

Revival of Darkest Hour: Political Parties and Suppression of Indian Media

Romita Handa

Department of Media Studies, CHRIST (Deemed to be University)

Abstract

The press has no exclusive right in the Constitution of the 'World's largest democracy.' Article 19 (1) of the Indian Constitution assures that "all *citizens* shall have the right to freedom of speech and expression." However, the exceptions under this article-including contempt of court, defamation, incitement to offence, security of state have often been used as strong tools to take action against the press. This research paper proposes to examine if India is currently facing another undeclared emergency as it introduces Citizenship Amendment Act while media reportage during the protests against this act was severely suppressed. While doing so, the paper draws parallels with the Emergency of 1975 declared by the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi as the press then too, was scrutinized gravely. The paper also attempts to explore the similarities between two political parties- Congress and Bhartiya Janata Party as these political parties differing greatly with respect to their ideologies, still pose certain similarities when it comes to suppression of media.

Keywords: Constitution, freedom, emergency, protests, similarities, suppression

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I. Introduction

In 2021, India was given the 142nd spot of 180 countries in the World Press Freedom Index. The world's largest NGO specializing in the defence of media, Reporters Without Borders (RSF) ⁱ named the current Prime Minister of India, Mr. Narendra Modi as one of the 37 'predators of Press Freedom.' RSF while adding his name to the list ⁱⁱ comprising the former Prime Minister of Pakistan, Imran Khan, North Korea's Kim Jong-un noted, "All that is left for Modi is to neutralize the media outlets and journalists that question his divisive methods."

However, the trends for the worsening of press freedom stem from the past (Chakraborty, Aishik & Sasil, Pascal (2020). During the 1975 emergency declared by the former Prime Minister, late Mrs. Indira Gandhi, India's democracy faced a major challenge. ⁱⁱⁱ On July 22, 1975, the government issued "Guidelines for the Press" which allowed the government to censor media houses to prevent any threat to the security and integrity of India (Palmer, N. D (1976). These trends continue as over 40 recorded cases of journalists being killed and recorded 200 attacks ^{iv} have taken place against those who do not confer with the popular ideologies. The number of cases which stand unsolved due to lack of information and condemned by UNESCO between 2006 and 2019 are 84.3%. Cases of Gauri Lankesh murder ^v continue to pose a serious challenge to the independence of media and thus one continues to face constant death threats or even a murder if a journalist or an activist condemns the right-wing (Ganguly, S, & Menon, R (2018).

However, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), attacks on media have significantly reduced since 2014. According to this data, India's ranking has improved significantly as only 10 journalists have been killed since 2015. On November 16, 2020, at 12:08 pm, Minister of Home Affairs, Amit Shah tweeted, "Modi govt is committed towards the freedom of Press and strongly oppose those who throttle it." While doing so, he also applauded the media for their relentless efforts and work during the Covid-19 pandemic with the hashtag #NationalPressDay.

This is not the first instance where the Centre cleared its stance when alleged with curbing the press freedom. The centre slammed the RSF report and India's ranking at 142nd rank. Information and Broadcasting Minister, Anurag Thakur, in his speech to Lok Sabha, said that the methodology with such less sample weightage is "questionable." He also said, "The World Press Freedom Index is published by a foreign non-government organisation, Reporters Without Borders. The government does not subscribe to its views and country rankings."

The research tries to analyse the working of press under the Modi regime and the Congress government during Indira Gandhi's reign. The research tries to draw parallels between the two political parties and their acts of suppression of media. The paper attempts to examine the media coverage of the Anti-CAA protests and the stance opted by popular media organisations and the headlines made by them. The paper also attempts to understand the

regulation of various media organisations during the Emergency of 1975 and the Guidelines issued by the government to censor news.

II. Statement of the Problem

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has been denying a press conference as his justification includes that the tech-savvy does not need a press conference when he can converse directly with his “Mitron” through Mann Ki Baat and Twitter (PAL, J, CHANDRA, P, & VYDISWARAN, V. G. V (2016). As the assaults on journalists continue, the credibility of press in India also significantly drops as India was placed on 31st rank out of 46 countries in The Reuters Institute Digital News Report of 2021. Similar trends were seen during Indira Gandhi’s reign as she declared the Emergency in 1975 where “press censorship was imposed...253 of them (pressmen) detained...18 of them banned”(Siwach, J. R (1979).What has led to worsening of press freedom? What strategies have been employed by the two political leaders to suppress press? What are the similarities between the two parties when it comes to suppression of media? All these questions prompted the current analysis of working of press while drawing parallels between Anti-CAA Protests and Emergency of 1975.

III. Rationale for Study: Media Biases and Watchdog Role

The role of free media in a democracy and the complex relationship between the two has reached a stage where the latter is unimaginable without the former (O’Mahony, T. P(1974). Many believe that Indian media has become one of the most profitable sectors, however, it has lost the greatest asset- public credibility and respect (SAGAR, S (2010). Yet, another argument suggests that while media is expected to be the ‘watchdog’ in a democracy, it is not particularly biased towards the powerful. Their bureaucratic organisation and cultural assumptions infuse in them the established biases which get reflected in the way events are reported (Prabhash, J (2005).

In an interview, Mr. Rajdeep Sardesai, one of the leading news anchors of the country admitted that “A large section of the Indian media has become a lap dog, not a watchdog.”On April 2, 2020, an article published by The New York Times, titled, “Under Modi, India’s Press Is Not So Free Anymore”, went on to list instances in which choosing to be anti-government was not a right choice. “Small town journalists have come under government attack, as well.” During the pandemic, the government before announcing a nation-wide lockdown, met the executives and editors of top media houses to “publish inspiring and positive stories about the government.”

IV. Purpose of study

Although, the literature regarding press freedom is expanding, however, the analysis has been limited to a certain period only. The current research tries to fill the gap by understanding if the past incidents influenced the present scenario in any way. The “declared” Emergency of 1975 is often regarded as the Darkest Hour. The paper attempts to explore if India is currently in an “undeclared” Emergency and if there are certain similarities between trends of 1975 and present era with regard to the characteristics, including suppression of media.

V. Research Questions:

The paper attempts to examine the following questions:

- a. How did the media report Anti-CAA protests? Was there any manipulation by the government?
- b. How did the Press function during the Emergency of 1975?
- c. What are the similarities between the two parties- Bhartiya Janata Party and Congress when it comes to suppression of media?

VI. Literature Review

The digital age and the spread of information through social media has become limitless. However, as the media reportage continues to evolve, threats to true and ethical journalism are increasing and are true (SALMAN, F (2020). The media world is rapidly changing and poses a threat to the English media (Sharma, K (2007). These changing trends might indicate large sizes of newspapers, better quality, bigger circulations and better readership (DAR, A. N (1990) or could point to a lack of media interest in certain stories due to its close ties with the state government (Sharma, S (2014).

Of Reportage of Anti-Citizenship Amendment Act Protests

The Citizenship Amendment Bill was passed by the Parliament of India on 9th December, 2019. This bill which became an act after the President signed it on 12th December, 2019, has been referred to as “unconstitutional”, “divisive” and “an assault on the democratic and secular fabric of nation” by the opposition. This act assured the citizenship to illegal refugees from six communities including Hindu, Buddhist, Sikh, Christian, Jain and Parsi from Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan on the grounds that the intruders were forced to reside in India because of “persecution” back in the other countries. The cut-off date for the applicant has been set as 31st December, 2014. While this act was a second attempt after the failure of the first one, to amend Citizenship by Modi-led government, it poses a

threat to the Muslim community excluding them from the communities who have been included in the act. Under this fear, a huge protest broke out in the Shaheen Bagh of New Delhi, as it became the epicentre of rebellion in 2020. As the protests continued, the media reportage continued to be biased according to a report by Campaign Against Hate Speech titled- *Wages of Hate: Journalism in Dark Times*. As protests spread down south in parts of Karnataka, the uneasy relationship between media and the protestors was brought to the forefront. In an article published on January 16, 2020, by the Coastal Digest, it was reported that media organisations attempted to downplay the incident as “Shockingly, it could not make it to the front-pages...” It was also suggested that most of the English newspapers were hesitant too until NDTV started its live coverage.

The kind of statements used by the media also reveals evident media biases. Republic TV displayed headlines such as – “END THE PROVOCATION”, “THEY LET THIS HAPPEN.” The TV anchor while running the footage reported, “...The Centre have nothing to say about the open act of violence...outside Jamia.” According to The Quint, the most common statement seen during the reportage was “After the protest turned violent, the police resorted to lathi-charges.” This statement justifies the violence imposed by the police officials, blaming the protestors who first turned violent.

The Kerala Press Club in its statement mentioned the attacks on journalists by the police officials, stating that the cameras were snatched, the journalists were told to delete certain footages captured and that “It was done with the sole purpose of suppressing the truth.” Both national and international media covered the protests extensively. In its issue of December 17, 2019, the headline on the front page of The Hindu read- “Students erupt in nationwide protests.” Although, it mentioned about the police brutality which led the students out on streets, the same page mentioned Modi’s urge to “stay away from rumours, falsehoods” and Amit Shah’s promise that the “Temple will come up in Ayodhya in four months.”

The media analysis also points to the biased coverage of Asian News International (ANI), a Delhi-based news agency abroad. On January, 26, 2020, the ANI tweeted, “Scotland: Members of Indian diaspora demonstrate in Edinburgh, in support of #CitizenshipAmendmentAct.” However, on the same day, The Telegraph in its article mentioned- “Multiple protests have taken place in London, New York, Oxford, Leicester, Edinburgh, Birmingham against CAA.” The article by The Wire, dated December 17, 2020, mentioned: “How The BJP Tried to Manipulate Public Opinion on Social Media in Favour of the CAA” by spending huge funds to gain support online.

Emergency of 1975 and Press Censorship

“The President has proclaimed Emergency. There is nothing to panic about,” declared the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi on the All India Radio on the morning of June 26, 1975. According to her, this step was essential to curb the “internal disturbance and conspiracy.” This conspiracy was a subtle reference to the activities of the opposition which wanted to remove her from power (Hardgrave, R. L (1979). The Constitution bestows on the President the power to declare emergency in cases of grave threats to internal security. President Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed under Article 352 (1) of the Constitution declared emergency in India on 25 June, 1975.

Indira Gandhi’s decision to declare emergency was fine-tuned to the insecurity her government had as the opposition started various movements including the JP movement in Bihar and the Nav Nirman Movement in Gujarat. These movements, particularly the JP movement under the leadership of Jayaprakash Narayan ^{vi} called for “total revolution” and dissolution of the state government. “The ink of the signature could scarcely have dried before the first arrests...A list had evidently been prepared: 676 was the number stated to have been detained...On the next day... the total as 900, describing only one-third of them as political detainees, rest as thugs. ...Opposition sourced made it 5000 by early July... the 18 July figure as 6, 229” (Morris-Jones, W. H (1975)

“Unfortunately, censorship authorities went about their work rather over-enthusiastically” (Upadhyaya, M. L (1978). A censorship order was issued in 1975 under rule 48 (1) of the Defence of India Rules, 1971 which allowed the government to regulate the kind of news being circulated, curbing dissent and criticism. Most of the newspapers could not circulate their regular issue on June 26, 1975, due to power and other technical difficulties, which were apparently planned by the government and thus strict regulation was imposed (Park, R. L(1975). The declaration of emergency and the subsequent Guidelines which the press was forced to comply with, exposed the pressures these quarters (including the Press Council of India) faced (Banerjee, S (1982).

In an article dated April 22, 2015, by India Today, it was reported that only three “big” newspapers could show signs of resistance to the government. In an article by Indian Express dated June 25, 2018, the Indian Express noted how it left the editorials blank as a sign of resistance. However, while this move could be done by the Indian Express or the Statesman, many of the district newspapers had been closed down by district magistrates. According to the article by India Today, The Hindustan Times and Times of India saw a drop in their circulation due to their pro-government stance. The Hindustan Times while covering the emergency had the headline, “President declares Emergency” while also having in bold, “Mrs Gandhi believes in Press Freedom.” The Times of India on the front page had two headlines placed next to each other, “Several leaders arrested” on the left and “Security in peril, says P.M.” on the right under the main heading, “STATE OF EMERGENCY DECLARED.” The same page also featured another headline in bold, “Situation Peaceful.”

Although, it was noted that the press contributed to the worsening of tension as they indulged in biased reporting against the government. "They had no comment to make when the opposition used blatantly undemocratic means" (Dutt, V. P(1976), yet, articles titled, "The censorship- The darkest phase in India's tenure as PM" by Economic Times or "India media: Papers remember 1975 emergency" by BBC still expose the horrors the press had to face.

Of The Similarities between Congress and Bhartiya Janata Party of Suppression of Media

An article dated November 19, 2018, by The Wire, titled "Ten Reasons Modi is just like Indira Gandhi. And That's Not a Good Thing," noted that "Indira Gandhi had scant regard for the freedom of press" and "Modi is known to have compromised the media even more." An article by the Scroll dated September 3, 2018, titled "Modi has drawn many lessons from Indira Gandhi's Emergency" states that while declaring a formal emergency would invite troubles, one can continue to wrap the state in an undeclared emergency, following all the dictates of authoritarian rule. Under Indira Gandhi's reign, the press was censored and respectable journalists were jailed. "People knew the stories in newspapers were either partially true or even completely concocted." Modi, too follows the same pattern but chooses to focus explicitly on "curbing the freedom of its critics" tagging them as "anti-national."

The News Click in their analysis of Modi's regime in an article published on April 2, 2020, titled, "Media after Covid: Why We Are Under a New Emergency" suggested "Are we moving towards the situation that prevailed...during Emergency...when Indira Gandhi's government muzzled the press? Yes, regrettably." In an interview with NDTV on April 1, 2022, Arun Shourie while agreeing to the comparisons drawn between 1975 and the current era by the interviewer, also mentioned that the condition has now worsened. "In the government's case, there were lies such as during the Bofors scandal. But today, it is endemic."

"Indira Gandhi is today much better remembered for muzzling the press," said an article by Engage dated March 10, 2021, and titled, "Charisma Through Communication: Comparing Modi's Media Strategy to Nehru and Indira". The same article quoted the Economist which noted, "...the BJP has largely marginalised critical voices of the press." Both the leaders knew the power of conveying their ideas through catchy slogans. While Gandhi depended on "GaribiHatao", Modi depends on, "Acche din", which is apparently stolen from former Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh's statement as mentioned in an article by Economic Times, dated March 19, 2015, and "Sab Ka Saath, Sab Ka Vikaas." The two have also been seen depending on the traditional forms of media such as radio for one-sided communication. The two have been dangerously obsessed with power. Every act has become about them- from Indira Gandhi's remark "I am the issue" when asked about the main issue in her 1970 election to Modi's "Mann Ki Baat", the two leaders who serve their parties having extremely different ideologies, still seem to have certain parallels when it comes to suppression of media and their ways of propaganda.

VII. Methodology

Research Design: The design selected for this paper was qualitative in nature. The common forms of analysis within qualitative research were used. One of the forms used is Content Analysis. Content Analysis is used to determine the presence of concepts like text or themes to analyse the meaning and the association between such texts or themes. Using Content Analysis, the research attempted to highlight the repetitive statements or words used to cover the incidents. The other method used was Case Study in which specific cases (Emergency of 1975) and (Anti-CAA Protests) were analysed to find a correlation between the reportage of media and the regulation of the same by the government. Using Case Study method, various tactics and strategies to manipulate the media's coverage by the government including what to publish and what not to was revealed. The Historical Model was also used to understand the coverage of the event in the past and correlate the same with the present scenario. This model also enabled to draw inferences from the past while making comparisons between the two leaders and parties. The research drew heavily on these models while analysing the data.

Data: Interviews, articles, research papers, newspaper coverage, coverage by popular broadcasters, statements by opposition during Emergency of 1975 and Anti-CAA protests were used.

VIII. Data Analysis and Discussion

a. Of the reportage of Anti-CAA protests

The data including articles published by both right-wing and left-wing media organisations; the statements released by both the government and the opposition and the analysis of the headlines made, point towards influence of the media coverage by the government. Statements were tweaked to blame the protestors while justifying the acts of police officials. The data collected also indicated the downplaying of the protest by the government itself.

b. Of the reportage during Emergency 1975

The Guidelines of Press issued during the Emergency period curbed the press freedom. The data collected showed how only three "big" newspapers including The Indian Express could offer resistance. The journalists were either detained or arrested. The media organisations became the spokesperson of government as they were placed under one Chief

Officer of Censorship. The media houses had to take down their stories. However, the public was aware of the biased reporting and thus the circulation of the right-wing newspapers went down.

c. Of the similarities between the two political parties

The methods employed by the political parties to gain widespread popularity are similar. Both the leaders connected with the voters by using media houses as tools of propaganda and regulating what was being published. The past incidents have influenced the present working of media. Both the leaders “became the message” themselves instead of becoming the medium.

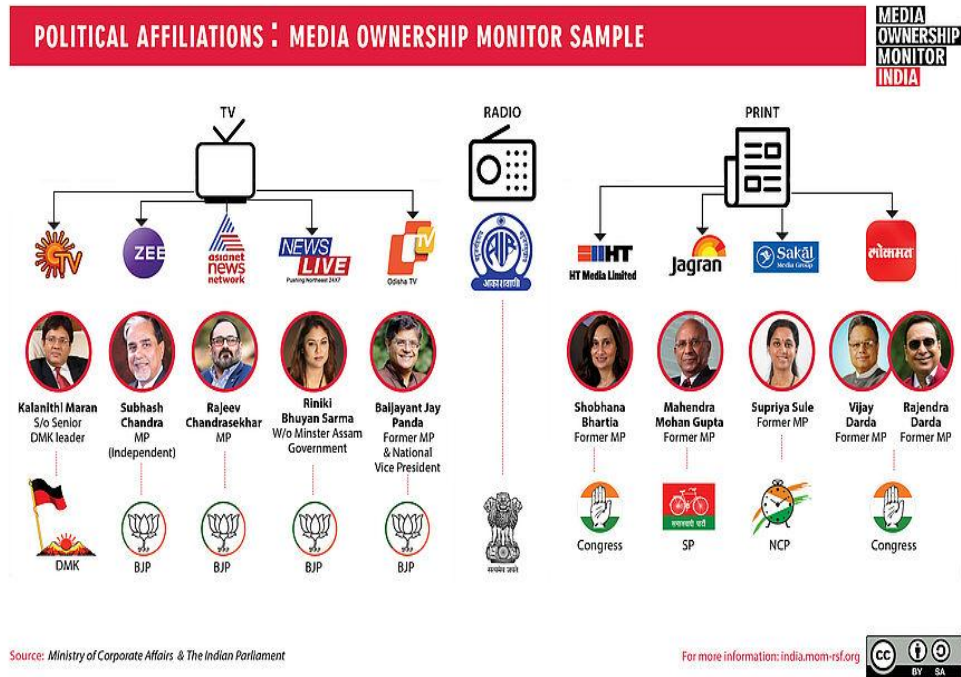


IMAGE 1.0

The pictorial representation above depicts the Media Ownership Sample across three mediums of communication with the masses-including Television, Radio and Print. In all three mediums, what remains common is the relationships of “large” or “popular” media houses with the government. This association influences their way of reporting as the news being produced becomes biased. Hindustan Times, for instance, supports whichever government is in power and this right-wing stance led to their drop in circulation during Emergency of 1975 and even in 1976.

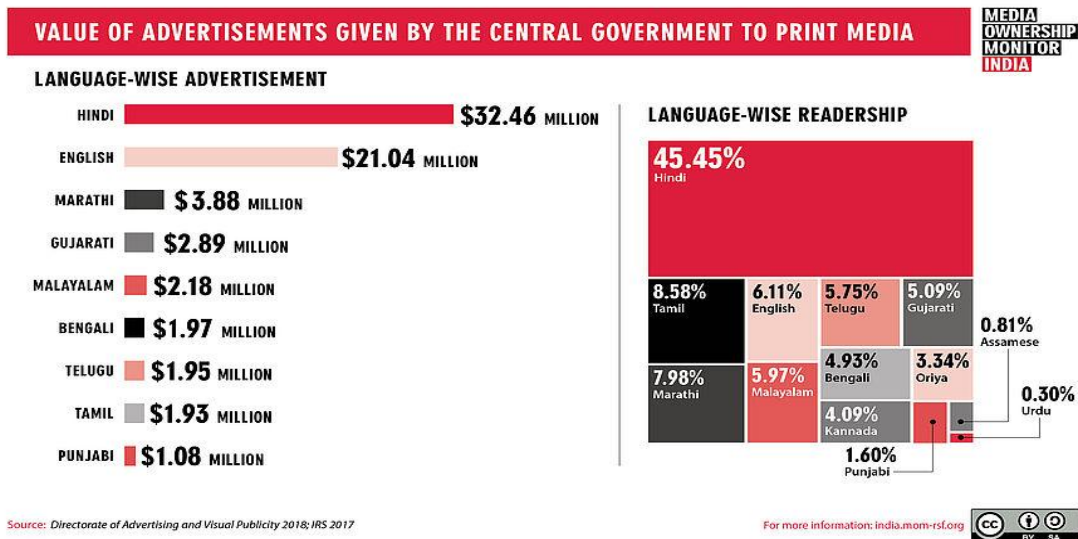


IMAGE 1.1

The above image indicates the Value of Advertisements Given By The Central Government To Print Media. Based on the circulation and the audience reach, these advertisements are distributed with the highest amount being given to Hindi Newspapers and the lowest being given to Punjabi Newspapers.

IX. Limitations

The research paper however has the following limitations:

- a. The number of journalists attacks has been distorted. Every newspaper suggests a different figure.
- b. The number of journalists detained during Emergency is not very clear since the numbers reported differ greatly.

The statistics and the figures to compare the working of press in 1975 and currently are distorted

X. Conclusion

The research attempted to understand if the media coverage during two major incidents, Emergency of 1975 under Indira Gandhi and Anti-CAA Protests under Narendra Modi had any correlation. Based on the data and the literature review, the research concludes that the reportage of both these incidents was influenced by the government leading to biased reporting. By exploring the various styles of using press as a tool of propaganda, both these leaders exhibit certain similarities. The parties while having different voter banks and ideologies still pose certain similar traits, including suppression of media. As these research questions are examined by a thorough analysis of working of media which continues to be suppressed and thus reports biasedly, one may fear the fourth pillar of democracy shaking and resonate mournfully with what Arun Shourie^{vii} said in an interview, “Today’s Media is not worth watching.”

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ⁱReporters Without Borders is a non-profit and non-governmental organisation that comprises a body of reporters who aim to defend the freedom of media worldwide. French Reporters sans Frontiers (RSF) stands as the world's largest NGO that advocates for press freedom.

ⁱⁱThe list of those who suppress the press freedom and named as 'predators' is being released since 2016 by the Reporters Without Borders. Narendra Modi is seen as a new entrant along with 7 others who have been listed since 2016.

ⁱⁱⁱThe Wire in an article published on 25 June, 2020 and titled as "India's Free Press is still tormented by the Laws Brought by the Emergency" noted that the many illegal laws including regulation of publication of news by Indira Gandhi could be used even today to suppress the media-
<https://thewire.in/history/emergency-free-press>

^{iv}The Scroll reported the number of attacks on journalists which have been recorded since 2014 under the Bhartiya Janata Party-
<https://scroll.in/latest/947640/40-indian-journalists-killed-nearly-200-faced-serious-attacks-since-2014-study>.

^vGauri Lankesh was a journalist and an activist who spoke against right-wing extremism and was shot dead in 2018 outside her residence in Karnataka. In an article by Times of India, the many details including the association of the 17 accused to the right-wing groups have been provided-
<https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/bangalore/gauri-lankesh-murder-accused-bengaluru-prison-7534075/>.

^vJayaprakash Narayan or JP was the leader of the opposition against Indira Gandhi during 1970s. He was an Indian Independence activist, political leader, theorist and socialist.

^vArun Shourie is an Indian economist, journalist, author and politician. He has worked as an economist with the World Bank, a consultant to the Planning Commission of India, editor of the Indian Express and Times of India and a minister of Communications and Information Technology in the Vajpayee-led government.