading Hindi newspapers, like Hindustan (Patna, May 17), Dainik Bhaskar (Bhopal, May 9, 17), Amar Ujala (Lucknow, May 17), have covered the stories of migrant workers' crisis including major accidents, like the Aurangabad incident (May 8) and the Auraiya incident

(May 16), which resulted in the death of many migrant workers and while these stories express only sadness and mourn the death of the migrant workers, the reports fail to highlight the Government's inadequate pandemic policies. The report covering the Auraiya incident in Hindustan (Patna, May 17) blamed speed and carelessness for the loss of the 26 lives of the migrant workers instead of blaming the policymakers for forcing those migrant workers into such compromising situations in the first place.

The national edition of Dainik Jagran (May 17) features a human interest story on a man who decided to travel hundreds of kilometres despite his disability and titles it as "A courageous journey". The glorification of this compulsive misery as opposed to highlighting the inaction of the Government to create favourable conditions for the migrant workers shows how the Indian mainstream media is biased to protect the interest of the regime.

- **The distraction of focus and framing public narrative**

The priming and framing theory of media suggests that media prompts people about what to think. During the COVID-19 lockdown, the migrant crisis did not surface in the news at the beginning even though it began as early as March 28 with the chaos at Anand Vihar Bus Terminal. In fact, the Indian mainstream media was focusing the public attention proactively on Tablighi Jamaat, how the public followed the prime minister's instruction of lighting diyas and banging utensils, army helicopters showering flower petals over hospitals, etc. while the parallel narrative saw migrant workers dying of hunger (Abhishek, 2020).

The glorification of State's primary repressive apparatus, the police force, as 'Corona Warriors' in the mainstream media (Amar Ujala, Hindi News Paper, Delhi, May) distracts the focus of the mass from the brutality of the police against the poor migrant workers where State violence has claimed nearly a dozen migrant lives (Agarwal, 2020).

The media platforms also have been focused on covering Prime Minister Narendra Modi's address to the nation relentlessly and none of the deliveries could provide the mass with an impressive account of government policies, the plight of the migrant workers, or how the Government is planning to deal with it (Bhatia, 2020). Mr. Modi's speeches were full of the rhetoric of patriotism and war, and the Indian mainstream media has highlighted and glorified such deliveries, appropriating the Government's endeavours in escaping the pertinent questions. Hindi newspaper Amar Ujalain its April 15 edition reports such a speech describing

Mr. Modi's humbleness.

- **Government controlled media coverage**

The State mechanisms of controlling the media were widely used during the COVID-19 crisis. Some hours before announcing the lockdown, Prime Minister Modi instructed the journalists to do only positive coverage during the duration of the lockdown (Sagar, 2020). However, the instruction was neither criticised, nor rejected- rather the journalists ecstatically spoke about this event on social media (Abhishek, 2020). This sophisticated State censorship on media trying to control the availability of information and restricting access to information has been reflected in the mainstream media. During the press conferences on the migrant crisis, the Government controlled the admission of media representatives, what questions to be asked, and shaped a State-approved narrative for the mainstream media to publish (Krishnan, 2020).

As a result, it is safe to conclude that the media coverage that the readers, by and large, have gone through has successfully formed a public opinion in favour of the Government. The journalists who were critical of the Government policies in their coverage of the migrant stories faced prosecution (Wire, 2020). In addition, Mr. Vempati, the CEO of Doordarshan, has discouraged the journalists, who have covered the news of the migrant crisis in a critical way and said that Indian media has been absorbed by the “journalism of misery” during the lockdown while it is supposed to engage itself in “journalism of hope” (Koppikar, 2020). Tagging the coverage of true stories of struggle in the negative light of discouragement contributes to the collective lack of empathy towards the migrant crisis safeguarding the Government from pertinent questions from civil society (Kumar, 2020).

- **Blaming the migrant workers for the spread of the Corona virus**

The mainstream Indian media has been collectively highlighting the official comments suggesting that the migrant workers are to be blamed for the spread of COVID-19 (Institute for Human Rights and Business, 23 July 2020; The Economic Times, 12 April 2020; News Medical, 7 July 2020; The Indian Express, 31 May, 2020). Such coverage contributed to the unacceptability of migrant workers in a state or the city. However, the official reports confirm that even after the return of millions of migrant workers to the states, there was no major increase in the spread of the COVID-19 virus (Pavitra & Arpita, 2020).

While Indian mainstream media has covered the statements blaming the migrant workers for spreading the Corona virus, none of the reports include the empirical truth based on statistical findings that ensures that such accusations are mostly false (Anshuman, 2020). This exposes the hypocrisy and confirms the selection bias associated with Indian mainstream media in the case of migrant crisis coverage during COVID-19 lockdown in terms of news angle.

- **Agenda driven reporting**

While it is notable that most mainstream media did not cover the migrant crisis news adequately, the available coverage of the plight of the rural migrant workers that induced applauds among the readers/viewers is also an outcome of structural hypocrisy. While migrant lives are usually glossed over, the mainstream media did, to some extent, bring it to the fore front, nevertheless, it could hardly do justice to the matter. Most of the media narratives of the plight of the migrant workers are the circulation of the same story of the hyperbolised versions. In many cases, such news was unaware of ground realities and was churned in the newsrooms only (Chawla, 2020).

The rush in producing news in bulk has a certain mechanical approach attached to it. Hence, the facts in each of these reports sometimes sacrifice accuracy to make the news more sellable. Jyoti, the 13-year-old girl from Bihar, was first featured in the BBC for taking her sick father back home- from Haryana to Bihar- carrying him as a pillion rider on her cycle. The latter coverage in Indian media, which changed her age from 13 to 15, was not descriptive about her sufferings and other ordeals of her life (Chawla, 2020).

The lexical choices used in the articles reveals that the reports of the same event in different Indian mainstream media show the use of the same words which leads us to the discourse of media bias. The common words, including Paswan (referring to the caste of Jyoti's family), Hindu, Bihar, etc., the undertone of political interests throughout the story published prior to the Bihar elections 2020, the endeavour toward creating public opinion, and appropriation of the political ideals of the regime could be thoroughly observed in those reports. The glorification of Jyoti by using male metaphors (for example, lion-hearted) also indicates the gender lens and gender insensitivity used in the Indian mainstream media (Soni, 2020).

Conclusion

The research through media content analysis takes us to this conclusion that Indian mainstream media does suffer from a certain selection bias. It is true that the migrant crisis issue, which does not get much attention otherwise, has been brought to the forefront by Indian mainstream media during the COVID-19 crisis. However, those reports are biased, agenda-driven, and focused on manufacturing public opinion in support of the ruling regime. The image of the migrant workers painted by the Indian mainstream media, mostly in negative lights, also contributes to the collective lack of empathy towards migrant workers rather than producing a critical outlook towards government policies. The interference of the Government, in the way the media works, curbs down the freedom of expression for Indian mainstream media resulting in such selection bias and unidirectional narrative of the migrant crisis during the COVID-19 lockdown. It can be observed that the Indian mainstream media has been used as a State apparatus to manufacture a State-approved public opinion. As a result, the public in the country does not actively demand a suitable pandemic policy and the crisis continues to exist. The plights of the migrants are, on the contrary, associated with victim-blaming, false glorification, and untrue narratives to evade questions. Such biased coverage of the migrant crisis relieves the Government of their accountability and encourages false knowledge and instils false faith in the regime amongst the people of India.

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