

INDIA AND PAKISTAN RELATIONS AND THE PRESS: HOW NEWSPAPERS IN INDIA COVERED POST 26/11 TALKS OF 2009?

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Abstract: Considering Mumbai 26/11 a ‘watershed’ event in the trajectory of Indo-Pak relations, this study locates the post 26/11 events in its backdrop. These attacks act as a contextual frame as this episode while the centrality of India Pakistan in South Asian discourse plays a consequential role in shaping this study. Multiple dimensions of a social reality called Indo-Pak relations have thus been re-created and constructed for the public in two countries.

However, as India and Pakistan relations are marked by frequent developments, the study has focused on analysing media portrayal of a significant event post Mumbai attacks which was the first meeting between the highest leadership from two countries after 26/11. This paper attempts to analyse some attributes of the media representation of Sharm el-Sheikh talks, which were held in 2009 attempts at understating the nature of coverage given to it. The findings and analyses will contribute towards understanding the media psychology regarding the studied event in particular and Indo-Pak relations in general.

IndexTerms - Times of India, Indian Express, Indo-Pak relations, Sharm el-Sheikh, Mumbai Attacks.

1. INTRODUCTION

India and Pakistan, the two nuclear states share one of the most volatile bilateral relations in the world. The Indo-Pak rivalry seen as the most ‘enduring and unresolved conflicts’ of these times by Paul (2005) which has consistently been antagonistic (Wirsing, 1998; Pattanaik, 2004; Wolpert, 2010; Zeb & Chandran, 2005; Véron et. al, 2008) and hardly cordial (Gehlot and Satsangi, 2004: 104). It is uniquely shaped by historical, political, cultural, geographic and economic contexts (Arif, 2001). As such Indo-Pak relations cover a wide spectrum of issues besides the foreign affairs encompassing history, food and culture, trade, sporting and religious matters, which signify a humanitarian aspect. However, these dimensions have been adversely impacted after people from the same place got divided after partition.

They have engaged in overt military encounters of different scales and even close military conflicts in 1948, 1965, 1971 and 1999 (Wirsing, 1998). The conflict has affected every dimension of interstate and societal relations between the two countries and despite occasional peace initiatives, little signs of abating have been visible (Paul, 2005). The discordance due to geographic frontiers have culminated into conflicting narratives from both India and Pakistan (Singh, 2013: 72).

1.1 Post Mumbai 26/11 scenario

On November 26, 2008, while the Pakistan’s Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi was in India (Singh, 2017) discussing the peace process by way of composite dialogue started in January 2004 (Gupta, Kalyanaraman & Behuria, 2009), Mumbai —India’s commercial capital was attacked by terrorists (Javaid & Kamal, 2013).

This was a watershed moment in the recent history of their relations and the events after this attack have been seen from the prism of this episode, which is the basis for this study as it focusses on analysis of Indo-Pak developments post 26/11. Mumbai 26/11 is at the core of India’s dominant discourse ever since and other issues of bilateral importance like talks, dialogue process, terrorism, trade and cultural relations hinges on Mumbai related trial and action to large extent.

1.2 Media framing of Indo-Pak relations

The role assumed by mass media in the context of India-Pakistan relations has been discerned and debated in a range of scholarships and discourses. This is applicable to their media as well, which has tried to capture multiple facets of this relationship in various genres, including cinema and news. Even analyses pertaining to each other are continuously relayed by their media in all its manifestations.

The continuous coverage, particularly by the news media has been guaranteed by the advancing media technologies in both traditional and new media existing in the media landscape. Print news medium has existed from the time when these two countries were part of the same country including the sample newspapers; Times of India (1838), The Indian Express (1932).

The framing theory explains how media frames the social reality of the bilateral ties between India and Pakistan in a certain way by focusing on some aspects and highlighting them accordingly. It explains that this selection and treatment of issues regarding the Indo-Pak developments is done to suit the dominant political agenda and public perception regarding the issue. For example, in the aftermath of Mumbai 26/11, focus has been on viewing Indo-Pak issues from the lens of terrorism and issues related to it. The aggressive media treatment of ‘terrorism’ describes the role of framing.

Press and Foreign affairs

Press effectively performs the function of ‘map-making,’ for the audience about foreign policy issues and this map is ‘drawn by reporters and editors’ (Cohen 1963: 13).¹ Decision making political elites in the area of foreign affairs like ministers or diplomats have always been noticed scanning pages of number of newspapers daily to remain updated on issues of international relevance (Davison, 1974). Newspapers have been accorded a notable role in the domain of foreign policy (Craig 1976: 322).

In case of Indian foreign affairs, researchers state that the perceptions created by the newspapers could possibly be a factor in policy decisions (Singh, 2015). This study focusses on English press because the Indian English press have earned a reputation of their own in this discipline and Windmiller (1954) calls it ‘paramount and the only national press in the world of Indian journalism’.

Sharm el-Sheikh Talks (2009)

This was a major media event about diplomatic talks between the Indian and Pakistani prime ministers — Dr. Manmohan Singh and Yousuf Raza Gilani on July 16, 2009. It took place along the sidelines of the 15th Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) summit in Egypt. The highest-level meeting was held months after the Mumbai 26/11 episode, which is a watershed event in the history of the bilateral ties between the two nations and thus, became a prominent news.

The two foreign secretaries also held few meetings before the two PMs met and it was during the initial period, that the mediated event began to emerge. The summit concluded with the issuance of a joint statement, which entailed an approach for possible future talks, along with a firm physical ‘handshake’ between Gilani and Singh. The Egyptian resort town Sharm el-Sheikh, where they met, became well known in South Asian media circles.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Content Analysis of the newspapers has been done before and after the Sharm el-Sheikh talks to examine the framing of this event in context of Mumbai attacks and how various attributes of the coverage given to the event by the sample newspapers in addition to examining if this event was constructed using the prism of Mumbai attacks. The attributes analysed include:

- Length
- Dateline
- Origin of Story or Byline
- Geographical Focus
- Tone ‘Bilateral relations’

Initially a brief description of every event has been provided followed by the results of the analysis regarding reference to Mumbai attacks and variables under study. The variables have been graphically illustrated after the description. Two prominent English dailies from India; *The Times of India (ToI)* and *The Indian Express (IE)* have been selected as the sample for this study considering various criteria like the readership, circulation, coverage given to Indo-Pak issues and pan-India presence.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Comparative analysis of the Sharm el-Sheikh talks Coverage given by Times of India and Indian Express is presented below:

3.1 Reference to Mumbai Attacks

TIMES OF INDIA

A reference to the Mumbai attacks was made in most of the stories, and it can be said that during this particular event, almost all inferences in relation to Pakistan were drawn through the prism of this episode. The tilt of the coverage has been towards this theme in totality as 26/11 attack related issues were discussed more than the NAM summit and meetings. ‘India’s review of progress made by Pakistan against terrorists’, ‘attack mastermind, Hafiz Saeed’s arrest and his release’, ‘status of Mumbai-related court trial in Pakistan’ etc. were mentioned.

Also, number of stories were done about the ‘Dossier on investigations’ which was handed over by Pakistan to India days before the talks. Thus, overall action by Pakistan was linked with the main event because of the references drawn during the event.

Pakistan’s pledge against terrorism has been repeatedly framed throughout the event coverage. Various conjunctions were used to connect these topics with the talks for example; ‘Pakistan handed over a fresh dossier on its probe into the Mumbai terror attacks to India, ahead of the meeting.’

The Indian Express (IE)

In case of IE also, most of the coverage, infact almost all the stories before or after the meeting are contextually linked to 26/11 and terrorism. Over 55 percent of the stories directly used the frame ‘Mumbai 26/11 attack’. The newspaper acknowledges ‘some action was taken by Pakistan’ in connection with the Mumbai attack investigations. The 36-page Dossier handed over by Pakistan before the PM-level talks is covered extensively different aspects are framed during the coverage. It was emphasized that it needed to be studied and ‘verified’ by experts before it could provide an impetus to relations.

¹ Cohen, p7

While this newspaper highlighted certain questions raised by then Foreign Secretary of India Shiv Shankar Menon, regarding ‘credibility’ of the dossier handed over by Pakistan, it mentions his opinion that India was somewhat ‘encouraged’ by the dossier as that accepted that the LeT carried the attack and it was planned in Pakistan and also named Lakhvi. An assurance from Islamabad that it will proceed with indicting the accused was reported.

Using information from FS, details in the dossier like ‘arrests of five men’ by Pakistani agencies in connection with 26/11 and search operations for another ‘nine proclaimed offenders’ for possible links to the attack are also covered.

The newspaper found that the ‘contents in the dossier complemented what Indian and FBI investigations revealed’ that supported what Pakistan’s Interior Minister had said in his media statements recently. Pakistan’s requests for additional information like copies of documents included in the charge sheet filed by the Mumbai police, as that was required by Pakistan agencies for further investigations against ‘Lashkar-e-Toiba’ were also given space.

3.2 Various attributes of coverage

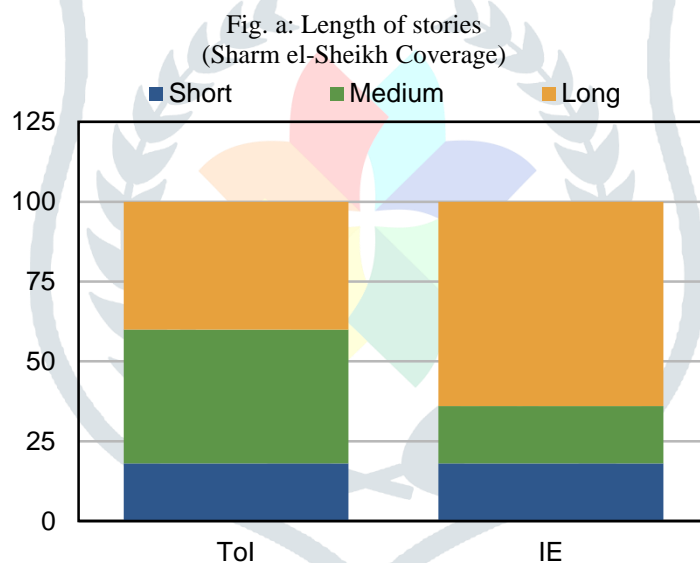
3.2.1 Length (Fig. a)

TIMES OF INDIA

During the period, over 80 percent of stories were either medium or long i.e. having more than 200 and 450 words respectively. An interesting finding was that the story ‘BJP questions “reversal” of policy towards Pakistan’, (July 17, 2009) which primarily focused on counter-narratives or oppositional views was among the shorter length stories. The variable of length is a probable characteristic of the coverage given to India and Pakistan by their national newspapers.

INDIAN EXPRESS

A uniform attribute of the coverage in all newspapers has been that most of the stories are either medium or long in length, indicating the prominence accorded to news about India and Pakistan by them. Majority are long stories forming over 65 percent of the stories.



3.2.2 Dateline (Fig. b)

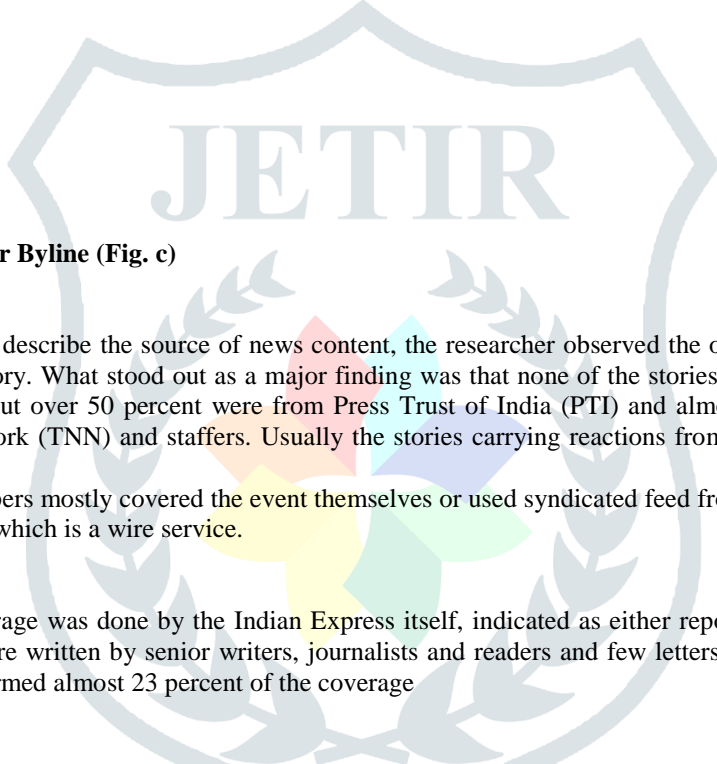
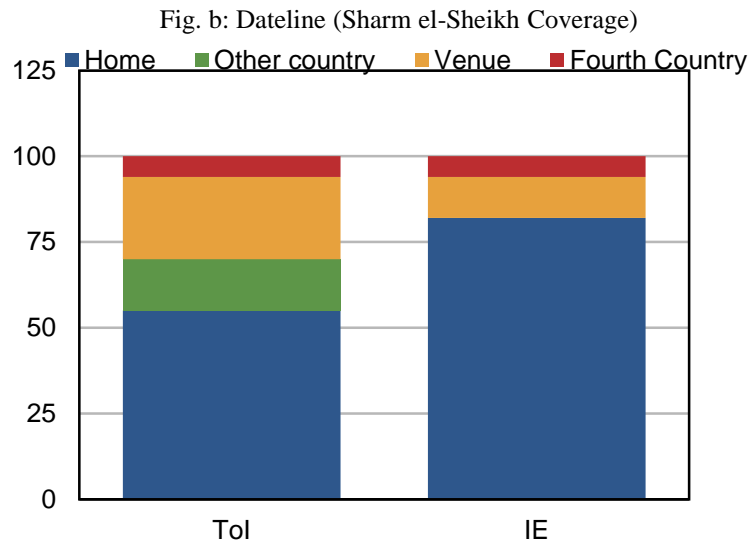
TIMES OF INDIA

Although, the NAM summit, on the sidelines of which Gilani and Singh met, was held in Sharm el-Sheikh, it was found that most stories (over 55 per cent) were filed from New Delhi (India) followed by around 24 percent from the venue. Less than one-sixth of news was from Pakistan (which is the other country), which was not about the summit specifically, but about the trial proceedings of Mumbai attack suspects, with some reference to the meeting. This is an important point to note vis-à-vis the concept of ‘spot news’ in journalism.

IE filed the least number of stories from venue, while it filed most from its home country i.e. India.

INDIAN EXPRESS

Unlike ToI, which had diverse datelines, IE filed over 80 percent of stories from home, with almost 65 percent from New Delhi only. A unique case was that no story was filed from Pakistan (Islamabad), which is against a prevalent finding in other newspapers that atleast few stories are done from the second country. Only few stories were filed from the venue itself, i.e. from Sharm el-Sheikh, and rest were from other places.



3.2.3 Origin of Story or Byline (Fig. c)

TIMES OF INDIA

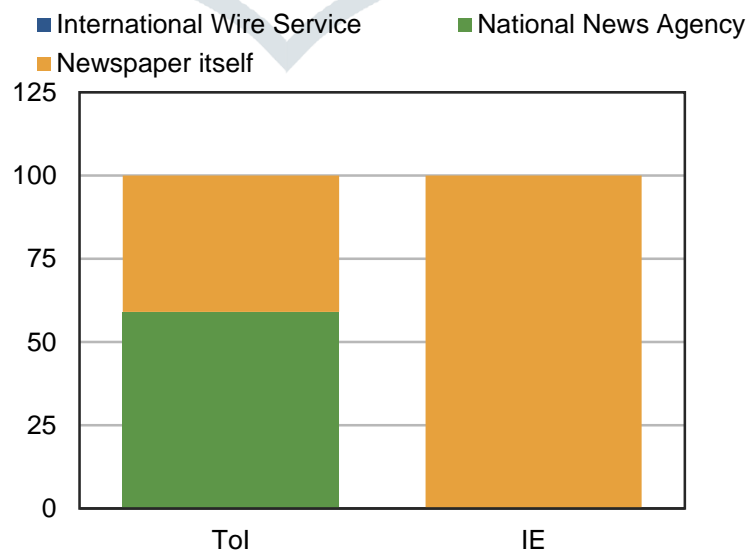
As a parameter to locate and describe the source of news content, the researcher observed the origin of the stories, that is the ‘byline’ or the author of the story. What stood out as a major finding was that none of the stories are carried from international news agencies or syndicates, but over 50 percent were from Press Trust of India (PTI) and almost 45 percent from ToI itself comprising Times News Network (TNN) and staffers. Usually the stories carrying reactions from the oppositions were carried from PTI.

It was found that the newspapers mostly covered the event themselves or used syndicated feed from different agencies, while ToI gave credit to PTI mostly, which is a wire service.

INDIAN EXPRESS

The whole of the news coverage was done by the Indian Express itself, indicated as either reporter bylines, or Express news service. Number of articles were written by senior writers, journalists and readers and few letters to the editor were part of the overall coverage. These two formed almost 23 percent of the coverage

Fig. c: Origin of Stories (Sharm el-Sheikh Coverage)



3.2.4 Geographical Focus (Fig. d)

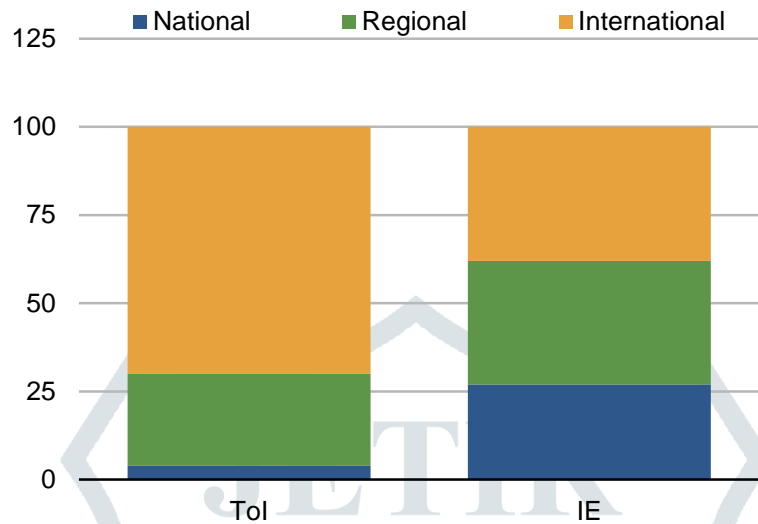
TIMES OF INDIA

As these meetings were held in Egypt, majority of stories in ToI i.e. almost 70 percent had an international focus, because of cross references to United Nations Security Council, US, NAM summit, Manmohan Singh’s visit to France enroute Egypt, where he participated in the French National Day celebrations and held talks with the French President, Nicolas Sarkozy.

INDIAN EXPRESS

This attribute was found almost equally divided between national (27 percent) and regional focus (35 percent) while international focus was seen in slightly more stories (around 38 percent). IE had a balanced focus on nation, region and world.

Fig. d: Geographical Focus (Sharm el-Sheikh Coverage)



3.2.5 Tone About bilateral relations (Fig. e)

TIMES OF INDIA

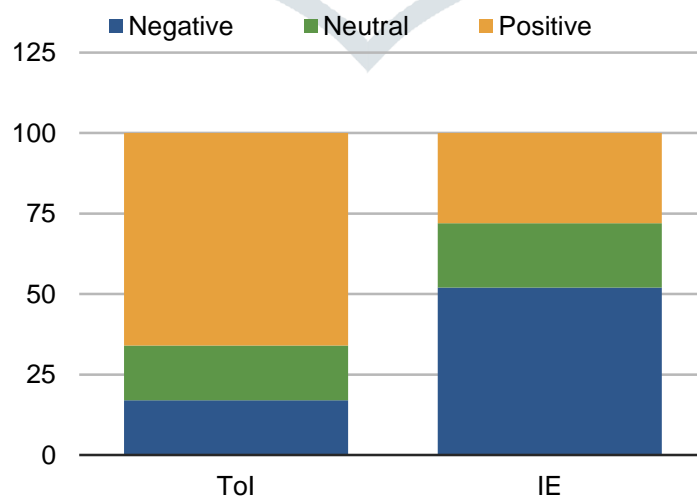
In the entire coverage, an overwhelming ‘suspicion’ and ‘skepticism’ is depicted about Pakistan, especially due to the questions asked by Indian side about the Mumbai trial and at times about their political leadership, etc. but still, over 60 percent of stories indicated a support for improved bilateral ties during Sharm el-Sheikh coverage.

INDIAN EXPRESS

Almost 50 percent of portion had a negative expectation about bilateral ties improving with Pakistan, even though Sharm el-Sheikh meetings were supported.

ToI favoured bilateral relations to a large extent and presented a favourable view on the outcome of Sharm el-Sheikh meetings as compared to IE, which was cynical about its prospects.

Fig. f: Tone about bilateral ties (Sharm el-Sheikh Coverage)



4. CONCLUSION

The two newspapers framed the entire event in the context of Mumbai attacks and issues pertaining to this attack and its investigations formed part of most of the references. The bilateral relationship which worsened after the attacks, has been continuously viewed from the lens of 26/11.

The coverage given by Times of India and Indian Express to Sharm el-Sheikh event did support the talks in the initial phase but there was little support for a long-term engagement without a concrete evidence regarding Pakistan's progress on trial proceedings on Mumbai attacks. Any skepticism visible in the coverage has been directed towards Pakistan mostly and less towards the then government, which indicates an ideological and political conformity of the media.

In the course of this study, various indicators like press nationalism and representativeness of officials as sources has been a prominent characteristic of the indexing during foreign policy coverage given to India-Pakistan issue. Most of the content has been often found to follow the ruling elite's discourse in both the countries in matters concerning major foreign policy decisions, which restricts the role of media as an agenda setter and a watchdog.

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