Framing the News: A Study of Print Media Coverage of the Kashmir Conflict

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Abstract

The Kashmir conflict began before India gained freedom from the British. The conflict is often categorised as a territorial dispute between India and Pakistan and in the past has also reached nuclear flashpoint. Since the 1990s, the advent of militancy in the region resulted in the loss of thousands of lives and displacement of lakhs of Kashmiri citizens. A myriad of religious, ethnic and political causes have also emerged around this intractable conflict. While reporting on the conflict, the media has for many years been a target of both militants and security forces. The pressure to toe the line while reporting has posed immense challenge to the media. This exploratory study examines how print journalists have framed the conflict. This study investigated factors that shape the coverage of events.In-depth interviews of correspondents and editors attempt to capture individual agency of those who report from the conflict zone. The study of text, images and layout design in the newspapers helped in identifying news frames that build certain narratives. News content of one year (2017) was analysed in three newspapers – *Times of India* (English), *Kashmir Times* (English) and *Amar Ujjala* (Hindi). The study findings help identifying linkages between framing news and perception about the conflict.

Keywords: Censorship; Conflict zone; Framing; Media's role in conflict; News frames; Peace Journalism; Reporting challenges in conflict.

1. Introduction

In recent decades, media scholars have researched the connection between, and impact of, media coverage on conflicts. Scholars have examined how media's framing of a particular conflict influences its progress and transforms its outcome. Further, framing of news has been studied

to explore how it builds perceptions about a conflict – how and why the conflict is taking place and who are the 'villains' and 'heroes'. Post-second World War, there has been a focus on locating media's role as a catalyst and influencer in self-determination movements and armed struggle for autonomy in various parts of the world. Researchers have been studying the roots of conflict in Africa, Asia, Middle East and Europe and determining the influence of media, both as transmitters of change and as catalyst of violence.

Most research on media's role cites the example of the 1994 genocide in Rwanda. Within 100 days, BBC claims,about 800,000 people (Tutsis who were a minority) were slaughtered in Rwanda by the majority ethnic Hutus (BBC.com, 2019). During the Rwanda massacre, the local media Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines, also called 'Radio Machette'– identified Tutsi hiding places that Hutu militia could target. Several Rwandan newspapers also incited ethnic hatred in their coverage. Romeo Dallaire, commander of the United Nations Assistance Mission for Rwanda (UNAMIR), wrote in the book *The Media and the Rwanda Genocide* that while the local media incited the mass killings, the international media mostly misunderstood the violence and treated it as tribal clashes(Thompson, 2007).Major news agencies did not invest enough resources to pursue the truth in Rwanda. The conflict was not presented with context or perspective.

Since the mid-1990s, especially after the war in Bosnia (1992-95), the debate about media coverage influencing the perception and even impact of conflict has expanded. There have been attempts in different countries, especially those experiencing armed conflict, to investigate how media can include the idea and perspective of conflict transformation in its coverage. The coverage of the conflict in Kosovo (1998-99) is often cited to illustrate this point. Many reporters covering the conflict were accused of blindly following NATO's versions without any verification (Höijer, Nohrstedt, Ottosen, 2002) . The Kosovo conflict involved the Serbs, the Kosovo Albanians, and the NATO. This NATO intervention aimed to stop the Serbian genocide against the Albanian population in Kosovo. Many in the western media appeared to compare Serbian leader Milosevic to Hitler. Milosevic was portrayed in the media as a war criminal, perpetrator of ethnic cleansing that resulted in mass deportation of populations. The Albanian militia, Kosovo Liberation Army, was portrayed as a group of 'freedom fighters'. The media's power in interpreting events and episodes has been well recognised after this conflict.

Examination of how media frames conflict offers a window to the fundamental role media plays in structuring the social world for us by interpreting major events and episodes. News frames appear to put pictures in our heads (Speer, 2017). Media, the only information disseminator in extraordinary times like war and conflict, has the capacity to construct reality and shape attitudes. Based on their interpretation, news consumers may choose to align with some of the conflict actors, sympathise with others. They may even misunderstand or reject the key principles shaping the conflict. Perceptions about reality are constructed by the media that chooses to define and explain conflict in a particular frame.

1.1 Armed Conflict inIndia and the Media

Since its independence from the colonial rule of the British, India has witnessed a series of armed conflicts related to the issues of autonomy, secession, ethnic and religious identity and border disputes. These complex conflicts have also become the sources of instability and hindered development in several states.

The Ministry of Home Affairs in India categorises violent conflict in the country as follows(Ministry of Home Affairs, 2018)

a)   Terrorism in the hinterland of the country

b)   Left wing extremism in certain areas

c)   Security situation in Jammu &Kashmir

d)   Insurgency in the northeastern states

Media's approach in covering the complexity of the conflicts and diverse aspirations of those impacted by it has been largely confined to reporting the events and episodes with limited context. In the seven Northeastern states, demands for independence and autonomy have been made in the past by close to 149 active and inactive insurgent groups. Almost two-thirds of these groups have been from Assam and Manipur (The Asia Foundation, 2017). In his 2011 study, *Map the marginal: Hidden wars and hidden media in northeast India* for Reuters Institute and University of Oxford, senior broadcast journalist Arijit Sen states that the "engagement of the mainstream Indian private media—both print and broadcast—with the Northeast remains marginal" (Sen, 2011, p.5). The media rarely goes beyond the claims made by government sources.The Naxal and Maoist led violence in close to eight states finds its roots in the battle for natural

resources in these states (Prasad, 2017). In the last two decades, this conflict, arising out of forced and misplaced agenda of development has resulted in suffering of the thousands of tribals. Although fatalities caused due to Maoist attacks and counter attacks have been reduced, close to eight states continue to report incidents of aggression. Many of the narratives from the conflict-stressed regions appear to focus on government stance and actions in tackling the situation. The events and episodes are mostly viewed from a security prism.

The Kashmir conflict has emerged as anongoing threat to South Asia's peace and to global security. Scholars of Indian media, especially of the national and mainstream press (that includes private news channels and government run Doordarshan)point towards the narrow prism through which the conflict is communicated to news consumers. As early as 2006, academic Navnita Chadha Behera in her book *Demystifying Kashmir* highlighted the tendency to neglect the complexities of the Kashmir conflict. She emphasises the need to include in the narrative the voice of diverse minorities in the region, like the Gujjars, Bakkarwals, Kashmiri Pandits, Dogras, and Ladakhi Buddhists. She argued that any presentation of the conflict needs to admit the "deeply plural character of Jammu andKashmir's society on both sides of the line of control" (Behera, 2006, p.2). Equally essential is the acknowledgement that there is no one goal to peace in Kashmir as demands of people range from complete autonomy from India,a separate special status within India and separation from India and Pakistan.

News media reportage of conflict zones in India in recent years in most of the affected states focus on clashes and encounters with scant attention to historicity or specifics of an event. Kashmir appears as a 'war zone', with limited perspective on the aspirations of a variety of communities and groups who live in the region. Mainstream media's policy does not appear to address issues of safety and security or training journalists for conflict reporting. Regular reports on Kashmir appear to perpetuate stereotypes and prejudices and reduce opportunities of examining the conflict with multiple perspectives and accommodating ideas of peace and resolution.

2. Study Design

This exploratory study attempted to study the professional practices of journalists working in a conflict zone and how they frame the Kashmir conflict. The study involved in-depth interviews with eight journalists, including three editors of prominent newspapers.These interviews provided

a deeper understanding of the challenges journalist face in conflict zones – how they work under threats, censorship and financial constraints. The study also examined the coverage of various new items published in the year 2017 in three newspapers. The study investigated factors that influence coverage of news, the critical role editorial policy plays and the business interests that govern certain frames.

The primary questions investigated in the study were:

1.   What kind of news frames are used and how are conflict issues amplified or diffused through such frames?

2.   What are the factors that determine the media policy and the resultant conflict coverage in Kashmir?

The study considered the following premises:

> News media reportage of conflict zones in recent years in Kashmir has largely been decontextualized, episodic and securitized affecting neutrality.

3.   Conflict reporting is dangerous and Indian media is not free to report the complexities of the conflict.

4.   Media organisationsoffer limited training and safety nets for journalists in conflict zone.

In-depth interviews were conducted with following journalists:

•   From newspaper Amar Ujjala –Chief Editor based in NOIDA and Srinagar correspondentof the newspaper

•   From newspaper Times of India – Chief editor Times Internet and editor of the newspaperbased in New Delhi and Srinagar correspondent of the newspaper

•   From Kashmir Times – Executive Editor based in Srinagar

Interviewing journalists of the same paper gave insights into the newsroom functioning and their editorial policy. It also provided a glimpse of what kind of stories receive greater attention or are better presented. The questionnaire also evinced answers on the challenges on working in a violence prone area.

Other journalists

- Senior woman journalist who earlier reported for Times of India and is now based in Delhi working for a news agency.

- Experienced independent journalist who lived in Kashmir and has reported for several media organisations on Kashmir conflict since the 1990s

- FormerBBC correspondent based in Srinagar who continues to report for a South-based daily

Interviews with such experienced journalists pointed towards the challenges of reporting a prolonged conflict with all its complexities.

Two journalists were interviewed in person. Other journalists were interviewed online and later their interviews were transcribed. Two separate questionnaires were prepared for editors and reporters. However, there were some common questions put to the interviewees.

Sample questions posed to interviewees:

- What kind of training do your correspondents/photographers undergo before they start reporting on Kashmir?

- What is your editorial approach to the conflict and what kind of brief you give to the correspondent in the field?

- What challenges do you face while in the field and otherwise?

- Do you see a pattern in the kind of stories selected and presented on Kashmir?

Reports of three newspapers – one Hindi (Amar Ujjala) and two English (Times of India and Kashmir Times – in the year 2017 were studied for this research. While both Times of India and Amar Ujjala are considered national newspapers, Kashmir Times is considered more of a regional with high circulation in the state. The study was useful to discern patterns that dominate the coverage of Kashmir conflict.It also interrogated the factors that facilitated or constrained the reportage of key issues in Kashmir.

Five news events were chosen to study the patterns. Analysing news content of three newspapers (mostly front page was studied along with

edit and regional pages) helped to determine what were their prima-ry common focusses and what were the marked differences. Journalists interviewed considered these five events as important in describing both the intensity and growth of the conflict post 2016 and the sense of alien-ation citizens of Kashmir felt towards the Indian states. This research ex-plored how media coverage has influenced the understanding of conflict and stirred discourse in a particular direction.

The 2017 events closely studied were:

1. **Kashmiri resident used as human shield.** In month of April, Resident of Kashmir, pashmina shawl seller and part time labourer Farooq Ahmad Dar, used as a human shield by security forces to ward off stone pelters in Beerwah area of Budgam in central Kashmir during by-elections. He was tied to an army jeep and paraded through several villages to pre-vent protesters from attacking the security forces.

2. **Srinagar by poll in April sees record low turnout – 7% – in last 30 years.** Eight people were killed and close to 200 cases of violence reported during the election. No votes were cast in 27/38 booths. People boycotting the polls indicated the political breakdown of BJP-PDP alliance that began in 2014.

3. **Hizbul Mujahideen commander Zakir Rashid Bhat or Zakir Musa releases audio-videos.** These videos challenge separatists in Kashmir and aligns with Al-Qaeda. Hizbul Mujahideen commander Zakir Musa re-leased in May 2017 an audio tape in threatening to decapitate and hang separatist leaders in Lal Chowk (Srinagar) if they interfered with what he called as the 'struggle of Islam'. This message challenged the separat-ists claims for a political solution to Kashmir crisis. Later more videos about his strategy were also released.

4. **Militants attack bus of pilgrims returning from Amarnath Shrine in the month of July.** At least seven persons were killed and 16 injured. Attackwas considered worse since 2000.

5. **Since January 2017 Operation All Out launched to rid Kashmir of ter-rorism:** Series of offensives launched by security forces to end militancy in 2017. Security forces claimed170 militants were gunned down under the operations. The crackdowns were a joint exercise of Indian army, CRPF, J&K police, Border Security Force and Intelligence Bureau.

3.Review of Literature

Existing literature offers conceptual debates around news frames and coverage of conflict, offering insight into the trends and patterns of how research in this area has progressed. Sociological theorist Erving Goffman (1974) was one of the earliest scholars to have presented a general theory of framing. Hesaw the role of framing in organising and structuringinformation. The exercise of framing allows the media to interpret – label, perceive, identify – events and occurrences. This process eventually gives meaning to certain events. For Goffman, framing provided the plan (schemata), the model to interpret events in certain way. A few years later, Gitlin (1980) explained frames as devices used by journalists to organise massive information for their own benefit and that of the audience. However, it was American media scholar Robert Entman (1993) who identified 'selection and salience'as key components of framing. Framing appeared to be a process of focussing on some aspects of reality while excluding some others. Thus, according to Entman, the objective of framing appears to be "selecting and highlighting some facets of events or issues and making connections among them so as to promote a particular interpretation, evaluation, and/or solution" (Entman, 1993, p.417).

Frames can be used to define problems, identify forces that create the problem, evaluate the effects of the problem, and propose a treatment or solution to the problem. Frames, Entmanargued, determine what people understand and remember of a problem. Frames appear to engage with the observations about a certain event and present a narrative built around an interpretation of that event. They help, as Gitlin explained (1980, p.7) "organise a world" for both the journalist and the news consumer. Finally, as Reese (2001)argued, framing is a combination of "interests, communicators, sources, and culture" that attempt to provide a coherent picture of reality. This goal is achieved by verbal and visual resources (Reese, 2001, p. 11).

Thussuand Freedman (2003), through a series of essays in *War and the Media: Reporting Conflict 24X7*, demonstrated how conflict is framed and represented in the media. They examined how the watchdog role of media is being challenged since 2000 during war and conflict coverage. They highlighted how the process of framing even forced journalists to appear more like patriots publishing the government narrative and ignoring alternatives and eventually narrowing the discourse around conflict. Their research linked to whatAmerican journalist Walter Lippman's work (1922) *Public Opinion*offered as criticalinsights into the processes and

factors that shape news and its presentation. Almost a century ago, Lippman expressed concern about reporters working more through emotion and hopes of the media organisations they are attached to rather than the facts present in the field. Citizens understood big and small events through the prisms presented by journalists and accordingly formed opinion on issues. He believed that the audience – readers and now viewers – needed a journalist who was more prepared in presenting news.

Researchers have also attempted to demonstrate how media frames can impact the understanding of issues for readers/viewers. In a 1987 book (Iyengar and Kinder)it was demonstrated how viewers evaluated American president's performance based on the standards set by the TV news. Later, in another study Iyengar (1991) also pointed how certain way of presentation in news could emphasise attribution of responsibility about the incident. Iyengar specified that news forms could be either episodic or thematic, the former being the most used communication. Iyengar was able to demonstrate how the episodic formats appear to influence the viewers by making them less likely to hold public officials accountable for existing problems. In fact, the viewers are more likely to hold the victims of the problem as the key cause of the problem

Quality of reportage is critical in helping citizens process a reality that they do not see and often do not understand. A reporter's perception of the facts is crucial in presenting a reality for it can influence perceptions about how a conflict can be resolved. Chindu, Sreedharan (2009) examined in his PhD thesis how media coverage of Kashmir in Pakistan and India was counterproductive to peace efforts. He asserted that Indian and Pakistani coverage of the Kashmir insurgency played a role in prolonging the conflict. His research examines how press on both sides created a non-conducive environment for peace attempts. He recommended the need for conflict journalism training for media personnel covering Kashmir.

A two-year field survey by Wani, Ayaz Ahmad (2018) in Kashmir Valley focussed on issues that have not been resolved since the outbreak of insurgency in the 1990s. Using interviews of local youths, the survey highlighted the gulf between local Kashmiris and the Indian government and the radicalisation of youth in the recent decades.Wani's study emphasised again the role of mediaon presenting specific narratives of the conflict, focussed on rhetorics, and demonising some groups or communities.

4. How frames are constructed, and news interpreted

The process of framing appears sometimes as an unconscious and sometimes as a deliberate exercise journalists undertake to make a wide audience comprehend an issue and help them form an interpretation of it. This process of frame building results in emergence of a few dominant narratives.Recurrent news on the same theme, like conflict in a particular area, is perceived through the same narrative again and again. Both the personal biases and editorial policy of a media organisation can play a part in constructing the news frames.

In a journal article (1991) 'Framing US coverage of international news: Contrasts in narratives of the KAL and Iran Air incidents', Entman elaborated how frames are constructed. According to Entman, frames can be found in the keywords, metaphors, symbols, visual images, and concepts presented in a story. These keywords, metaphors and visual images are repeated and reinforced with consistency across stories. This process, Entman emphasises, makes some thoughts and ideas more important and significant thanothers in the news story.

Entman demonstrated the key concerns of framing when he compared the media narratives of two news events of 1983 and 1988 that were covered in the Time, Newsweek and CBS Evening News. On 1 September 1983, a Soviet (Russian) fighter plane shot down a Korean Airliner killing 269 passengers and crew. On 3 July 1988, a US navy ship shot down an Iran Air flight killing 290 passengers and crew. Entman, examined the textual choices, images and story display formats the Time, Newsweek and CBS Evening News used while covering the news event initially and later while presenting further analysis about the incidents. The shooting down of the Korean airliner was portrayed as far more important than the Iran Air event by all three. Both were tragedies, but Entman argues, the Korean incident was "configured" as a bigger one.

Comparison of two Newsweek covers (Left 12 September 1983 issue) and (Right 18 July 1988) present how the South Korean airline and Iran Air incidents were projected. The headline «Murder in the Air» portrayed the KAL incident as an aggressive action while the headline «Why It Happened» appeared to frame the Iran Air incident as a terrible error.

Source: https://www.newsweek.com/archive, Fair use, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?curid=51756014

Entman even identified words and images used to indicate who is responsible for the incident. The words could be adjectives placed in the

main story, or in a headline, in sub-heads or as pop-ups. Newsweek's first cover for the KAL incident had a bold headline 'Murder in the Air" while Time in the same week put 'Shooting to kill – The Soviets Destroy and Airliner' as a headline on its cover. The lead stories in both the magazines carried headlines that appeared to point a finger at the Soviet government for destroying a passenger aircraft. In contrast, the Iranian airliner story carried a more restrained headline on the Newsweek cover – 'Why it Happened' – while the Time cover only mentioned the event on its flap with the headline 'What went wrong in the Gulf'. Entman observed that the Iranian airliner story headlines appeared passive and abstract, more concerned with what went wrong than attributing agency, i.e., who did it.

Framing appears to have a design and sometimes may also appear to have a purpose. Coverage of conflicts like the Bosnia-Kosovo wars and Syrian conflict explain how crucial the process of framing is in presenting a reality of major significance. Through various frames, journalists essentially attempt to build a narrative. The Syrian conflict ,which started in 2011, left more than 380,000 people dead, devastated cities and even entangled other countries (BBC.com, 2021). In 2011, inspired by the Arab Spring protests, Syrians opposed the government led by Bashar- al - Assad. The country soon descended into a civil war. Opposition supporters armed themselves initially for defence and later to push the government security forces from some areas. Assad declared the rebels as 'foreign-backed' terrorists. As protests grew, the Syrian government attempted to crush the opposition with brutal force.

The rebels included Al-Qaeda affiliated groups who claimed to establish a more Islamic state of Syria. A2013 study (Alitavoli , 2019) compared opinion pieces of two news portals – CNN.com and Antiwar.com – in the year 2013, close to the American intervention and withdrawal from Syrian conflict. After examining 89 articles, the study emphasised that while CNN presented Assad as a villain using chemical weapons against his own people, it also challenged then American President Barack Obama for not taking adequate action in Syria. Antiwar on the other hand appeared to give focus to the tragedy and futility of such wars. Their stories examined who were the key players who would benefit from a military intervention in Syria and how the Iraq war was a compelling example of failure of military intervention by American forces.

5. Kashmir Media: Challenges in Reporting and Comprehending Conflict

Kashmir has a history of robust print journalism. A report on the Kashmir media*Kashmir's Media in Peril: A Situation Report* claimedexistence of 370 publications listed with the state government's Department of Information and Communications (Murthy, 2017). The report also mentioned that journalists in Kashmir work without protective gear, insurance, or safety training. It also pointed to the increased vulnerability of photojournalists and women journalists in the conflict zone. Also, the government for many years appears to control their editorial content by withholding advertisements, that is the main source of revenue for most.

Post 1990s, there has been a surge in the development of local press, that has to a great extent tried to counter the narratives offered by most of the national media (Showkat, 2017). Since the abrogation of Article 370 and striking down Article 35A in 2019, pressure on media has increased and restrictions on reporting multiplied. Kashmir Times editor Anuradha Bhasin described in an article the attacks on journalists by the government agencies: police summons, raids on homes, pressure to reveal the source of information given, and arrests based on alleged terror charges. Such actions, she wrote, have created "a chilling silence"(Bhasin,2021,para 12) in the region.According to a 2018 report by Reporters Without Borders, India has slipped to 138 from 136 in thePress Freedom Index among a pool of 180 nations. Conflict-ridden countries like Afghanistan, Palestine and Myanmar fared better. Reporters Without Borders is an independent NGO that has made efforts to defence right to information for close to three decades. In 2020, it ranked India at 142 on the press freedom index. It pointed to the worrying situation in Kashmir where reporters were harassed by local police and paramilitary forces. The string of regulations in Kashmir have forced some media outlets to shut down (Reporters Without Borders, 2021)

In 2017, a reader of Economic and Political Weekly (a weekly peer-reviewed academic journal) made some observations about the level of discourse created by media around Kashmir. In the Letters section of EPW, Ader Rashid Shah wrote on 'Perceptions on Kashmir' (EPW.org, 2017). He lamented that news is presented in bits and pieces and no effort is made to help the reader understand the " actual rage and alienation on the ground'' that Kashmiris feel. He observed that the national media, mostly based outside the state, adopted a partisan nationalism highlighting selective incidents that suit TRP requirements. Shah identified a pattern in the way news was presented, especially by news channels. The channels provoked their speakers from Kashmir and later tried to prove their arguments wrong. In his critique, Shah charged the media of encour-

aging violent and sensational incidents. This, he argued, led the masses to foster a negative and almost villainous perception of Kashmiris.

5.1 Key findings

Almost all journalists interviewed for the study shared experiences of intimidation, harassment, and threats.

a)Extremely challenging to report from the conflict zone both for reporters and media organisations: Initially the pressure appeared from militants and security forces, but in recent decade pressure comes largely from government agencies. A few (Times of India and AmarUjjala correspondents) also claimed harassment and intimidation from the crowds/citizens who perceived most mainstream media as anti-Kashmir. Recent gags, post 2019, force us to conclude that in condition where journalists are not allowed to even access sites of action, the dependence on reporting only the version of one source, i.e., government is near total. Pressure is manifest as questioning where the correspondent got the story from, calling the journalist to the police station for interrogation, to arresting the journalist on alleged anti-national activities.Oneeditor (Kashmir Times)mentioned closure of some editions in Kashmir due to withdrawal of advertisements by the government. Such circumstances force journalists to present most reports demonstrating how the Indian agencies are combatting terrorism in the state.By working with several restrictions and facing a constant sense of fear, the media is restricted in communicating the complete picture of the conflict. It has also resulted in making diverse voices from Kashmir invisible. A 2019 report (Seshu&Murthy) expressesconcern about the government's control of communication processes labelled it as undemocratic and harmful.

b).Reportage largely episodic, with nationalisticnarrative as dominant frame: Examination of mostly front pages and some regional and edit pages of the three newspapers suggest national narrative appeared paramount in the coverage of majority of newspapers (Amar Ujjala and Times of India) studied. Sources quoted in most stories were from the government (including the police and para-millitary). Reports rarely explored background of the crisis or the implications of a particular episode. Reports appeared concerned with documenting deaths, actions of stone pelters and government's efforts to control the militancy.Journalists also pointed to the problem of under-reporting and negligence of several issues of the Kashmir conflict. Srinagar correspondent of Amar Ujjalastated that a large part of the population in Kashmir has not been aligned with separat-

ists. But most national media does not present this fact clearly (Amarinder S. Bali, 11 August 2020). Another senior journalist started reporting on Kashmir extensively close to the early 1990s with the advent of militancy. He was critical of the journalists reporting on the conflict as they have taken a more "black and white" approach to events (D. Devadas, personal communication, 8 March 2019).

c).Editorial policy is critical in shaping frames:Amar Ujjalachief editorstated that the paper saw its role as that of a nationalist. They consider Kashmir as a land of people victimised by terrorism that is sponsored by Pakistan (IndushekharPanchauli, personal communication,8September2018). In the Jammu edition studied for the research, it was observed that text, images used in most stories presented a situation of constant war in Kashmir. Actions of security forces were amplified, and limited coverage was given to challenges of Kashmir citizens living through various restrictions including information blackouts. The front page gave prominent coverage to visit of army chief, often quoting him as saying that they were ready for war on Kashmir with Pakistan. Most of Times of India stories from Kashmir recorded the events and incidents but offered no contextualisation or perspective. Such episodic coverage continued to present Kashmir only as a region of militancy.However, the local newspaper (Kashmir Times) studied for the research devoted more space to both reporting beyond the headlines and offering in its edit pages and in-depth reports the challenges of a complex conflict. It also documented voices of diverse groups like the separatists or politicians challenging the decisions of the central government.In particular, the approach of the newspaper in covering both the human shield story of April 2017 and the Musa video story of May 2017 offeredanalysis on the implications of such incidents. The executive editor of this paper claimed that efforts are made to avoid presenting stories only based on government handouts (Anuradha Bhasin, personal communication, 2021).

d).**Mainstream media overlooks critical issues while presenting Kashmir conflict in nationalist frame**: Some issues ignored by mainstream media are:

Corruption among security forces is rarely highlighted: Journalists interviewed claimed such stories are not entertained for they may impact the morale of security forces.

Disenchantment and anger of local youth that is leading protests in the region now.

Mismanagement of the Kashmir crisis by central leadership:While government decisions are reported, impact of decisions are not allowed to be reported extensively.

Tragedy and loss of people staying in the border zones that heavily militarised.

Deaths and injuries due to landmines put by the army to counter Pak infiltrations.

Rise in civilian deaths in recent years.

5.2 Conclusion

This study explored how journalists report on the Kashmir conflict and how they frame the conflict. Most journalists interviewed agreed that that media has a constructive role to play in conflict reportage. But many admitted the inability to bring the complexity of the conflict to the fore. Restraints from the government – blocking advertisements, intimidating, and harassing journalists, censoring news of certain events, information blackout – prevented a free discourse on the conflict.

Studying the way journalists pick and choose certain aspects of conflict indicates that the media appears to ignore the human cost of violence in terms of education and development. Kashmir conflict is projected mostly as a law-and-order problem where stakeholders are primarily the government agencies and militants. There is seldom focus on the lives of majority of people, belonging to diverse groups and communities. With its preoccupation with presenting the Kashmir story as a law-and-order narrative or anti-Pakistan narrative,security forces as protectors of Indian territory the representation tends to project majority Kashmiri citizens as villains.

The dominance of certain frames makes the voices of people unheard and limit the capacity of media to discuss freely the complex parts of the conflict. A sustained narrative in the media - the tendency to often quote largely how the security forces are tackling militancy, how the government in Delhi is passing orders to the war zone – demonstrate how policies are functioning in Kashmir. There are few narratives, especially in mainstream media, of how people are reacting to the government policies or challenging it.

Despite the challenges, journalists recognized the potential of their work in recording the development and transformation of the Kashmir conflict. However, this research offers certain insights on the reportage from the conflict zone.

a) Media is more focussed on highlighting the violence and conflict, more engaged in communicating security operations against militants and not focussed on the cost of prolonged conflict on people. There is limited focus on the life of the citizens. Conflict framing indicates bias towards citizens of Kashmir.

b) Media organizations prefer to present the conflict in nationalist frame, reporting largely on how government is tackling militancy. They appear to focus on certain episodes and events instead of covering the conflict in a thematic way.

c) Constant threats and financial constraints prevent media to gather and present accurate information around the conflict. News consumers do not get the complete or real picture of the conflict and appear to have narrow understanding of the conflict.

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