



The Media and Conflict: Case Study Overview Reporting on the Kashmir Conflict between India and Pakistan

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Abstract

If one believes in the power and relative importance of journalism in our modern world, then one would be inclined to believe mainstream media's coverage of a particular issue to be fair and accurate. Being fair, however, is not just about getting your facts straight. It is also about what you leave out, about the informal narrative that is painted in the coverage of an issue. This distinction is especially relevant when covering conflict outside of your own borders, especially longstanding conflicts with entrenched opposite narratives, a severe dent on emotional engagement, and virtually the highest stakes possible, as is the India-Pakistan conflict over the disputed territories of Jammu and Kashmir. What can end up happening in decades-long reporting of such conflicts is that the very coverage itself becomes, inadvertently, a battleground. This paper will, thus, focus on two related aspects of media involvement in the Kashmir conflict: 1) The international battleground of media coverage of the conflict (with India on one side pursuing a narrative of legitimacy through media control, and the international media on the other leaning too heavily into a narrative of a violent oppressor—India), and 2) what is, consequently, ignored from the coverage and, thus, missing for a fair understanding of what the situation is on the ground.

Keywords: Media and conflict; Journalism; Kashmir; India; Pakistan

Introducing the Conflict: An Interminable Struggle

India and Pakistan have fought four wars with each other since their independence in 1947, all of them were, in one way or another, over the issue of the disputed territories of Jammu and Kashmir. And, beyond the four open military conflicts, there have been countless skirmishes, airstrikes, riots, insurgencies, cross-border actions, threats and escalations

between them, especially since the last war ended in 1999 [1]. In the global historical consciousness of conflicts in the Middle East and South Asia, the Kashmir conflict between India and Pakistan has a place right alongside the Arab-Israeli Conflict as the two longest-running violent conflicts in an already conflict-ridden region. Both emerged out of the growing pains of decolonization, both have existed – explicitly – since the 1940s, both have come at an intolerable cost of civilian lives, and both have revolved around disputed histories of legality (in the case of the Kashmir conflict, legality of Kashmir's accession to India in 1947) [1,2]. Thus, a brief overview of its most important historical “timemarks” is critical.

Upon the dissolution of the British Empire and the independence of its colonies, India and Pakistan fought a war in 1947, the year of their independence, over what was then called the princely state of Kashmir and Jammu. The new state of India was set to become the home of Hindus of the former empire, while the new state of Pakistan, the home of Muslims [3]. Colonial India was ruled as a collection of small kingdoms, each with its own ruler, the Maharajas, and, in 1947, each of the former colony's princely states was given the option – fully in the hands of the Maharajas – to freely choose between India and Pakistan, with the majority-Muslim states encouraged to join Pakistan [4]. The princely state of Kashmir and Jammu, a majority-Muslim state under Maharaja Hari Singh, bordering both the new states of India and Pakistan effectively had three options: to become a part of the new Muslim-majority state of Pakistan, to accede to India, or to become Independent. As Anand [3] described it, “Maharaja Singh disliked the idea of becoming part of India, which was democratizing, or of Pakistan, which was a Muslim state [and he was not]. Thus, he thought of independence” [3]. However, soon after seeking independence the Maharaja encountered an internal tribal Islamic revolt against his rule that threatened his position and his life, and that was revealed to have been encouraged and aided by the newly-created Army of Pakistan. In response, and under counsel of Sheikh Abdullah, a Kashmiri separatist the Maharaja had appointed as administrator of his state, Singh agreed to accede to the new state of India, signing one of the critical documents India has held up as legitimating its rule over the years: the Instrument of Accession of 1947 [3].

This document, as Anand [3] explains it, “bound the State of Kashmir and Jammu and India together legally and constitutionally” – at least as much as the other states that would and continue to form a part of India today. Critics would subsequently point out that the accession of Kashmir and Jammu to India was not unconditional since the document had been signed by an absolute ruler, with no consultation of the people, under threat of an overthrow by the tribal rebellion, and under pressure by, not only Indian authorities, but also British Viceroy Lord Mountbatten, to do so, not to mention the fact that in the actual wording of the document it states that “as soon as law and order is restored...the State’s accession should be settled by a reference to the people” [3,4]. Much of the evidence, in fact, points to a concentrated effort by the British to ensure Kashmir’s eventual accession to India, despite the former being a majority Muslim state [4].

Nevertheless, the debate endures. It is a critical controversy that remains unsettled and that can be weaponized by either side of the debate, as the readings of both Anand [3] and Sherwani [4] demonstrate. It is a loose end, if you will, in the conflict, similar to the ambiguity of United Nations Resolution 181 that partitioned Mandate Palestine into a Jewish and an Arab state and that continues to be a source of conflict and debate today. Regardless of “who is right,” the point, as it relates to media coverage, is that the controversy is there, it should be acknowledged for what it is, an unresolved issue, and that any narrative that purposefully or inadvertently passes judgment to favor either side of the debate on the basis of inherent and natural righteousness is unwarranted without due reference to the fact that, legally speaking, the issue remained unresolved. What followed the signing of the Instrument of Accession in 1947 was India providing support for the defense of Kashmir against the Pakistani-backed tribal rebellion that culminated in a cease fire, dividing the territory along what is known today as the Line of Control (LoC), the current border separating the territories: with Jammu and the Kashmir Valley (including Ladakh) in India’s control, and Azad Kashmir (a western section of the region) in Pakistani hands [1]. What followed since then were three more wars between India and Pakistan over control of certain areas of the disputed territories, countless skirmishes across the LoC, and several civil uprisings against the Indian government’s history of abuses from within Kashmir, culminating in a deteriorated situation that has become a hotpot of different militant groups: Islamic terrorist groups (Lashkar-e-Taiba, for example, or Islamic State affiliates), Kashmiri separatist groups that seek independence from both India and Pakistan (the Jammu Kashmir Liberation Front or JKLF), etc., all operating frequently in the region, and with the Indian government often accusing Pakistan of backing several of them.

Media Coverage as a Battleground: A Strange Duality

What emerges after careful study of the media coverage of this conflict is a seemingly strange duality whereby coverage by Indian media is set against the international media in a structure of competing narratives: the Indian narrative, on the

one hand, emphasizing the legitimacy of the Indian government’s presence and actions in the region, and the international media on the other, perpetuating a narrative of enduring Indian occupation and the struggles of an oppressed people, often ignoring equally important angles and omitting relevant factors not related to the Indian-based oppression narrative. [Here a disclaimer is necessary: In this paper I do not mean to argue that international mainstream media is in any way not accurate, not fact-based, or outwardly politicized when it comes to the Kashmir conflict. The arguments and evidence laid out in the following pages should not be seen as an indictment on the legitimacy of international media organizations like CNN, the BBC, Al Jazeera, the New York Times or the Washington Post, among others. They have been and remain an accurate source of daily information. The argument put forth here, however, does indicate that, as it relates to this particular conflict, the international coverage and the Indian media have positioned themselves on opposite sides of what I called this “strange duality” of reporting, creating a media battleground that often lets important perspectives fall through the void created by this polarity. The arguments I give are as follows.]

Let’s look first at the Indian narrative, and the pressure campaign by the Indian government to have the conflict reported on in a specific way. With care to avoid generalizing to all media in India, it is fair to say that much of the Indian press is, as Nazakat [5] described it, “welded to the idea of ‘national interest,’ with omissions of blatant human rights abuses by Indian security forces, or the impact of Indian policies like curfews, etc....Indian media coverage of Kashmir generally tends to solely blame Pakistan for the unrest in the state” [5]. Much of the coverage omits telling the audience about the general feeling of unrest against the Indian authorities and relies heavily on simply reporting on state sources and press releases by the armed forces on the events that unfold in Kashmir. One famous case, for example, exemplifies these arguments. In April of 2010, three young men from a village in Indian Kashmir went missing. The Indian armed forces first reported that they had killed three Pakistani terrorists. After the bodies were returned, it was revealed that the young men had not been terrorists, but rather local boys abducted and killed in a faked operation against terrorists by Indian officers to gain promotions [5]. The case led to mass protests in Kashmir by outraged locals, but the Indian press took several days to finally report on the case, and when they did, they made a point to categorize the incident as a “rare exception,” downplaying its impact as “Pakistani propaganda,” a common theme in Indian media coverage [5].

Other examples stand out that are worth mentioning. In 2014, massive floods from an overflowing Jhelum river smashed through Indian-administered Kashmir’s summer capital Srinagar. It was a tragic and deadly disaster that left over 280 people dead, destroyed infrastructure and wreaked havoc on the region. The media coverage that followed was quite revealing of the narratives discussed above. The Indian air force, partially charged with the rescue and clean-up operations, began airlifting journalists so that they could take aerial photographs of the disaster area, according to a

Kashmiri journalist, “only [under the condition that they] produced a story favoring the army and the air force, and covering their relief efforts as their principal story” [6]. As the journalist mentioned in Khalid (2015)’s review of the event explained, “it seemed that [media outlets from New Delhi] were reporting for the military and not for the flood victims” [6]. The Indian government has, further, not shied away from getting directly involved and going after revenues from “undesired” news outlets. In fact, as Navlakha [7] reported in his weekly journal entries, India had previously sent decrees to all public agencies to stop issuing advertisements for five Kashmiri newspapers because they had an “anti-nationalist” agenda [7].

In 2019, the region witnessed a major development in the conflict. India revoked the “special status” designated for the states of Jammu and Kashmir, granted under article 370 of the Indian constitution, and began administering the two states centrally from New Delhi, a move that was seen by Pakistan and the international community as one of India’s most direct affronts to the fragile peace yet [8]. Protests broke out in Kashmir, where demonstrators clashed with the police and many incidents of violence were recorded. India received heavy criticism in the mainstream international media, where outlets like the BBC covered the issue around, not only India’s original affront (revoking article 370), but also the brutality of its security forces against the protesters [8]. To demonstrate the “strange duality” described earlier, this paper highlights the commentary by one of India’s top news anchors, Arnab Goswami of Republic TV, who, after seeing the BBC criticism, went on air and accused their coverage of the protests as “fake news, and a lie by a lying, government-owned British channel” [8]. Evident here is the rift between the Indian press, and the international press.

It is time now to look at the coverage by the foreign media and analyze their reporting. When one looks at the mainstream global media’s coverage of the Kashmir conflict, what stands out is not the blatant demagoguery present in some Indian outlets, as we saw in the previous paragraphs, nor is it the factual inaccuracy classically associated with the term “fake news.” It is an informal narrative – most evident in what angles they choose to cover and not cover – that perpetuates a perception of an illegitimate Indian occupation (which as we saw earlier, legally, it is not exactly clear whether or not it is indeed illegal, reference page 4) overseeing a deteriorating situation that has never been worse, and in doing so contributing to the obscuring of key characteristics of the conflict that are equally deserving of media attention as the activities of the Indian security forces.

As Barkha Dutt [2], an award-winning Indian journalist who is often critical of India’s ruling BJP party of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, explained in a Washington Post column where she treated this very issue, foreign media has relied on “sweeping generalizations and a complete absence of historicity and context” in a lot of their reporting on Kashmir. She argued that western media outlets often, especially in light of the 2019 revocation of article 307, paint the picture that the situation has never been worse. She pointed to

specific examples of outlets like Business Insider covering the communications blackout imposed by India in Kashmir as if it was something new, where in reality, the same had happened several times before after infamous militants had been killed in 2016 [2,9]. The argument here is that foreign media focus their reporting to tell the story of a brutal occupation by Indian security forces that – though it may be the case and an important part of the story – are missing key elements. For example, during the August riots, there were many media reports that India was targeting mere teenagers, arresting and torturing them [10]. Where foreign media failed, however, is in reporting fully that it had been Pakistan-backed Lashkar-e-Taiba militants who had been using many of those teenagers as human shields. [Disclaimer: Dutt is not defending the actions of the Indian government. As a journalist that has covered Kashmir for 25 years, she is fully aware of the impact of India’s human rights abuses in the region. What she argues, however, is, as she puts it, “Kashmir is a complex story with many dimensions and paradoxical realities.” In the false ‘living hell vs. happy place’ narratives, the truth is a fatal casualty [2]. In fact, as prime evidence of her legitimacy as a journalist is the fact that she is accused of being an anti-government leftist when attacking Modi, and of being a pro-government fascist when she criticizes media coverage of Kashmir]. What she argues is for an equanimous coverage of the different factors that make the conflict so complex: the Indian occupation and repression, as well as the actions of Islamic militants and terror groups that operate out of Pakistani-controlled Kashmir.

Other examples from different sources support this argument. If we go back to the Jhelum river floods from 2014, for example, and we look at the coverage by, say the Washington Post or Al Jazeera, we can see that their framing of the story is still too focused on the actions of the Indian government: a Washington Post piece, for example, highlighted the slow rescue efforts by Indian authorities and titled the piece “Anger Rises in India’s Kashmir” [6]. The Al Jazeera story, for example, focused not on the floods, but on India once again, with the headline “India turns Kashmir flood into PR stunt,” not really paying much attention to the fact that Indian authorities had evacuated hundreds trapped by the floods [6]. A study conducted in 2004 by a doctoral student at the University of South Florida that analyzed the different frames the conflict had been given by a group of mainstream outlets (The New York Times, The Washington Post, and the Los Angeles Times) found that the dominant frame used to describe the Indians in stories relating to Kashmir since 1989 had been “Military establishment,” “violent repressor,” and “nuclear risk” [11].

What Falls Through the Cracks

What this paper has explained is, not that one side or the other is right, but rather that through the faults of reporting on each side of the duality, a void has been created that has swallowed up much of the truly important coverage that would help deliver a clear and fair picture of the situation on the ground. Though nationalist propaganda on behalf of the Indian government (covered in pages 5, 6 and 7) is, in practical

terms, indefensible in comparison to the narrative omissions of the foreign media explained above (pages 7, 8 and 9), the latter is nevertheless a fault that must be called out in order to seek improvement.

Going back once again to the 2014 flooding example, while the Indian press focused on the actions of the Indian military, and the foreign press was anchored in a political perspective of the Indian government's response to the disaster, what got lost in the shuffle was what the local Kashmiri media had spent their time reporting: the efforts of the local population and how they saved many lives [6]. As Khalid [6] explained, "they praised young people for forming self-help groups and for putting their lives in danger, evacuating people trapped in flood waters... for setting up relief camps and wading through dangerous waters looking for survivors" [6]. These small, apolitical stories of unimportant people are the ones missing from the conversation about Kashmir in general, and that is what this "strange duality" has created, a vacuum of important perspectives that, either because they don't reflect India in a good, nationalistic light, or because they are apolitical and unrelated to India's involvement at all, never receive the attention they deserve.

In a related argument, and in keeping with what we know about the media industry in general, this paper also points out that part of the issue is the preference for stories about violence/conflict/crime by an audience that has a clear affinity for "negative" or "sensational" stories [12]. This affects news media's coverage of the Kashmir issue just as much as it affects local news about crime in Washington D.C. As Zia and Syedah [13] explained it, "coverage of the Kashmir issue is systematically negatively framed and invariably centered on violence, violent events, and, and thus fails to highlight peaceful alternatives" [13]. As with the story of the floods, the inspiring efforts of Kashmiri locals did not make much noise in foreign coverage. Too much of their attention went to the attention-grabbing politicized issues. This has a deeper, more dangerous, consequence than mere underrepresentation, argue Zia and Syedah [13]: it also can contribute to the endurance of the conflict as peace journalism is not emphasized because it does not attract commercial interest.

Conclusion

Fairness is not just a matter of factual accuracy. What we write about is as important as what we ignore. We feel the need to re-iterate here that this paper does not try to argue

that nationalistic media is on the same level of journalistic malpractice as omitting certain narratives. However, both represent a kind of fault evidenced in the media coverage of the Kashmir conflict by each side of the "strange duality" between the Indian press and the mainstream, foreign press. Perhaps more emphasis should be given to the latter, though their "crime" was the lesser, given that, if we believe in active journalism's role in our world, we are likely to rely on such global outlets as sources of information, knowledge and empathy. They should be held to a higher standard. Thus this paper emphasized their perceived shortcomings as they relate to Kashmir.

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