



Coverage of incidents of violence against minorities in English press of Pakistan: A study of lynching of Christian couple

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Abstract:

This study analyzes the coverage of an incident of lynching of Christian couple alleged of blasphemy in November 2014, in English press of Pakistan. Three leading English dailies were taken as a sample and their coverage pertaining to the said event was analyzed for a period of one week after the incident. Newspapers collectively published 60 news stories and six editorials during first week of the incident. Content Analysis of these stories reveal that only nine were descriptive news stories, 29 stories condemned the incident and called for action, 18 were stories of protests and four stories dealt with how violence against minorities in Pakistan has become a common phenomenon.

Key Words: *minority, media, blasphemy*

Introduction

According to the CIA World Fact book, religious minorities make five percent of Pakistan's population including Christians, Hindus, Sikhs, Bahais and Parsis. Plight of these minorities in Pakistan can be gauged from the extent of violence they are subjected to. In 2007, Minority Rights Group International ranked Pakistan seventh in the list of ten most dangerous countries for minorities, whereas the country topped the list of countries with a major increase in threats to minorities (Mahmood, 2009). U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom in its annual report of 2014 listed

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Pakistan among the eight countries of particular concern with a high rate of violence against minorities (Annual Report of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, 2014).

Though Constitution of Pakistan provides adequate provisions for the rights and freedom of religious minorities, actual ground realities negate constitutional guarantees. Pakistan has long been notorious for the plight of minorities and increasing threat looms around minority communities here. Country's controversial blasphemy law have often been a matter of debate at certain national and international forums are notorious for their exploitation leading to human rights abuse (Knox Thames, 2014). Besides facing legal and cultural discrimination, religious minorities in Pakistan often endure incidents of massive violence, bloodshed, desecration of religious and personal assets, forced conversions etcetera (Shams, 2013).

Christians constitute Pakistan's second largest religious minority with Punjab hosting more than 3 million Christians. Most cases of violence against minorities in general and against Christians in particular have been reported from Punjab (Mahmood, 2009). In 2009, Christian homes were set ablaze in Gojra whereby eight Christians were burnt alive on the allegation of blasphemy. In 2010, a Christian laborer Asia Bibi was sentenced to death for blasphemy, followed by the assassination of Salman Taseer, then Governor of Punjab who advocated her case and condemned blasphemy law. In 2011, federal minister for minorities, ShahbazBhatti was murdered (Faruqi, 2011). In 2013, 125 Christian houses were burnt in the Christian locality of BadamiBaagh. Later that year, a suicide attack on All Saints Church in Peshawar killed 119 Christians (Factsheets: Countries: United

States Commission on International Religious Freedom, 2014). End of 2014 witnessed one of the most chilling episodes of mob violence against minorities when a Christian couple was lynched and burnt in the brick kiln where they worked. The incident invited a lot of criticism from political and religious groups and numerous human rights organizations from home and abroad, claimed considerable time and space of news media throughout the world.

This study explores the patterns of coverage given by elite Pakistani press to the incident of violence against this minority couple. This study maps how media constructs people's perception towards such incidents and explores different slants and angles given by different media organizations while covering this particular incident. Study can be of value to media students as well as to human rights organizations and organizations working for the rights of minorities.

Literature Review

Literature review is divided into two categories, studies that deal in portrayal of minorities in media and studies that deal in violence or discrimination against minorities in Pakistan.

The overall coverage of press towards minorities is more positive than negative (Ambreen, 2014). Similarly, in a one year research of English dailies, it was found out that coverage of Ahmadis was relatively negative in media whereas, coverage of other minorities was mostly positive. Research further highlighted that Christians are the most represented minority in English press (Shahzad Ali, 2010). Likewise, Montes (2012), in his research, found that media frames the religion negatively and the trend is more obvious in case of religious

minorities. Religious minorities are represented only when there is a negative event including some crisis or violence. Findings of Faruqi, points out that Christians in Pakistan are being subjected to discrimination, violence and persecution. Report also highlights the development of blasphemy laws and their exploitation in recent years, besides giving a preview of major incidents of violence against minorities (Faruqi, 2011).

Thames and Cassidy argue that blasphemy laws in many countries contradict the international standards of human rights, since they are easily abused or manipulated through false accusations. Research reveals that Pakistan has maximum number of victims convicted under blasphemy laws and despite their rampant abuse and lack of procedural safeguards, Federal Sharia Court of Pakistan stick to death penalty for blasphemy (Thames, 2014).

Likewise, Shams (2013), says that minorities in Pakistan are discriminated culturally and legally whereas blasphemy laws are used to settle personal scores and vendettas. Furthermore, these laws are against the true spirit of Islam and legal reforms are needed to bring them in conformity with Islamic injunctions. Annual report of United States Commission on International Religious Freedom 2014 states that chronic sectarian violence against Shiites, Christians, Ahmadis and Hindus is rampant in Pakistan and successive regimes fail to provide adequate protection to minorities and punish the perpetrators. Blasphemy laws are used to curb religious freedom and foster a climate of impunity (Annual Report of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, 2014).

Minorities are also institutionally marginalized and

constitutionally excluded in Pakistan. Current laws and regulations regarding minorities are reversal of Jinnah's ideals. Report by Malik recommends that a pluralistic culture based on equal citizenship and unfettered human rights can bring in many improvements for the country and its inhabitants (Malik, 2002).

Report of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, "Violence towards religious communities in Pakistan" presents a factsheet of incidents of violence against all minorities that took place within the span of a year from June 2013 to July 2014. According to the report, there were 22 attacks on Christians alone, causing 128 casualties within the mentioned period. Overall, there were 122 attacks on different minorities with 430 casualties. (Factsheets: Countries: United States Commission on International Religious Freedom , 2014).

Khan in 2014 explores the legal impediments towards interfaith harmony in Pakistan and states that Pakistan is the only country that has constitutional definition of a Muslim for the purpose of law, which is the very basis of sectarianism in the country, for different sects compete for their hegemony over law. Secondly, blasphemy laws in Pakistan have long been used by authorities to harass religious minorities and vulnerable Muslims for settling personal scores and vendettas (Khan, 2014).

A report by Standing Committee on Law, Justice and Human Right, Youth Parliament of Pakistan explores the factors that lead to violence against minorities in Pakistan. Report states that 1980s' policy of Islamization followed by rise in Taliban insurgency and patronage of extremist factions by certain political and religious

forces contributed a great deal towards promoting religious extremism, intolerance and violence against minorities in Pakistan (Standing Committee on Law, 2014).

In this context it is of significance to study how issues related to minorities are covered in mainstream English press of Pakistan. And see if minorities and their issues are adequately represented in English Pakistani press. It is of particular relevance to study different angles of news coverage of incidents of violence against minorities and trace commonalities and differences in the coverage patterns of different newspapers. In this study, the researcher observes the patterns of news coverage in terms of their frequency and nature and tries to discover how this coverage tries to mold public perception in a particular direction.

Research Questions

RQ1. How English Pakistani press covered the incident of lynching of Christian couple by mob?

RQ2. What was the frequency of news that appeared in English dailies within a week of the incident?

RQ3. Was there any difference in the coverage in the three dailies?

Methodology:

The researcher conducted content analyses of the news items relevant to the incident. The researcher selected three English newspapers, Dawn, The News and Daily Times in the month of November, 2014. In this research, unit of analysis is news story. The researcher selected those news that appeared within a period of one week after the incident.

Categories

After the pilot study, the researcher extracted following four categories of content. These categories are descriptive news, condemning/call for action news, protest news, and generalized news

Descriptive news:

For the purpose of this study, those news stories count as descriptive news in which the headline and/or the lead tends to describe the event as it happened and subsequent developments as reported by the news papers' own sources.

Condemning the incident and call for action news:

This category comprises news stories in which the headline and/or the lead features oral, written or recorded statements of individuals, groups and organizations that condemned the incident and call for certain actions to be taken.

Protest news:

Protest news stories are those in which the headline and/or the lead report of protests by individuals and groups from both minority and majority community in form of rallies, sit-ins, strikes, processions, boycotts etc.

Generalized news:

Generalized news items are those that account for violence against minorities in general in Pakistan and include references of past incidents of violence in the country as covered by the news papers' own sources. News stories featuring such references under statements issued by individuals and groups are not included in this category.

Findings

The researcher coded the data in accordance with operational definitions stated earlier. The results are presented as follows.

Table 1: Collective coverage as per coded categories

Categories	Newspaper		
	Dawn	The News	Daily Times
	<i>f</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>f</i>
Descriptive News	2 (9.5%)	3 (17.6%)	4 (18.2%)
Condemning/Call for Action News	10(47.6%)	7 (41.2%)	12(54.5%)
Protest News	9 (42.8%)	5 (29.4%)	4 (18.2%)
Generalized News	0	2 (11.8%)	2 (9.1%)
Total	21 (35%)	17 (28.3%) s	22 (36.6%)

N=60

Findings in Table 1 show that collectively 60 news stories were published in the three newspapers over a week about the incident of which daily Dawn published 21 news stories, The News published 17 news stories and Daily Times published 22 news stories. Coverage in percentage of Dawn accounts for 35 percent that of The News account for 28.3 percent and that of Daily Times accounts for 36.6 percent. Table shows that Daily Times published maximum number of stories

about the incident whereas The News published minimum number of stories.

The findings show that three newspapers collectively published 9 descriptive news stories, 29 condemning/call for action stories, 18 protest stories and 4 generalized news stories. Ratio of descriptive news is 15 percent, condemning/call for action news account for 48.3 percent, protest news comprise 30 percent and generalized news account for just 6.67 percent of the entire news coverage. This table also shows that maximum news stories belong to the category of condemning/call for action news.

Table 1 shows that daily Dawn published 2 descriptive stories which account for 9.5 percent of total coverage given to the incident by Dawn. Condemning/Call for action category comprises 10 news stories which accounts for 47.6 percent of Dawn's total coverage. 9 news stories were published in the protest category which makes it 42.8 % of Dawn's coverage. Daily Dawn did not publish any generalized news story. This table also shows that maximum percentage of Dawn's coverage is belongs to condemning/call for action category.

The News published 3 descriptive news stories which accounts for 17.6 percent of its total coverage of the event. 7 news stories belonged to the category of condemning/call for action news which makes it 41.2 percent. Protest news category carries 5 news stories and makes 29.4 percent of the total coverage whereas 2 news stories were published in generalized news category which accounts for 11.8 percent of the newspaper's total coverage of the incident. This table also shows that maximum coverage was given to condemning/call

for action news by The News. Daily Times published 4 descriptive stories which account for 18.2 percent of its total coverage. 12 news stories were published in condemning/call for action news category which makes it 54.4 percent of the newspaper's total coverage. Protest news category consists of 4 news stories accounting for 18.2 percent, whereas 2 news stories were published in generalized news category accounting for 9.1 percent. Table shows that maximum news stories published in Daily Times fall under condemning/call for action category.

The findings show that there is a coherence of trend among all the newspapers in their coverage. Net percentage of condemning/call for action news is greatest whereas individual newspapers have maximum coverage of the same category. Daily Times has maximum overall coverage but minimum coverage of protest news. Daily Times has maximum percentage of descriptive news and condemning call for action news, Dawn has maximum percentage of protest news, and The News has maximum percentage of generalized news. Dawn, unlike The News and Daily Times contributed no news to the category of generalized news.

Analysis and discussion

Above data reveals that though all the newspapers gave adequate coverage in terms of frequency to the violent murder of Christian couple, news story that tend to describe the event as it happened and subsequent developments were seldom. It is obvious from the results that only 15 percent of the news stories were descriptive. It indicates that very few developments took place

regarding legal proceedings of the case by the concerned authorities. Since ratio of descriptive stories is consistently low in all the three newspapers, there are little chances of missed opportunities or underrepresented facts about the event. Condemning/call for action stories were published in greatest ratio by all the three newspapers. It indicates that numerous political and religious forces and human rights organizations representing minority under discussion as well as other minorities and majority condemned the incident at large and demanded a number of actions and reforms for the concerned authorities in order to curb this menace and provide adequate protection and religious freedom to the minorities. It also implies that media chose to highlight stories of this category purposefully to give the impression that society at large stands with minorities and condemn the acts of violence against them. Protest category grabs the second largest share of coverage which clearly implies that media chose to highlight how different factions of society are protesting against the lynching incident in particular and religious extremism and intolerance in general. Finally, the generalized category received minimum coverage. The News and Daily Times published two stories each in this category. These stories were aimed at reviewing the patterns of violence against minorities at general and recalling past events of such violence that took place in Pakistan. These stories reflect a more sympathetic inclination towards minorities for they meant to generalize one incident to the entire community and remind the readers that minorities have long been marginalized and subjected to violence in our country. Dawn published no such generalized news story after this incident.

Conclusion:

This study aimed at analyzing the press coverage of incidents of violence against minorities. The researcher took an event of violence against Christian minority as a case of study to analyze the coverage of three leading English newspapers, namely Dawn, The News and Daily Times for a period of one week after the incident. The research shows that the three newspapers provided adequate coverage to the event in terms of both quality and quantity. The three English dailies mostly condemned the action and called for action to prevent such an incident in future. Though there was considerable coherence in the coverage patterns of the three newspapers taken for study, Daily Times provided maximum coverage in comparison. Furthermore, The News and Daily Times were more similar in their patterns of coverage as compared to Dawn.

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