

THE ROLE OF MEDIA IN INFLUENCING PUBLIC OPINION ON VIOLENCE AGAINST MINORITIES: THE CASE OF RAMU IN BANGLADESH

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Abstract

The article examines media portrayal of violence against religious minorities in Bangladesh and the ways in which it influences public opinion. Taking the 2012 violent attack on a Buddhist community at Ramu, Cox's bazar as a case, the article demonstrates that the press media has its own ways, time, reasons and methods of how an incident of violence would be framed and presented. As the study reveals, the media have a vast role in shaping people's perception about violence against minorities although the effect is closely related to the dimension of violence, identity of people and the credibility of media and government concerned. Yet, driven by vested interest and specific political ideologies, the media often publish biased and subjective news. The article suggests a greater role of media in sensitising people and influencing national strategies towards maintaining communal harmony.

Introduction

The role of news media in the reportage of communal violence has become pervasive for some time now. With the advancement of communication technology the news media itself has come to the centre of communal violence.¹ This is true for a country like Bangladesh where the outbreak of violence against minority Buddhist religious community at *Ramu* in the South-eastern part of the country in October 2012 attracted considerable media attention. This attack made it the third major incident of communal violence in the year of 2012. Almost all the local and national dailies have tried to answer as to why and how such incidents have taken place while the country had been

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¹ Gadi Wolfsfeld, "The role of the news media in conflict and peace: Towards a more general theory," in *War and crisis journalism: Empirical results- Political contexts*, edited by J. Grimm and P. Vitouch, Germany: Wisbaden, 2007.

maintaining an impressive record of communal harmony². It is in this context that this article attempts to examine the role of media in shaping public opinion during and after the recent violence against minorities in Bangladesh. Taking *Ramu* incident as a case the article will, therefore, look into the ways Bangladeshi media cover and report communal violence in the country.

In writing this paper we were motivated by a number of empirical concerns. First, although numerous journalistic accounts furnished the basic facts about what happened in *Ramu*, most of them were descriptive rather than analytical in character.³ Moreover, while these accounts do make an attempt to dig up the roots and history of such incidents, they do it in a very cursory fashion, which does not help to sufficiently explain the causes and various implications of violence. Selective engagement of print and electronic media to report violence against minorities is another reason why we became interested in the issue. As noted earlier, the violence in *Ramu* was preceded by more incidents of violence (in February and March 2012) which received limited media attention compared to the *Ramu* incident.

More importantly, very little systematic academic inquiry has been conducted on the issue. Existing literature mostly highlights the socio-political and communal dimensions of the incident. In assuming the political and social background of the violent religious conflict in *Ramu*, Rana, for example, argues that reducing the causes of the conflict to social media may completely overlook more complex political motives and diverts attention away from perhaps more worrying social and political trends affecting the people of Bangladesh.⁴ In the same vein, Gayen termed the religious violence to be politically fuelled and forming the chain of violence in different places at different times.⁵ She indicates that there were an all parties' "He-men" beyond this violence. Rashid analyses the international implications of *Ramu* violence for Bangladesh by arguing that it may question Bangladesh's image as a country of communal harmony.⁶ The author argues that the incident may strain Bangladesh's relations

² There are 566 national and 2475 local newspapers and 26 television channels operational in Bangladesh. For details, visit: <<http://allmedialink.com/bangladeshi-media-glance>> (accessed December 30, 2013)

³ Jotirmoy Barua (ed.), *Ramu: A Collection on Communal Violence*, Dhaka: Drik, 2013.

⁴ Sohel Rana, "Religious conflict in *Ramu* (Bangladesh): A Facebook led conflict?," *European Institute for Asian Studies*, October 25, 2012, at <http://www.eias.org/sites/default/files/EU-Asia%20at%20a%20Glance_Ethnic%20religious%20conflict%20of%20Bangladesh_Sohel-Rana_0.pdf> (accessed October 15, 2013)

⁵ Kaberi Gayen, "A Known Compromise, A Known Darkness: 'Ramu-nisation' of Bangladesh," *Forum*, vol. 6, issue 11, November 2012.

⁶ Barrister Harun Ur Rashid, "Ramu violence: International implications," *The Daily Star*, October 10, 2012.

with major Buddhist countries i.e., China, Sri Lanka and Myanmar. None of the above writings have focused on the media implications of the incident.

The paper attempts to fill in this gap. This is not an article to inquire into the causes of the incident *per se*, yet, the causes and consequences of violence against religious minorities in Bangladesh will be explored in this paper through the lenses of media portrayal. The paper will make a critical evaluation of the role played by the general and the social media and offer policy recommendations on how the media can positively influence public opinion regarding violence against minorities.

Methodology

Both qualitative and quantitative data collected from primary and secondary sources have been used in writing this paper. The study collected secondary information from books, journal articles, government and civil society reports and newspapers. With an intend to understand media response to the *Ramu* incident, the study conducted a content analysis of news published in two vernacular newspapers -The Daily Noyadiganta, The Daily Janakantha –and in an English daily- The Daily Star from January 2012 to March 2013. Although the study relied heavily on print media to examine the issues concerned, in analysing people’s perception of media portrayals of communal attack on minorities, it has also taken into consideration the role played by the electronic and social media in general. Primary data was collected through a questionnaire survey conducted among 50 Muslim and non-Muslim persons to know about media-effect on public opinion.⁷ A Focus Group Discussion (FGD) has also been conducted with a group of interviewees. A number of key personalities i.e. scholars, representatives of minority communities and government officials involved in this issue have also been interviewed formally and informally.

The paper is organized in six sections. After the introduction, the next section offers a conceptual and theoretical framework of the topic discussed. The third section puts the violence against minorities in the region and Bangladesh within a historical perspective. The causes and consequences of violent attack on Buddhist temples at *Ramu*, Cox’s bazaar has also been dealt in this section with much detail. Taking *Ramu* incident as a case, the fourth section examined the nature, scope and content of media coverage on the violence against minorities. Based on primary data the fifth section examines media influence on public opinion on *Ramu* incident. The last section offers conclusions and recommendations. For now, let us move on to the conceptual and theoretical issues within which the article is framed.

⁷ See, Table 4 for details about the interviewees.