

The Award Wapsi controversy: Rise of Intolerance during 2015 Bihar elections

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ABSTRACT

Media is considered to be the fourth estate of democracy; they play an integral part in shaping public opinion. India is the land of festivals and elections and we say this because every year more than one of the 29 states are on election mode. But the last 18 months has witnessed heightened interest among Indians in every election and this can be attributed to the massive victory of Narendra Modi led NDA in May 2014. This trend did not stop here as BJP won every state election after that in the months that followed. After commanding an indispensable win, the NDA government faced a strong hurdle from the united opposition. The watershed moment for the political parties was the 2015 Bihar elections. The opposition created an anti-NDA alliance to overcome the NDA. Experts say that the anti-NDA alliance used the media effectively as a communication tool to inject the messages of intolerance in the society and dent the chances of the NDA. Newspaper coverage can create a positive or negative impact on the political image. Media focused on political and social issues that created an atmosphere of intolerance debate nationwide, intellectual class raised the issue and confronted the government by returning their awards famously known as “Award Wapsi”. This research intends to find out how the entire Award Wapsi controversy had an impact on the Bihar state elections. The research further tries to probe if concepts like Agenda Setting and Manufacturing Consent by and through the media helped in this endeavor.

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Introduction

India is a democratic country where the right to freedom and equality allows every citizen to voice his/her opinion without the fear of state. The Award Wapsi episode can be termed as the most controversial, attention seeking event that took place in 2015. The timing and intention of this campaign seems mischievous. The entire debate of intolerance happened right before the Bihar elections. It all started when a renowned writer, M M Kalburgi was murdered in Karnataka. The event set off a rage of protest among the authors and writers. Writers like Nayantara Sahgal and Uday Prakash instigated the issue leading other writers from different parts of the country to come forward to return their awards that they had received during the Congress tenure. The Sahitya Akademi awardees returned their awards in protest against what they perceived to be a growing atmosphere of intolerance in the country under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

Through the years, media has become the trustworthy source of information for all individuals across the globe. Media has the power to frame certain news as prominent and present it to the people. The framing theory explains the media's influence on the society. Individuals usually believe the media and form opinions based on information received from various media sources regardless of whether or not the information is factual.

Ever since its inception, print media has played an integral role as a Fourth Estate of the society. It has acted as a forum for public debates and discussions. Press has been touted as a watchdog of society, guardian of public interest, and the

intermediary between those who govern and those who are governed. It is considered to have the potential of playing a crucial role in reconstruction and regeneration of nation by focusing on the social, economic, and moral factors in the society. In a democracy, print media plays the role of highlighting the issues, focuses on facts and provides multiple perspectives. Newspapers have been in forefront of not only disseminating information but also shaping the public opinion. Print media has the power to influence people by highlighting and focusing on several issues or topics of discussion.

The run up to the Bihar state elections saw several renowned authors, writers, scientists and filmmakers voice their view against the rising intolerance in the country. They felt that the nation is in peril due to the attack on democracy, reason and the composite culture. They believed that the intellectual class that is supposed to contribute towards the unification of the society is being suppressed through politically motivated intimidation and physical attacks. They felt that the lack of liberal space is hurting true democracy in our country.

The entire issue of rise of intolerance in India gained momentum due to the Dadri mob lynching case that happened coincided with the Bihar 2015 state election. The Dadri incident refers to the case of mob lynching that happened on the night of 28 September 2015 in Bisara, a village near Dadri, Uttar Pradesh, India. A mob attacked a Muslim family and killed 52-year-old, Mohammad Akhlaq Saifi and injured his son, Danish. An unsubstantiated rumour was spread about Mohammad Akhlaq's family.

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News broke out in the village that Akhlaq's family had killed a cow and consumed its meat on Eid. The act of consuming beef was the cause for the lynching. The ruling party of the State and the Central government were criticized by various political leaders and intellectuals for being responsible for this incident.

The Agenda Setting theory closely relates with media framing. The salience of an object increases the amount of news coverage about the topic. The topic could be relating to a public figure, an issue or any other topic that the media is focusing on. News media can increase the importance of a news story by the amount of the time that is spent on reporting the issue.

Agenda Setting is a theory about news media's power to structure the importance of certain issues in the public's mind. Agenda setting theory holds that, through gatekeeping, the news media selects and highlights certain events, people and issues. Through repetition and consistency across media, the public begins to adopt the news media's agenda and believes that these same events, people and issues are salient and important. The theory describes mass media as a tool that influences public opinion by setting agenda in public discussion. Media affect the public opinion, not necessarily by supporting one view over another, but by emphasizing certain issues in the public sphere. The news does not tell people what to think, but rather tells people what to think about. Newspapers, thus, have the power to highlight an issue in the news and make people believe that it is important to the society.

The popular propaganda model of communication, *Manufacturing Consent* by Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky can be related to this research study. The mass communication and media conglomerates are an effective medium and powerful ideological source that can carry an objective oriented function of propaganda through filters in the form of ownership, advertising, news shapers, news makers and limited debate and media content which emphasizes the interest of media conglomerates that are in control. Chomsky through his work tries to indicate the role of media in serving the interest of the political elites and corporate powers.

On one hand, the intellectuals and several opposition parties described the entire protest as the revolt against the atmosphere of intolerance. The ruling party at center termed it as 'manufactured'. They found it to be the politics of hatred, violence, killing and ignorance that was manufactured for political motivations.

Review of literature

Newspapers act as an effective tool like most forms of mass media, while creating an agenda setting trait. The basic hypothesis for this was put together by Maxwell E McCombs and Donald L Shaw in their research paper, *The Agenda Setting Function of Mass Media* (1972). They coined the term to describe in more general term a phenomenon that had long been noticed and studied in the context of election campaigns. Paul A Lazarsfeld referred to it as "structural issues" which is an essential part of advocacy and attempt at opinion shaping.

In the paper, *Agenda Setting, Religion and Media*, the researchers McCombs and Rashi (2015) have highlighted how the concept of Agenda Setting can be used to communicate and influence the public using various means of media. The researchers examine the media activity of Chabad, an Ultra-Orthodox Jewish movement that is committed both to making Judaism widely accessible and to influencing public discourse. Rabbi Schneerson, the Chabad movement's leader, undertook

this theological mission using the power of mass media. The study was an attempt to see how various movements have tried to influence the agenda on religious grounds and determine the interface between religion and setting the agenda. This finding could be useful for other religious groups seeking to influence media and political agenda.

Scheufele and Tewksbury (2007) emphasize the theoretical explanation of Framing, agenda setting and priming in their research study. Media framing is based on the notion of how an issue is characterized in news reports that can have an impact on how the audience interprets the story. The way individuals classify information also adds to the framing theory and framing is a macrolevel and a microlevel construct. *Speaking of Tolerance and Intolerance*, Gregorios (1995) tries to denote the difference between tolerance and intolerance that forms an ideal relation with religion in India. According to the researcher, the three words- fundamentalism, tolerance and secularism lead to uncertainty and confusion rather than creating a solution. He further goes on to define the word "tolerance", where he states that it's wrong to denote it with diverse religions. The researcher states that the Indian politics is religion infested. Wrong religious considerations are used for gaining votes, choosing candidates and so on. Religion based politics leads to problem of communal conflicts. Various political parties in India use political vendetta to promote strange ideology of secularism. The problem of communal conflict is not solved, but rather aggravated by these political groups by imposing secularism on the people for their vested interest.

Watts and Dodds (2007) through their paper "Influentials, Networks and Public Opinion Formation" wanted to test whether the theory of opinion leaders adopting an idea and lots of other people quickly following it had a relevance. The researchers came to the conclusion that influentials—a privileged minority who impact a remarkable amount of their peers—are paramount to the structuring of public opinion and views. They found that large cascades of influence are driven not by influentials but by a critical mass of easily influenced individuals.

In *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (2010), the researchers Herman and Chomsky propose that the mass communication media of the United States acted as an effective and powerful ideological institutions that carry out a system supportive propaganda function, by relying on the market forces, internalized assumptions, and self-censorship through the means of propaganda model of communication.

Frunza (2002) focused on how religious fundamentalism came into existence in his paper, *Religious Fundamentalism and the Globalization of Intolerance*. Secularization involves the process of secularization of identity. Religious principles got substituted by modern ideologies that lead to the 'secularized shaping of the world.' The researcher used the example of Marxism, where in an attempt to construct a new secular identity the disenchantment with religion was exploited. Today, due to the crisis caused by the secularization of the identity there is a resurgence of religious movements that are not rooted in tradition but have the potential to cause ideological conflict.

Objective

The following are the main objectives of the research study:

- To study whether the Award Wapsi controversy was a genuine movement or a politically motivated campaign.

- To study whether the rise of intolerance issue framed by the media was a part of larger political conspiracy.
- To study the level of involvement of print media in the coverage of the intolerance issue during the Bihar Elections 2015 and its impact on voter decision.

Methodology

The main objective of the study is to find if print media plays a role in influencing and shaping public opinion and thus impacts the voter decision during elections. The researcher used qualitative research technique to carry out content analysis of the newspaper in question. Text based analysis is the means of examination of the content to reach a conclusion. The researcher intends to analyze the contents of a leading English newspaper *The Indian Express*, Patna edition. The reasons for choosing the newspaper are- the English newspaper has a wider reach in Bihar and has a good presence in urban cities of Bihar, like Patna. The analysis will help the researcher to study the impact of print media during the Bihar election 2015. The time period for the research study was from October 1 to November 10, 2015.

The following parameters were chosen-

- Placement of the story
- Tone of the story
- Visual elements
- Page prominence
- Number of times the word 'intolerance' or its synonym was used

The above-mentioned parameters focused on aspects like positioning- whether lead story, second lead or at the bottom. What was the tone of the story- negative, positive or neutral stance? The element of visual adds an extra impression in the mind of the reader. Page prominence in the form of front page or inside story and the number of times the word 'intolerance' or its synonym being used in the article were considered.

Data Analysis

According to the content analysis done for a period of 40 days during the Bihar 2015 elections, it was observed that the placement and timing of the news articles was very strategic. The content analysis involved the examination, selection and coding of the newspaper content according to the pre-determined parameters.

The researcher had categorized the text based content into 3 different forms of article writing, namely Lead story, Editorial and Opinion story. The researcher applied the content analysis method and analyzed the content on the basis of given set of parameters.

Table1. Page prominence of content.

Page Prominence	Front Page Articles	Inside Page Articles
2 nd -31 st Oct 2015	24 Articles	28 Articles
1 st - 10 th November 2015	10 Articles	12 Articles

The researcher found that the majority of the stories regarding the intolerance issue were lead stories and these were mainly placed as front page articles. During the month of October 2015, 32 articles featured as lead story and 16 articles during the first 10 days of November 2015. Not many editorial pieces were written about the Intolerance and Award Wapsi issue during the Bihar state elections, but the ones written carried a negative and rigid stance against the role played by Central government. Few of them even criticized Prime Minister Narendra Modi's late reaction to the entire intolerance issue.

Several opinion pieces were written by well reputed personalities such as Ghulam Nabi Azad, Ramchandra Guha,

Tarun Vijay, Vinod Rai and Talveen Singh. These articles varied in their stance. Few of them were positive in tone while the others heavily criticized the political stance of the Central government towards the entire issue.

Table 2. Placement of content

Particulars	Lead Story	Editorials	Opinions
2 nd -31 st Oct 2015	32 articles	5 articles	15 articles
1 st - 10 th November 2015	16 articles	1 article	5 articles

The study found that article headlines which had names of prominent personalities or politicians had the element of visuals attached to the story.

The page prominence and placement of a story does have an important influence on whether or not the public is exposed to the framing of the story. Stories that appear on the front page have a major chance of being read by the reader than those in inside page. The news story must be read in order for one to be influenced by the frame of the story and page placement plays a major role in how prominent a story is to the reader.

Majority of the stories had either carried a very negative tone or criticized the Central government regarding the issue of rising intolerance in India. Most of these stories were directly linked to the Award Wapsi controversy where writers and other intellectuals questioned the stance that the Central government had adopted against the rise of ideological injustice in the society. Similarly, very few articles appeared during the election phase that either created a neutral stance or carried a positive tone towards the Central government's role. It was also observed that many of these stories had direct linkage in the form of criticism or attack towards the PM Narendra Modi regarding the issue of intolerance.

The researcher also carried out the weekly analysis of the newspaper stories. A very interesting pattern emerged during the research study. It was found that several stories were published a day before and on the day of polling. The Bihar elections was held in 5 phases. The first two phases of polling happened on 12 and 16 October 2015. During the said period 22 news stories appeared in the newspaper regarding the Award Wapsi issue and rise of intolerance in India debate. The same pattern continued during the next 3 dates of polling, that is 28 October, 1 and 5 November 2015. During this period 24 news stories had been published.

In the month of October 2015, majority of the news stories carried a very negative, firm stance and critical viewpoint towards the role played by the Central government. Out of the 52 articles that were published in the month of October, 30 articles criticized the role that the Narendra Modi led NDA government had played with regards to the intolerance issue. The intellectual class and various political parties attacked the Modi government. An element of fear was created by them in the society. Around 16 articles carried a neutral tone towards the entire issue of intolerance and the rest 6 articles carried a positive tone that supported the viewpoint of the Central government towards intolerance and Award Wapsi controversy.

During the first 10 days of November 2015, the newspaper covered major news stories that reflected a neutral stance on the Award Wapsi issue. Out of the 22 articles, 10 of them were neutral. 8 articles criticized the government's stance; 4 articles carried a positive tone.

The two pie charts below give an overview about the number of articles that were published in the *Indian Express*

newspaper for a period of 40 days during the Bihar state election 2015 based on the tone of the news story.

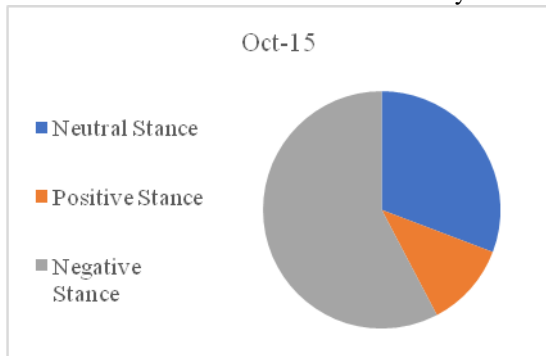


Figure 1.

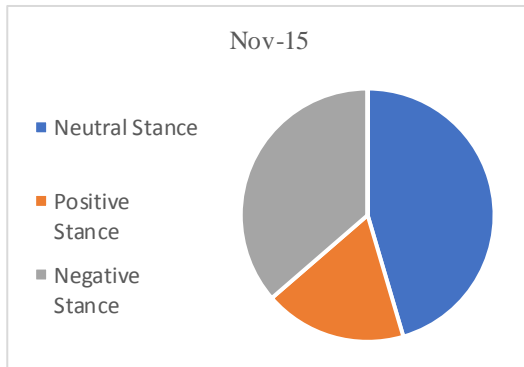


Figure 2.

On an average, every article had the word intolerance or its synonym repeated at least 3 times. Every article that was related to Award Wapsi controversy had its reference at least 2 times.

All these news stories were directly linked to the controversy of Award Wapsi which included intellectuals such as Sahgal, Vajpeyi, Kashinath Singh and many more writers returning their Sahitya Akademi awards. According to the researcher, such news stories were used as strategy to polarize the votes. It was also observed that once the elections got over, the number of stories regarding 'intolerance' and Award Wapsi drastically reduced.

The concept of two step theory seems to have been very smartly used by the media. The like-minded people were used as opinion leaders to create a macro level consensus. Framing an opinion among the common man is much easier when an intellectual or well-known public figure talks about the issue on a regular basis. Such like-minded people hold greater weightage in the society. Each community has an opinion and influential leader who creates a perception in the mass. The Bihar election was a great opportunity for such like-minded people to come together and frame a negative image about the current Central government. An unholy marriage between the Two-Step theory and Agenda Setting can be observed. The intolerance issue was magnified by the media, they set an agenda by allowing the intellectuals to talk about the issue with communal overtones.

A correlation between the Bihar election and Award Wapsi campaign can be observed, the entire outburst seems to be planned and programmed just like an ad campaign. An ad campaign includes a teaser which tries to increase the curiosity among its audience. Similarly, the Award Wapsi had the elements of teaser in form of the Dadri beef incident. Once the intensity increases, the final idea or product is released in the campaign. Here, the rise of voices from several intellectuals and celebrities and famous personalities helped to give a voice

to the Award Wapsi campaign. According to this research it can be concluded that the newspaper stories did have an impact on the voter decision during the Bihar 2015 elections.

Conclusion

After analyzing the various newspaper articles for the research study, the researcher has arrived at the following conclusions- A large influence of the media can be noticed regarding the publishing of news articles regarding the Award Wapsi and rise of intolerance issue. The so-called intellectuals marketed the entire concept of intolerance through the Dadri incident and Award Wapsi controversy. The public relations practitioners used the media to transmit their politically motivated information to the public.

The media used the framing technique to politicize the Central government's role towards the entire issue which seems to be very negatively portrayed. It's important to understand the role of media framing because public opinion gets influenced by the source of information that these individuals consume. The frames in the news can affect the individuals and their public knowledge about the news topic. Framing has a large influence on the society, individuals tend to get inclined to mirror the viewpoint of the media whether or not they are conscious of it.

Considering the Bihar election results that was in favor of the Mahagathbandhan led by JD(U) and its main ally RJD, it can be concluded that newspaper stories did have an impact on the voter decision. A high level of print media involvement was also noticed during the election phase. Every Award Wapsi and intolerance related issue or news story was covered extensively.

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