

New Narratives Of Nationalism And Media Interventions

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Abstract

The Fathers of Indian Constitution envisaged a country in different hues than are evident today. Nationalism had different connotations, secularism was not a pejorative term then. Recent years have not only seen a paradigm shift in various dimensions of socio - political and ideological environment but has also added an interesting angle to the mediascape prevalent nowadays. This also includes the perspectives of alternate and new media, which mainstream media has to compete with and is a big factor for this transformation. On the other hand, freedom of speech and expression, a fundamental right, demonstrative and symbol of the most vibrant democracy in the world has adopted interesting narrative strategies. The ball is both the courts, the level to which the expression is taken advantage of in absolute sense , without any thought for the destruction it does and the gagging of it or controlling it as per one's own interest . This battle has no rules. Voices of dissent are meeting very saddening consequences as is testified by cases like Gauri Lankesh, not in consonance with the tolerance that was the hallmark of this nation. Communal colours are thrown in on very mundane of issues. Most disturbing fact is the role of media in highlighting and debating problems which, perhaps, in some cases is seen by many as accentuating them rather than dousing the flames. What implications this has on media credibility is a different matter altogether and debatable. The present study endeavours to explore the narratives of nationalism in another light, the resultant political and ideological conflict and the positive or negative media interventions using a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods.

Keywords- Nationalism, Ideological Conflicts, Media Credibility, Secularism, Freedom of Speech and Expression.

Introduction

"But one thing that she stood for, above everything else was a rational outlook, questioning caste, questioning exclusion and believing that this country is the country of the questioner." (Ajay Sukumaran, 2017) These were the words of Teesta Setalvad, the popular activist after the gruesome murder of Gauri Lankesh, editor of Gauri Lankesh Patrike, a Kannada Weekly on September 5, 2017. Protests erupted throughout the country, along with candle light vigils

with debates about the purpose of the crime. Was this the result of Lankesh's vocal stand against certain political ideologies? Was she posing a challenge to certain forces out to mould India as per their vision? These and various other queries and accusations fly right and left in an atmosphere that is surcharged with something very different from a few years or decades ago. The transformation is visible and palpable.

Nationalism is the new mantra on the block, with definitions that include hitherto unknown aspects. As Jyotika Viridi remarks, "Indeed, nationalism displaces the stranglehold of a medieval theocracy in its modern –day secular version of citizen subjecthood. In part, this is because nationalism is perceived as "natural" rather than constructed- at once tenacious, adaptable, and resilient. Yet for all its force and continually changing guise, nationalism is still a relatively unexplored, or rather sporadically explored, phenomenon." (Jyotika Viridi , 2003) The concept is so comprehensive that it would be an onerous task to unravel it. The strands are numerous.

The colonial rule and the fight for independence saw the unification of the country, with the spirit of brotherhood, irrespective of caste, creed, gender etc. Nationalism took its roots from the realization of the glory of the traditionally rich heritage of our country, in which newly emerging media and exposure to the western world also played a significant role. Media, in all its forms, was able to take forward the mission of building a resurgent India. The image that was projected on to the world was a positive and pluralist, dynamic and unified entity. Various crisis situations brought forward these qualities of the people of this nation. But over the years, the definitions of these core concepts have been interpreted anew. The flames of communalism that lit during partition have not doused yet, they flare to consume the country every now and then and with greater intensity. The ideological battles are no longer academic but assume dangerous political and casteist overtones. Interestingly, even the educational institutions have not been spared from becoming the battleground of politicians. The list is exhaustive.

The word media- nationalism is aptly used to describe the Indian scenario today. "Nationalism is a set of ideas and movements in which people imagine a unit of a nation consisting of region, religion, language and other factors, their forces of cohesion increase, and people try to enlarge their interests ." So, then Media – Nationalism is a concept for reconsidering nationalism by placing critical emphasis on the linkage between media and nationalism.

(Yutaka Oishi, 2008)

Debates on media distinctly segregate and place individuals in the rigid compartments of being nationalists and anti-nationalists. The vicious circle goes on as the ball is in the arena of both politics and media. The credibility of media is at stake as the face of media has undergone a horrendous transformation. In the name of debate, shouting and slanging matches go on. The TV anchors forgo their credo of 'objectivity' to even threaten the participants and fake news, paid news are the norm. News is infotainment first and foremost. Media trials take place on daily basis. Heroes and zeros alternate frequently. This trend has

been more evident with the emergence of new media as the mainstream media struggles to survive in the face of the popularity, accessibility and the freedom of the former. The narrative strategies have changed. In absence of any regulatory authority and any clear laws, it is the law of the jungle out there.

Freedom of Speech and Expression is the basic right granted to us by our Constitution. It is fundamental to our existence and growth. Where this right is suppressed, it is a totalitarian state, not a welfare and a democratic state. However, the freedom is never absolute and the interpretation of a democracy by many citizens becomes distorted and they abuse it for their own petty ends. Many a times, the country has been held at ransom by anti-social elements in the name of preserving the freedom of speech and expression, inciting and instigating people to vitiate the atmosphere and even leading to lynching, riots, arson and loot etc. At other times. Reasonable and genuine actions and expressions are given negative undertones to gag the voices of dissent.

JNU Case

Jawaharlal University is a prestigious institution in the Capital of India and has a long academic, ideological and intellectual history behind it. It was embroiled in a controversy wherein a debate on the issue of nationalism reached its peak. A cultural gathering was organized to discuss the issue of the hanging of Afzal Guru and Maqbool Bhat and Kashmir. ABVP alleged that anti India slogans were raised during the event, which led to charges of sedition slapped against student leaders, Kanhaiya Lal and others. There are different versions available about the entire episode. Kanhaiya was thrashed in the court premises. Teachers and politicians gave statements in support and against the student leaders. JNU was in the eye of the storm for a long time.

Zaira Wasim Case

This showed how volatile is the state of affairs in the State of Jammu and Kashmir as a young teenage actor, Zaira Wasim was caught in the vortex. Popular for her role as young Geeta Phogat, the wrestler from Haryana, in film Dangal, Zaira had a meeting with the state CM, Mehbooba Mufti Sayyed, to celebrate her success in the film, where she was praised as the role model for the youth. She was taken aback when this meeting turned out to be a cause for trolls, threats and abuses for the young girl while, though on the other hand, there was huge support for the teenager from various parts of the country. Zaira deleted her post on social media and apologised for hurting the sentiments of some people.

Padmavat Case

Indian cinema has promoted nationalism more than any other medium not only in India but has been a source of generating patriotism among the Indian diaspora in countries like Australia, UK, USA and many others. However, it has also frequently the target of pseudo nationalist forces, ready to take up cudgels at the slightest provocation. Earlier, films like PK had come under scanner. The latest case has been that of Sanjay Leela Bansali's Padmavat, a period film based on the story of Rani Padmavati of Chittor and Allaudin Khilji, the Sultan of

Delhi. Its shooting at Jaigarh Fort was disrupted and Bansali attacked, equipment was broken allegedly by Shree Rajput Karni Sena, interestingly, even before the shooting was complete. Protests, arson, to the extent of attacking school buses preceeded the screening of the film, with a few states like Haryana, Rajasthan banning the film against the directives of the Highest Court in the country. Supporters claimed, " Bansali was to be made an example of, and, a message conveyed to other film makers: history has to be shown only from a certain perspective." (Ziya Us Salam, 2017)

Films or any other work of art has interpretation intrinsic to it unless it crosses the boundaries of ethics and genuinely hurts someone's sentiments. It was a strange case of anger among a fringe group like Karni Sena without viewing the film. The groups were objecting to the non-existent intimate scene between the Queen and Khilji, the Ghoomar dance by the Queen and later, there were also protests by some other groups about the glorification of Jauhar performed by the Rajput women. The actors and the Director were threatened with dire consequences like chopping off the nose of Deepika Padukone. The huge box office success of the film validated the claims of innocence by the film maker.

Gauri Lankesh and Other Bloggers

The murder of Gauri Lankesh, editor of Gauri Lankesh Patrike and activist in Bangalore, at her doorsteps was a reminder about the changed atmosphere where any word of protest and dissent is frowned enough to silence the voice itself. It is also a prism through which the entire system can be viewed. A critic of majoritarianism, Gauri was not the first such case. In India and Bangladesh, many civil activists like Narendra Dhabolkar, M.M. Kalbhurgi and Govind Pansare and bloggers have met a gory end just for expressing themselves from public and social fora. Intolerance is vitiating the atmosphere like never before. As Pamela Philipose analyses in the context of return of awards by litterateurs,

"But what was also distinctive about that most nonviolent resistance was the prescience with which it pointed to the future. It anticipated the destruction of the culture of tolerance in the country would, as certain as night follows day also lead to the coarsening of public discourse, the creation of falsehoods dressed up as facts, the shrinking of spaces for public discussion, the intimidation of intellectuals through prohibitive law suits, and brutalities heaped on those who dissent." (Pamela Philipose, 2017)

Role of Media

It is interesting to analyse the role of media, print, electronic and digital, in interpreting the concept of nationalism in the modern day context and circumstances. The emergence of Social Media, especially has given a different dimension to the this debate on nationalism, with hundreds of expressions. Pamela Philipose remarks, A new note of muscular nationalism has crept into media discourse. Also conspicuous is the curbing of dissent and the rise of the surveillance state - developments that bode ill for the independence of the Indian media. (Murali Krishnan,2017)

Various reasons are assigned to this trend, including ownership patters and political affiliations, competitions. The result is the total loss of media credibility among the readers and audiences. Where the role of media should have been to, perhaps, shrug off certain lesser issues or giving it a cold shoulder, the tendency has been to make mountains out of molehills, taking strident and aggressive stands on non-issues, making them part of the social and political agenda. Sensationalism has become the bane of Indian media. Strident journalism replaces the soft, savvy one. In general also, one sees PILs, for example, being filed on frivolous matters, in order to get media mileage, hanging on to the popularity of celebrities. In the name of Freedom of Speech and Expression, anything goes during television debates. In certain cases, media has even been accused of doctoring footage to cater to certain dispensation. Alternate media, on its own turf, has been pretty vocal about these cases and the war is on between national and anti-national, between self-expression and regulation and the battleground is the Indian media. So is the public opinion formed.

Significance of the Study

The environment in all spheres is changing very rapidly and consequently, the mediascape is also transforming. Many events happening in recent times is giving different dimensions to the term nationalism, which is in stark contrast to the previous notions as envisaged by our Freedom fighters and Constitution makers. It is right time to analyze the situation and take remedial measures, if needed before it is too late.

Objectives of the Study

The main objectives of the study are:

1. To define the term nationalism.
2. To discuss the changes in the political. Social and psychological mind set of the system.
3. To find out the role of media in such circumstances.

Research Methodology

For the purpose of the study a sample of 100 youth, male and female, was taken in the city of Delhi through random sampling. A questionnaire was served to the respondent's. The data collected was evaluated through percentile system.

Data Analysis and Discussion

1. Most of the people (74%) think that the concept of nationalism has changed over the years, while 9% can't say anything about it. The rest (17%) don't agree with it. Passage of time, no doubt, has its impact as also the change in dispensation. It is the new generation also which is resulting in this change. The debate is whether the change is for the better or worse.

2. Interestingly, a big chunk of the young respondents (67%) feel that Freedom of Speech should be absolute. Only 29% say no to this question. 14% do have any answer to this question. The youth want full freedom to express their views, with no restriction. The Social Media is giving them this platform, which they can use or misuse.
3. 70% say yes to the question whether New Media has given hype to the issue of nationalism. 21% are confused, while 21% reply in negative. New Media, as mentioned earlier, is proving to be a catalyst to the discussion on nationalism.
4. 68% respondents opine that the issues of nationalism in TV debates are biased. 17% can't say anything about it. 15% don't feel so. As far as the credibility of media is concerned, it is at an all-time low and the TV debates not only appear biased but also ultra-aggressive, muzzling one opinion by shouting it down.
5. The difference between not in good taste (38%) and it is freedom to express opinion (37%) is very less. Another 18% do not have any opinion. 7% say it is reasonable. Padmavat has been a benchmark case and a classic example of how fringe groups can overrun the judgement of the highest court and various agencies. But the youth is divided over the protests being in bad taste and considering it a right to express public opinion. This is also an indicator of the direction in which the youth is moving.
6. 35% respondents think that violence and arson to enforce ideology is not justified at all, 29% say it is justified to some extent only. Only 9% say it is totally justified. 27% offer can't say. This is again a very negative response from the youth, even if some section of them feel that violence and arson are justified.
7. There seem to a voice rising for need to amend Constitution (67%). 20% say no and 23% can't say. It seems that among the youth, the concept of nationalism is already shaping in a new form, where terms like secularism are being forced to become redundant though amendment of the Constitution is to a large extent justified.
8. A big segment (36%) say that media is playing a negative role in the debate on nationalism though 30% also say it is positive. 34% do not offer any opinion. Respondents are divided over the issue but feels like media is playing more of a negative role as per public opinion.
9. On the murders of Bloggers like Gauri Lankesh, it is worth mentioning that 42% find it just another criminal act. Only 19% condemn it. While another 39% do not wish to speak about it. Many youngsters are not even very aware of these cases. They find it just another criminal act and do not see anything deep behind it. One needs to seriously think about it.
10. Definitely, a big majority (68%) feel that such media interventions have affected the credibility of media. A tiny section 7% say no while 25% can't say. As already discussed, media credibility has taken a dip.

Conclusion

The study on the new narratives of nationalism and media intervention has been a critical look at the some of the key and fundamental support systems of our nation which are slowly and steadily changing their hues. Word that has not been mentioned in the study is intolerance in more ways than one and which is becoming the collective psyche of the country, needing to get into a more constructive groove if the nation is not to lose its unique identity at global level. The most vulnerable group is the youth which is being exposed relentlessly to a new world through media and technology, not conducive to many moral and ethical values. Media has to take responsibility for whatever it conveys. It is a new era in the making and one has to be careful about it.

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