

DECONSTRUCTING NEWS REPORTAGES: PERSPECTIVES ON THE MAKING OF COMMUNAL IDENTITIES

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Abstract: In building a nation, newspapers and print culture in general have always contributed a major role in constructing political consciousness. Newspapers helped in universalizing a discourse leading to a sense of connectedness among the people who are dispersed in large areas. Benedict Anderson, in *Imagined Communities*, argues for the irreducibility of material-cultural practices (which he significantly chooses to call 'print-capitalism') in creating and sustaining the 'imagined community' of a nation whose citizens maintain 'deep attachments' to each other in the absence of face-to-face contact: 'the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion'. This paper attempts to look into the role of early newspaper circulation and the effect it produced in the masses during the post-Independent city of Jamshedpur, particularly in the decades of 1960s and 70s. *Azad Majdoor* which was published and widely circulated in Jamshedpur facilitated in understanding the ground realities of the society then. This paper attempts to probe into the role of *Azad Majdoor* whose reader base primarily was the working class. Giving it a historian's flair, this study examines the language and the style of reporting the news which helped to develop a particular community consciousness and then later became a tool to polarize masses on communal identities.

Keywords: Newspaper, Print Culture, Communal Identity.

Introduction: Communalism becoming news is not dangerous; News becoming communal is dangerous.

- A Poster by 'Delhi Union of Working Journalist' 1977

Press, as Gramsci holds, is considerably the most 'prominent and dynamic part' of the dominant ideological structure. In the decades of 1960s and 70s, when Jamshedpur, a small city in Jharkhand (erstwhile in the state of Bihar) did not have a regular culture of reading newspapers owing to the scant circulation from Patna or Calcutta, *Azad Majdoor*, which etymologically means 'free workers', emerged as the only stronghold local newspaper which was published and widely circulated. This, in course, impoverished and contributed in understanding the otherwise concealed socio-political consciousness of the city.

Jamshedpur was one of the cities which were a part of Nehru's visionary modern towns in the near future of the Free India. Other cities, such as Rourkela, Bhilai, Bokaro, were the first industrial towns of the independent India and represented the importance of industrial development in the country. Mainstream national newspapers arriving from Patna or Calcutta could only reach the city post-noon from their origin of publication. Some of the prominent newspapers were *Searchlight*, *Udit Vaani*, *Statesman* and *The Times of India*. The gap that was created by the late arrival of these newspapers was met by *Azad Majdoor*. The latter gave adequate coverage to the regional news along with the national and international news. An analysis of *Azad Majdoor* is worthy here because it was the only newspaper published from Jamshedpur whose reader base had working class people in majority. The language and the style of reporting the news is critical to the historians working on the social history of the city.

This paper can be read in the light of three segments: the reports, editorials and propaganda, or in other words, it is compartmentalized into three predominant themes, namely Hindi language movement, local

Jamshedpur news and ideas of patriotism and nationalism. These themes are important to understand how various issues were reported to develop a kind of consciousness and awareness that fed into the making of a communal identity. During the process of writing this paper it was realized that owing to cultural limitations it is quite impossible to give exact translation in many cases, therefore the quotes extracted from the newspaper and studied here are in Hindi only. The methodological approach undertaken here is that of content-analysis in order to study the role of print media in Jamshedpur communal riots of 1979. The subject of the study is reports published in the newspaper related to riots and through this study, it would be attempted to prove that print media voiced the language of hate and sensation and in course disrupted social harmony instead of publishing real stories.

Among the several political matters of national importance, one that was widely discussed in the newspaper was the issue of Hindi language. Jamshedpur being an industrial town welcomes people from diverse background and does not have domination of any particular group. However, in such a context Hindi language invited significant attention. The newspaper mentioned the Hindi language movement and the glory of Hindi language in some of its reports. For instance, this newspaper argues that India can only be strengthened by establishing only one language which is Hindi. It further reports, 'From Himalayan range to Kanyakumari, Hindi language is spoken and understood by all'. The movement for Hindi as the national language and its reportage by *Azad Majdoor* is important because it indicates a collective consciousness that was being developed in the city at that point of time. As this newspaper was important in generating a political awareness among the people, it firmly sided with the Hindu religious community on all matters and on many occasions presented a biased view. On the issue of language, this newspaper openly sided with Hindi language arguing that women from Orissa, Bengal and Madras were more fluent in Hindi than the women from U.P and Bihar. In its report dated December 13, 1964, the newspaper claims that "*Hindi Virodhi Niti se rashtra kabhi sabal nahi ho sakta*" which translates as that anti- Hindi policies can never be of any benefit to the nation. It sang praises of the grandeur of Sanskrit language as the mother of all languages in a report on the same day "*Sanskrit sabhi bhashaon ki janani hai*". The newspaper firmly asserted that only Hindi language has the capacity to be the national language. This assumption devoid of any factual support only highlights the agenda based reportage of this newspaper. Another report urged the people to start practicing the habit of writing Hindi "*Hindi mein kaam karne ki aadat dale*". On the same page, another report accuses the then Union education minister, Mohamad Karim Chhagla of demoting Hindi and supporting English. It went on to say that the minister's attitude to Hindi is antithetical to the unity of the nation and undermines the independence of the country. While this information may seem normal in today's context owing to the presence of multiple ways of creating a political consciousness on a mass scale, such cases of incitation were rare fifty years back. At that time, this newspaper had the same importance as internet has today, especially in remote areas. While in rest of the Bihar, the language movement was centered on the adoption of Urdu, *Azad Majdoor* in Jamshedpur continued to support Hindi language unabashedly denouncing any argument that hindered their agenda.

Jamshedpur has a different context because of the delay in the receipt of newspapers to the general public and the reader base being industrial mainly Hindi speaking people who were regular readers of it. The importance of this newspaper thus cannot be underestimated in Jamshedpur. This newspaper however was not an uncritical well wisher of Tata group. For example, while reporting the workers' strikes of 1964-65 it supported the demand for increased wages and bonus for the workers, at the same time it called the calling of strike as against the national interest. On the matter of social issues of caste system, untouchability and communalism, the approach of the editor appeared problematic. For example, it did not attempt to bring into light the strategic casteism being meted out in company administration in appointments and in the allocation of societies to worker residents.

The language of the newspaper had zingoistic undertones. In a report dated 6th September 1964, the paper declared and warned Pakistan government to mind its ways "*Pakistan apni harkato se baaz aaye*". In the report it said that Pakistan should stop using US government against India and that it must not deceive India into a false friendship. In another report, the newspaper asserted that one cannot put Kashmir at stake for friendship with Pakistan. In a report on 8th November 1964, the newspaper strongly

recommended that if India wants to continue being independent with respect, it must start producing atom bombs and train the young men and women into Guerilla warfare. It lamented the price inflation in the country and argued that it is all because of corruption. It believed that India must achieve self-sufficiency and the money from corrupt people should be taxed for the making of atom bombs. The newspaper tried to connect the issue of workers' strikes with that of the border issue with Pakistan. On 20th December 1964, it reported that while Pakistan is causing tensions on the border, workers are undermining the progress of the country by calling a strike "*Ek or seemaon par dushman garaj rahe hai aur hum apno ko hi mitaane me tule hai*". It asserted that it is the duty of the workers to not invite the downfall of the nation. While the industrialists must work with generosity, the workers must work with sacrifice and patience. Another report goes like, "*Kashmir swayam Bharat hai or Sheikh Abdullah Pakistan ke wakeel hai*". It condemned the decision of Nehru to take the issue of Pakistan's invasion in Kashmir in the UN and affirmed that a person would, in practice, beat the thief first and then take them to the court: "*jab chor humare ghar me ghusta hai toh kya hum us samay kisi thane ya adalat me daudte hai? Us samay toh hum use maar hi bhagate hai. Kitne dukh ki baat hai sheikh ji humlawar pakistaniyo ko bhi bharat ke samaksh bhi ijjat dete hai*". It argued that Pakistan is the believer and propounds anarchism. It lambasted Pakistan for its treatment of minorities in the then East Pakistan. It reported about the miserable condition of Gurudwaras in Pakistan. As well as, it also warned Pakistan that it must not interfere with the Muslims in India. The news went on as, "*Pakistan bharatiya musalmaano ka rakhsak kadapi nahi: Pakistan ko bharatiya musulmano ki fatkaar*". Eminent scholar Veer Bharat Talwar comments about a newspaper called "Ranchi Express" that all the reports by this paper that defied rationality were presented as "today's breaking news" to put an indelible impact on the people.

All these facts hint in a strategic way the newspaper promoted a stereotypical aggressive nationalism on the issue of Pakistan that coalesced with the right wing ideology in which a social and political consciousness was being developed under the control of industrial capitalist house that acted as the landlord of the city. In a report dated 13th March 1979, the newspaper alleged that there are some spies from Pakistan who are active and want to disturb the harmony in the city. On what basis was this claim made has not been mentioned. The Bihar Criminal Intelligence Gazetteer mentions about the domination of some local crooks but does not talk about any outside influence. This reportage did not cease any sooner and continued through the decade of 1970. The unreserved support for Hindi language and aggressive and hostile undertones for Pakistan fed into the consciousness of an ultra-nationalist zealot.

The newspaper echoed the opinions of one man, the editor Ganga Prasad Kaushal as a universalizing voice urging workers to not strike and risk country's development; recommended training in warfare to people and threatened Pakistan time and again. The opinion of the editor was not different from the general elite opinion about the country but what is noteworthy is that one omnipresent voice of the editor attained legitimacy when masqueraded as the voice of the newspaper.

The immediate cause of 1979 riots was predominantly the clashes between two groups during Ram Navami procession. These communal tensions had already appeared a year ago on the very occasion of Ram Navami itself but the then administration did not allow Hindu religious groups to take the procession through Muslim inhabited areas like Azad Nagar, Road Number 15 etc. As a result, Hindu groups started campaigning with slogans, pamphlets, and small meetings in the city. Some of the slogans were echoed in the outbursts of '*Hinduon ke desh mein Hinduon par atyachaar*', which can be roughly translated as 'Hindus are themselves being tortured in a Hindu nation'. The campaign went on for almost a year until the next Ram Navami in 1979. *Azad Majdoor* played a crucial wheel during this period to spread communal messages and also contributed in the growth of communal hatred. It tried to justify the image of the magnificence of the procession. The enthrallment that the language of the reports displayed invoked an image of universal godliness to the figure of Ram. The celebration of the procession in the newspaper also legitimized the entire discourse. It also successfully hid the propaganda of the communal elements in a religious collective. *Azad Majdoor* played a crucial medium to spread an awareness of the communal Hindu identity centered on the figure of Ram among its

readers. The reflection of these ideological conflicts can be seen in its peak in the contemporary political upheaval of the 1990s.

Anderson's analysis of print capitalism is helpful in understanding the politics of language of the newspaper reports. The sense of community and sameness that was generated by the newspaper helped in catering to a communal identity. The grandeur that was at display in these processions was described with equal glory in the newspaper. The involvement of religious authorities legitimized the discourse as having a sanction of religiosity away from the political. Such consciousness of a collective Hindu identity could then be utilized to argue for a Muslim 'other' against the former. Thus, gradual formation of a collective consciousness that could be easily led into believing that anything that came as a threat to this identity must be strongly combated. This communal awareness laid the foundation for communal tensions and conflicts. Acquiring the detailed background as well as the immediate cause, if possible both sides of the story, is important not just because it is the job of a journalist but also because one of the fallouts of communal reporting is that existing prejudices between communities do get affected. The stereotype of violent Muslim/ communal Hindu gets strengthened if reports do not go beyond the surface. The distance between communities can grow if only one side is presented and both communities might accept the violence of the groups who are seen to be protecting them. This paper, through a particular case-study of a prominent newspaper of that decade, attempted to realize how news media contribute to constructing and shaping a consciousness of our socio-political intellect.

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