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Breaking the news: Unravelling Political Polarisation in Indian News landscape

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Abstract

“Freedom of the press is not just important to democracy, it is democracy.” (Cronkite, 2004)

This paper examines the escalating political polarisation in India’s socio-political landscape, focusing on the media’s evolving role from historical to contemporary times. Political polarisation in India has significantly impacted electoral behaviour, public discourse, and social interactions, creating a complex environment of partisan identities that hinder rational dialogue and compromise. By exploring the historical role of the Indian media, particularly during the Emergency era (1975-1977) when it acted as a formidable force against state censorship, the paper highlights the media’s critical role in fostering accountability and dissent. The study further investigates how contemporary media, driven by commercial interests, often sacrifices journalistic integrity for profit, exacerbating political divisions and sensationalism. This shift undermines the media’s watchdog function, distorts public perception, and poses significant challenges to democratic governance and social cohesion. Through a nuanced analysis of these dynamics, the paper underscores the necessity for media organisations to balance profitability with public responsibility, and for regulatory frameworks to ensure media accountability. Ultimately, the research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how historical legacies and current media practices shape India’s political polarisation and its implications for democracy.

Keywords: Media landscape, polarisation, editorial independence, press freedom, commercialisation

Introduction

In recent years, the socio-political landscape of India has increasingly become defined by deep-seated divisions, often termed political polarisation.¹ This phenomenon not only influences electoral behaviour but also shapes public discourse, social interactions, and even interpersonal relationships. As various political factions align along increasingly rigid ideological lines, citizens find themselves navigating a complex maze of partisan identities that often preclude rational dialogue and compromise.² The ramifications of such polarisation stretch beyond the political arena, infiltrating cultural, religious, and socio-economic spheres, thereby complicating the narrative of unity among India's diverse populace. By examining the historical antecedents, contemporary manifestations, and potential consequences of this divisive trend, this essay aims to unravel the complexities of political polarisation in India, ultimately highlighting its implications for democratic governance and social cohesion in a nation characterised by paradoxical pluralism.

Throughout its history, Indian media has functioned as both a watchdog and a platform for dissent, particularly during times of political upheaval like the Emergency era from 1975 to 1977.³ The press at that time displayed remarkable defiance against the state, leading to the imprisonment of several journalists who challenged the government's narrative. The boldness of the press during the Emergency was more than just a profession; it was an act of patriotism. This underscores the critical role of the media in holding power accountable, even under the threat of censorship. Additionally, regional media outlets have played a transformative role in this resistance. For instance, local newspapers in Kashmir have often defied state-imposed restrictions, courageously reporting on human rights violations. As articulated by a

¹ Political Polarisation refers to the division of attitudes to political issues into two distinct opposing groups. This often results in a significant gap in public opinion and a lack of middle ground between the groups.

² The term "partisan identities" refers to strong allegiance to a particular political party or ideology, often leading to a polarised society where compromise becomes difficult.

³ The Emergency era (1975-1977) in India refers to a 21-month period when Prime Minister Indira Gandhi unilaterally had a state of emergency declared across the country, which led to severe curtailments of civil liberties and press freedom.

journalist from the region, “Our role transcends journalism; we are the voice of the silenced” (National Intelligence Council, 2021). Such instances highlight the diverse landscape of Indian media and its enduring struggle against political repression, which becomes even more significant in a politically polarised environment.

The intersection of commercial interests and journalistic integrity has become increasingly pronounced in contemporary India, raising critical questions about the state of press freedom. As media outlets pivot towards profit-driven models, traditional journalistic values—such as impartiality and public service—are often eclipsed by the demands of commercial success. This shift not only affects content creation but also shapes the underlying agenda of news organisations, potentially skewing public perception and discourse. Furthermore, a reliance on advertisement revenue compels media houses to cater to audience preferences, which may lead to sensationalism and a dilution of hard-hitting journalism. As the landscape evolves, it becomes essential to scrutinise how this commercialisation impacts the press’s role as a watchdog, as it grapples with maintaining independence while fulfilling the dual imperatives of profitability and responsibility to the public.⁴ Ultimately, the implications for democracy and informed citizenship are profound, necessitating a nuanced examination of these dynamics. The commercialisation of media, in a context of political polarisation, further complicates the narrative, as media outlets may align with particular political ideologies to secure financial backing, thereby exacerbating societal divisions and hindering the prospects for objective journalism.⁵ This paper aims to unravel the complexities of political polarisation in India by examining its historical antecedents, contemporary manifestations, and consequences, with a particular focus on the evolving role of the media as both a watchdog and a commercial entity. By understanding how political factions and media dynamics shape public discourse and societal cohesion, we can better grasp the implications for democratic governance in a nation characterised by paradoxical pluralism

⁴ The concept of the media acting as a watchdog involves monitoring the actions of those in power, holding them accountable

⁵ This refers to the process where media organisations increasingly prioritise profit and audience engagement metrics over traditional journalistic values such as impartiality and public service.

Background

Contemporary landscape of media in India

The contemporary media landscape in India has experienced profound shifts, largely driven by the advent of digital platforms and the proliferation of social media. This transformation has amplified diverse voices and allowed for greater democratic engagement, yet it has also led to significant challenges. As media outlets compete for attention in an overstimulated environment, the framing of political narratives becomes increasingly selective and sensationalised. Political polarisation, exacerbated by differing media portrayals, can influence public perceptions and deepen societal divisions. “The influence of media on public perception of political issues is a topic of ongoing significance in contemporary society,” highlighting how media narratives shape not only political discourse but also collective identity within India (Tiya Jhunjhunwala et al., 2024). Additionally, the dynamics of audience reception reflect a polarised populace where media framing significantly affects how political developments are understood and interpreted, further entrenching divisions (Soha Salahuddin, 2024).

In the contemporary landscape, the state of press freedom in India faces significant challenges that arise from political, social, and legal pressures. Journalists and media organisations often navigate a complex environment where government influence and societal expectations intersect, leading to self-censorship and fear of reprisals. Notably, reports have indicated a rise in violence against journalists and a tightening grip on media narratives, manifesting in the form of selective censorship and legal harassment. This climate not only stifles dissent but also curtails public access to diverse viewpoints, crucial for a functioning democracy. Therefore, understanding these dynamics is essential for assessing the precarious state of press freedom in India today.

Overview of Press Freedom in India: Historical Context and Current Landscape

Throughout its history, Indian media has functioned as both a watchdog and a platform for dissent, particularly during times of political upheaval. A notable example is the Emergency era from 1975 to 1977, when the press displayed remarkable defiance against state censorship, leading to the imprisonment of several journalists who challenged the government's narrative. As noted by a veteran journalist, the boldness of the press during the Emergency was more than just a profession; it was an act of patriotism. This period underscored the critical role of the media in holding power accountable, even under the threat of severe repercussions.

Fast forward to contemporary India, and the media landscape has drastically evolved. While the legacy of resistance during the Emergency still inspires many journalists, the intersection of commercial interests and journalistic integrity has become increasingly pronounced. Today, media outlets pivot towards profit-driven models, often at the expense of traditional journalistic values such as impartiality and public service. This shift not only affects content creation but also shapes the underlying agenda of news organisations, potentially skewing public perception and discourse.

For instance, the reliance on advertisement revenue compels media houses to cater to audience preferences, leading to sensationalism and a dilution of hard-hitting journalism. Unlike the Emergency era, where the battle was against overt state censorship, contemporary media struggles with the more insidious pressures of commercialisation. As a result, the role of the media as a watchdog is compromised, further complicating the landscape of political polarisation.

In this context, understanding the transformation from a press that once unified to resist authoritarianism to one that is fragmented by commercial and political interests is crucial. The current media environment, influenced by both historical legacies and modern economic pressures, continues to shape the socio-political discourse in ways that both reflect and exacerbate India's political polarisation.

Challenges to Press Freedom

Among the myriad challenges to press freedom in India, the influence of governmental structures and socio-cultural dynamics plays a pivotal role. Increasingly, media outlets face pressures that stem from political motivations, exemplified by the heavy surveillance and censorship imposed by authorities under various pretexts, including national security. This stifling environment not only constrains journalistic expression but also discourages investigative reporting that could otherwise illuminate governmental malfeasance. In this context, the importance of ethical frameworks for media governance becomes pronounced; as highlighted in discussions of global governance of science, effective oversight is crucial to protect press integrity (Chaturvedi et al., 2015). Additionally, the emergence of new technologies poses unique dilemmas for journalistic practices, as misinformation and state-sponsored narratives proliferate in the digital space. Consequently, fostering a robust civil society that values independent journalism is essential for overcoming these multifaceted challenges to press freedom in India. Ultimately, such efforts can help fortify democratic principles and promote accountability in governance.

Examination of Censorship, Intimidation, and Violence Against Journalists

An alarming trend in India relates to the persistent climate of censorship, intimidation, and violence that curtails journalistic freedom. This environment, fuelled by state and non-state actors alike, not only discourages robust reporting but also induces a pervasive culture of self-censorship among media professionals. Faced with threats of violence, journalists often find themselves navigating a perilous landscape where the state may employ intimidation as a means to control narratives, thereby stifling dissenting voices. The concept of the Politics of Impunity illustrates this scenario, highlighting how state-

sponsored actors manipulate the legal landscape to entrench fear and limit critical reporting, creating a space of exception where journalists operate under constant threat (Alley R et al., 2021). As noted in global trends, the fallout from such practices lays bare the harsh realities in which journalists operate; only 14 percent of the world's population enjoys true press freedom (Dunham J et al., 2014). This systemic repression not only undermines democracy but also threatens the public's right to information.

Press freedom metrics

Various global indices reveal a troubling trend; for instance, India's ranking in the World Press Freedom Index has fluctuated considerably, reflecting increased governmental control and regulatory pressures on media outlets. The nuanced dynamics of domestic credit and international reserves illustrate broader economic implications that may also impact journalistic independence and resource allocation within the media sector (Gupta et al.). Furthermore, significant disparities in press freedom can be discerned through the examination of non-marital fertility statistics, which metaphorically underscore the intersection of societal factors and media representation (Stone et al.). Collectively, these metrics denote a pressing need for reforms that safeguard journalistic integrity, ensuring that a diverse and independent press can thrive amidst the challenges posed by socio-political factors in India.

State controlled media

Control over media is often perceived as a tool for states to maintain power and influence public perception. This tactic allows governments to shape narratives, suppress dissent, and promote ideologies that align with their interests. In the context of India, the state has increasingly employed propaganda to sway public opinion and legitimise its actions. For instance, instances of government propaganda have been particularly evident during periods of political turmoil, where media portrayals have emphasised national security threats over civil liberties, thereby justifying restrictive measures against dissenting

voices. As noted in (Abbas et al., 2019), a graded assessment of political party leaders' responses reveals how propaganda can cater to specific demographics, often undermining broader geopolitical concerns and inclusive dialogue. Furthermore, the correlation between foreign direct investment and media freedom highlighted in (Dutta et al.) illustrates how economic interests can manipulate media narratives, further reinforcing state control and limiting democratic discourse.

The landscape of press freedom in India has witnessed a grim decline, particularly as the government seeks to control narratives that dissent from its political agenda. According to reports, the Press Freedom Index has plummeted, reflecting a broader pattern of government repression against journalists, with increasing numbers of arrests documented annually. Non-lethal violence and intimidation tactics against media personnel have spiked, aiming to stifle critical voices (Jackie HARRISON et al., 2022). Instances of propaganda, particularly through films like *The Kashmir Files*, illustrate the pernicious role of media in promoting a singular narrative that serves state interests and fosters communal divisions (Abhijit Rege, 2023). This orchestrated media strategy not only marginalises dissent but also manipulates public sentiment to justify governmental policies, such as the aggressive stance toward Kashmir under the Modi administration. Such developments underline the states intent to perpetuate a controlled media environment that suppresses pluralism and dissent, thereby reinforcing political polarisation in India.

Commercialisation of Media

The landscape of press freedom in India has undergone significant transformation, particularly with the rise of commercialisation in media. Historically, Indian journalism flourished under the principles of democracy and free expression; however, the increasing commercialisation has introduced a myriad of challenges. Financial pressures often compel media outlets to prioritise sensationalism over substantive reporting, potentially undermining journalistic integrity. This phenomenon is further exacerbated by government influences and corporate interests that shape narratives, raising concerns about self-censorship among journalists. As observed in various global assessments, including competitive innovations in strategies for enhancing national capacities, India's approach to press freedom reflects a critical balance between promoting democracy and accommodating commercial interests (Luke A. Stewart et al., 2012). Ultimately, the intertwining of commercial motives and media operations has led to a pressing need for a reassessment of how press freedom is governed and practiced in India to safeguard its essential democratic role.

In contemporary India, the intersection of money and commercialisation significantly undermines press freedom, creating a precarious environment for journalism. Media organisations often succumb to commercial pressures, prioritising sensationalism and partisan narratives over integrity and factual reporting. This shift not only compromises the quality of information disseminated to the public but also cultivates an environment ripe for political polarisation. The state, in turn, exploits this circumstance, utilising media outlets vulnerabilities to propagate favourable narratives and suppress dissent. By maintaining tight control over financing and advertising, the government encourages media loyalty, thereby ensuring that prevailing political ideologies dominate public discourse. Consequently, the erosion of press independence serves dual purposes: it fortifies the state's influence over public perception while simultaneously marginalising critical voices that challenge authoritarian tendencies. Thus, the commercialisation of the media becomes a tool for the state to consolidate power, inadvertently stifling democratic engagement and citizenship rights in the process (Freedom House, 2012).

The Influence of Advertising Revenue on Editorial Independence

As media outlets increasingly rely on advertising revenue, a complex dynamic emerges that can compromise editorial independence, particularly in the Indian context. The pressure to generate profit often shifts the focus from responsible journalism to sensationalism, which may dilute the integrity of news reporting. In a diverse society like India, this trend becomes particularly problematic, as the medias role should encompass social reengineering and addressing critical issues such as dignity of labor and social justice. The commercial imperative raises the question: should media merely cater to public demand, or should it also educate and uplift societal standards? This tension reflects a broader conflict within media organizations, where the commodification of content risks transforming the audience from informed citizens into mere consumers. It becomes vital to consider whether this commercialisation signals a stealthy privatisation of public discourse (Bheemaiah Krishnan et al., 2014), ultimately hindering the medias potential to fulfil its democratic obligations (Rodrigues et al., 2005).

A significant consequence of the commercialisation of media in India is the intricate relationship between advertising revenue and content bias, raising concerns about journalistic integrity and public trust. As media organisations increasingly rely on ad revenue to sustain their operations, the inclination to produce content that favours corporate interests or aligns with advertiser agendas becomes pronounced. This pressure can lead to a dilution of impartiality, wherein critical issues, particularly those related to governance, are either downplayed or sensationalised to appease financial backers. This trend not only compromises the quality of news but also erodes the publics capacity to engage with diverse viewpoints, limiting democratic deliberation. Furthermore, as noted in recent analyses, media entrepreneurship aiming for independence, while valuable, often struggles against the overwhelming influence of advertisers and powerful political entities (Girija et al., 2020). The resulting content bias ultimately restricts the medias role in contributing to societal well-being, thereby diminishing its efficacy as a public service (Gebremichael et al., 2013).

The Role of Media Ownership Concentration

The concentration of media ownership significantly impacts press freedom in India, fostering an environment where commercial interests often overshadow journalistic integrity. As media conglomerates expand their reach, they tend to prioritise profit over unbiased reporting, thereby influencing the narratives presented to the public. This scenario intensifies in a rapidly digitising landscape, where the promise of new media technologies, while ostensibly democratising access to information, is often compromised by corporate monopolies that control digital platforms. The rise of ad-less digital media start-ups represents an attempt to counteract this trend, aiming to create independent spaces for democratic discourse; however, these initiatives face substantial challenges such as governmental and corporate oversight and potential censorship (Girija et al., 2020). Furthermore, the socio-economic factors that dictate who gets access to these new media platforms reveal an underlying stratification, where marginalised voices struggle to penetrate the mainstream narrative despite the technological advancements (Schwittay et al., 2011). Consequently, media ownership concentration not only restricts press freedom but also hampers the diversity of perspectives essential for a healthy democracy.

How ownership concentration affects public opinion and press freedom

The dynamics of ownership concentration play a crucial role in shaping the diversity of viewpoints available in media, which in turn affects press freedom. In contexts where a few entities dominate the media landscape, such as in India, the commercialisation of news drives a narrow focus on commercially viable narratives, often at the expense of nuanced reporting that reflects a range of perspectives. This scenario leads to a homogenisation of content, where critical social issues receive limited attention, thus stifling public discourse. Moreover, as the proliferation of platforms owned by a select few continues, the diverse voices that traditionally contribute to a robust media ecosystem are increasingly marginalised. Effective policy frameworks addressing these issues are necessary; however, existing structures often fail to adequately support a developmental model for technology transfer in media that would ensure broader access and a plurality of voices (Tripathy et al., 2011). Consequently, as ownership concentration intensifies, press freedom is undermined, leaving the public with a limited understanding of key issues.

The impact of political polarisation on minorities in India

Political polarisation in India has increasingly marginalised minority communities, shaping their political, social, and economic spheres. As political factions deepen their divides, minorities such as Muslims, Dalits, and Adivasis often find themselves as collateral damage in the struggle for power, leading to a pervasive sense of alienation. Interviews conducted with representatives from various minority groups, including insights from Kaushik, reveal that this polarisation engenders fear and a lack of political representation. Discriminatory policies and rhetoric serve to intensify societal fissures, resulting in an environment where minority voices are systematically suppressed. Furthermore, the entrenchment of majoritarian ideologies not only denies these communities essential rights but also fractures inter-community relationships, magnifying tensions across religious and caste lines (Mahmood Mamdani, 2005-06-21). Thus, the ramifications of political polarisation extend beyond electoral politics, deeply impacting the lived experiences of minorities in India, necessitating an urgent reevaluation of democratic practices and social cohesion.

Recent years have seen a stark increase in polarisation within Indian society, significantly impacting minority communities. This growing divide is not merely a social phenomenon; it has far-reaching implications for press freedom and democratic institutions. As highlighted in (Ashraf et al., 2022), the rise of a right-wing political climate under Narendra Modi's government has fostered an environment where dissenting voices and viewpoints, particularly those from minority groups, face increased scrutiny and hostility. This hostile milieu discourages critical journalism, thereby undermining the essential role of the press in holding power accountable. Furthermore, the systemic marginalisation of minorities can lead to under-investment in vital areas such as education and infrastructure, as discussed in (Easterly et al.). When these communities are preoccupied with securing their basic rights and safety, the overall democratic fabric of the nation is weakened, ultimately hindering India's potential to provide a robust counterbalance to hegemonic threats, such as those posed by China.

Conclusion

In unraveling the complexities of political polarisation in India, it becomes evident that the interplay between historical legacies and contemporary media dynamics plays a pivotal role. The country's rich history of media as a force for accountability, as seen during the Emergency era, contrasts sharply with today's landscape where commercial interests often overshadow journalistic integrity. This evolution from a unified resistance against state censorship to a fragmented media driven by profit underscores the profound changes in how information is disseminated and consumed.

The implications of this shift are far-reaching. Political polarisation is not merely a product of ideological divides but is also fuelled by a media landscape that increasingly prioritises sensationalism over substance. This not only distorts public discourse but also undermines the democratic process by limiting access to balanced and impartial information. The erosion of journalistic standards in favour of commercial gains exacerbates societal divisions, making rational dialogue and compromise more challenging.

Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach. Media organisations must recommit to the principles of impartiality and public service, even as they navigate the pressures of commercial viability. Regulatory frameworks should be strengthened to ensure media accountability and transparency. Moreover, fostering media literacy among the populace can empower citizens to critically evaluate the information they consume, thereby mitigating the effects of polarisation.⁶

Ultimately, the health of India's democracy hinges on the ability of its media to serve as a true watchdog, championing the values of truth and accountability. By reflecting on both historical precedents and contemporary challenges, we can better understand the path forward in fostering a media environment

⁶ Media literacy refers to the ability of individuals to critically understand, evaluate, and create media in a variety of forms, which is crucial in an era of misinformation and political polarisation.

that supports democratic governance and social cohesion in an increasingly polarised world. In summation, the phenomenon of political polarisation in India manifests as a significant challenge to the nation's democratic fabric, intensifying divisions along socio-economic and cultural lines. The rise of nationalism, particularly exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, has led to the dominance of right-wing political narratives, thereby influencing the public discourse and policy decisions. Examining the implications of this trend reveals both potential benefits, such as national unity in economic initiatives like Make in India (Atmanirbhar Bharat), and consequential drawbacks, including the deepening of societal rifts ((Yash Singh Sisodiya, 2021)). Furthermore, the media plays a crucial role in shaping opinions and framing discussions around foreign policy, as seen in the coverage of India's non-alignment amidst global conflicts (Ziya Mehdizade, 2023). Addressing these complexities is essential for fostering a more cohesive society, where inclusive dialogue can mitigate polarisation and promote understanding across diverse groups.

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