
ROLE OF MEDIA ETHICS &
NEWSROOM CULTURE ON THE
COVERAGE & PORTRAYAL OF
RAPE IN INDIA

FINAL PAPER SUBMISSION FOR
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Introduction and Relevance

The recent #MeToo movement has brought about much focus and discussion in the media on the issue of sexual harassment and rape culture across the world (The Silence Breakers, 2017). A movement that began in the United States of America, saw support in countries across the globe in order to fight against the massive prevalence of sexual harassment in various professions and everyday situations. The media not only covered the issue, but were also forced to introspect on journalism and newsroom cultures when allegations of sexual harassment were made against several journalists in various countries (refer to Wong, 2017, Kong, 2018, Stanglin, 2017, Flock, 2017).

As cases of sexual harassment continue to make the news with depressing regularity, learning how to cover the issues related to it is more important than ever. The news media reflect social reality and at once also cultivate the perception towards certain issues (Gerbner & Gross, 1976). What journalists write about and the way they handle the issues matter because they have the power to inform and shape public opinion.

In countries like India, rape is the fourth most common crime against women (National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), 2016). But while rape is a commonly known and a mutely accepted evil in the Indian society, the coverage of sexual violence and rape in the Indian media historically has been limited (Drèze & Sen, 2013, p. 226). The media not only shies away from covering such issues, but the social stigma attached to the topic is also reflected in the way journalists report about these cases. When the #Metoo surfaced and thousands of Indian women began posting their stories on social media with the hashtag, people were reminded of the landmark case from 2012 where a 23 year old woman was gang-raped in the heart of India's capital city Delhi, leading to nation-wide protests and media furore about the silence surrounding stories of sexual harassment and assault. Ever since that incident, the Indian media's role in giving voice to women and their issues has come under scrutiny and now, the #Metoo movement has only stirred the pot further.

This research paper aims to study the way Indian news media's ethics and newsroom culture affects the coverage and portrayal of rape and sexual violence. It will be a purely literature oriented study where I will begin the discussion by giving an insight into the Indian media landscape, the issue of ethics, and the literature studying media's coverage of sexual violence along with the newsroom cultures that affect it. In conclusion, I will find themes that emerge

from the literature and re-connect these themes in light of the broader discourse on universal values of journalism cultures, ethics and the media.

Research Question

What is the role of media ethics and newsroom culture in shaping the coverage of rape and sexual violence in Indian news media?

How do Indian news media's ethics and newsroom culture influence the coverage and portrayal of rape and sexual violence?

Literature Review

India's media landscape

India gained independence from the British rule in 1947 and by then journalism had already developed as a powerful tool from the freedom struggle movement. Print journalism was rearing to work under a free nation and in the years that followed the independence, print media in India grew unfettered. The case with the broadcast media was slightly different with radio and television being put under control of the government. While the television industry was burgeoning in other parts of the world, its growth in India was stunted for the first 17 years following the country's independence due to a myopic approach of policymakers (Saksena, 1996). Doordarshan- the only television channel in India in the early years had no competition and remained dull and largely focused on educational programming (Rao, 2014).

In 1991, the government of India decided to open up its markets and introduced the Liberalisation, Privatisation and Globalisation policy with the goal of making the economy more market and service-oriented and to expand the role of private and foreign investment. Many multinationals eyeing the growing Indian markets were quick to invest in the Indian media and this turned out to be the biggest revolutions for the Indian media landscape (Rao, 2008). The arrival of international satellite based television saw the launch of several new services like the CNN International (CNNI), Star TV, Zee TV and Sony TV between 1991 and 1995 and ever since it has only kept growing with more and more media channels mushrooming in the country. Today there are over 882 television channels that broadcast in over 161 million households who have access to Cable TV or Satellite TV in India (National Informatics Centre, 2017; Television Audience Measurement, 2016).

In addition to that, newspaper circulation in India has remained robust over the years. In fact today India is one of the few countries in the world where print media is not only still growing but regional language newspapers are expected to flourish even more in the coming years (Iyengar, 2017).

Along with this, over 900 million people, or about 75% of the population have access to mobile phones, 65 million Indians use Facebook and 35 million have Twitter accounts (Parthasarathy, et al., 2013). These staggering statistics give an insight into what Shakuntala Rao (2014) explains as ‘an era of intense media saturation in India’ where consumers are increasingly able to access global and satellite television along with Internet and social networking services, and the ever proliferating new media and technologies are ‘co-constructing and disseminating major events as they unfold’.

A repercussion of this is that Indian media has become highly commercialized and a tool in the hand of political class, industrialists and businessmen for their interests. Commercialization and politicization has culminated in “tabloidization of news”, manipulation of information, “conflict of interests” and paid news (Rao & Johal, 2009).

Media Ethics and Press Code in India

Despite the media saturation and commercialisation of the press, Indian media has remained largely free from government intervention and control. There is a great deal of diversity in the varied news media in their reporting on India as well as the world (Rao, 2008) and the Indian government has maintained and encouraged a code of ethics to apply to the media.

In 1966 the Press Council of India (PCI) was established to ‘preserve the freedom of the press and to maintain and improve the standards of newspaper and news agencies’. It receives funding from the state and was envisioned as an autonomous, non-official, statutory body comprised of political appointees, journalists, and editors. Its code of conduct addresses issues of accuracy, fairness, privacy, obscenity, vulgarity, suggestive guilt, violence, social evils, riots, and sensationalism and the council is enjoined to build up a Code of Conduct for newspapers, news agencies and journalists in accordance with high professional standards (Rao, 2014). Its 111-page code titled ‘Norms of Journalistic Conduct’ is the most comprehensive and widely recognised code of ethics that Indian journalists are expected to follow (Rao & Johal, 2009). However, the council is a largely toothless body in the sense that it can criticize publications that fail to follow its code but does not have the power to penalize those found guilty of malpractice (Jolly & Khan, 2016).

Other than that, the News Broadcasters Association (NBA) is an independent and privately funded group that also developed a 'Code of Ethics and Broadcasting Standards' in 2008 for electronic journalists working at cable news networks (Exchange4media, 2008).

There is a decent overall framework of media ethics and code of conduct in place in India, but studies show that ethics is not a widely discussed or contested issue among journalists and media professionals in India (Mushtaq & Baig, 2016). Even the journalism schools in India have nothing related to ethics training and education in their syllabus (Rao, 2014). Rao and Johal's (2009) study of ethics in news making revealed that journalists may be familiar with the codes but they have few opportunities to discuss them or clarify them through fellow colleagues or seniors. Clearly, the code of ethics in India is not sufficient as it tells only the role of journalists, not how to play that role.

Such a dearth in the code of ethics along with lack of training for journalists makes interpretation of ethics vague and ambiguous to learn and practice (Ramprasad, Liu, & Garrison, 2012).

Regulation of reporting on sexual violence

Reporters covering stories of rape and sexual violence have little room for reflection on the ethical aspect of their work since the newsroom culture does not grant them the liberty to discuss such issues with senior colleagues or refer to any legal guideline. The only legislation restricting media coverage in India is under section 228A of the Indian Penal Code (IPC), which prohibits the press from disclosing the name of a victim of sexual violence or providing information that could potentially lead to their identification. A violation of this law can lead to a fine and imprisonment for up to two years (Jolly & Khan, 2016). However, the victim can be named under special circumstances or when they or their family gives permission.

The Press Council of India also prohibits the naming or photographing victims of rape, however they have no firm guidelines on how sexual violence should be reported and what constitutes unethical coverage. And while the PCI can criticize publications or media houses that fail to follow a code of conduct, it has no power to penalise those found guilty of malpractice (Rao, 2014).

Covering rape and sexual violence

The question of ethics has been repeatedly asked of the Indian media recently as academicians, media watchdogs and common people have begun to notice some gross problems in media's coverage and justification of issues related to celebrity news, violence against women, children and the subalterns (Rao & Wasserman, 2015; BBC, 2015; Rezwan, 2012; Khullar, 2017; Aroa, 2014).

India has a shameful history of violence against women and rape culture in the society. And even then, media attention to the subject has been scant if anything. The December 2012 Delhi gangrape case changed that and drew attention to the prevalence of sexual violence against women (Rao, 2014) along with the way conversations on these issues have been historically suppressed.

Drèze and Sen (2013, p. 227) make note of this change when they wrote that "as newspapers reinvented themselves as rape-reporting vehicles, many of them across the country have been devoting much space, often several pages every day, to report of rape gathered together in a way they never had been before." After that incident, conversations, analysis and long-form pieces on rape and women's safety and security filled the pages of newspapers and the television screens. Feminist scholars took up the issue just as much and many pieces have been written in academic literature on the prevalence of rape in the Indian society. Historic analysis of mass rape incidents from the time of the partition of India in 1947 or those during the Bangladesh war of 1972 were being analysed for the first time by many (Rao, 2014).

A majority of the literature available on the Indian media's coverage of rape and sexual violence focuses on the aftermath of the aforementioned 2012 gangrape case and is mainly divided into two clusters. Most of the studies focus on the analysis of the content produced by the media- including newspapers, documentaries and television news. While the others focus on journalists' perspective and understanding of ethics and norms. In this part of the paper, we will take an overview of both sides of the discussion and study the nuances that the literature addresses.

Ila Nagar (2016) studies the way media reported the 2012 gang rape incident through a critical examination of news reports, editorials, and other stories directly related to the rape in two widely circulated Indian newspapers- *The Times of India* (English language) and *Dainik Jagran* (Hindi language). Her sample consists of articles from 17th December- the day after the crime took place, up until the 31st of December- the day the victim succumbed to her injuries and died. The central claim of Nagar's research is that 'the class of the woman killed in this incident played a role in the amount and type of newspaper coverage garnered by this

particular crime'. She argues that the victim's upward mobility and middle-class status informed by neo-liberal ideas along with the widespread protests led to the large coverage of the crime.

Furthermore, her framing of the issue through a critical discourse analysis method enabled her to study the language used in the newspaper articles as 'a window into how a culture understands and projects its discourse onto gender norms.' Her central claim in the study is that the language used in newspapers is a conscious choice that reporters and editors make (p. 260) and in fact, newspapers are 'attuned to the general public sentiments'.

The findings corroborate her claims in that although newspapers covered the crime extensively, the language used perpetuated the conventional norms and beliefs about gender and gender roles and showed that newspapers furthered the existing stigmas against rape and rape survivors. The class of the victim and the people who protested against the incident made up a big part of the media rhetoric and the perpetuated implication was that 'the rape of a middle-class woman was worse than rape' (p. 270).

The claim of class bias in the media is also supported by Shakuntala Rao's study (2014) on ethics of journalistic practices of television news media in covering rape. Rao gives a unique insight into how newsrooms' culture shapes the way issues of rape and sexual violence are covered in the Indian media. Through in-depth interviews with journalists from television news media in Delhi, Rao argues that 'the Indian news media's portrayal and coverage of rape is narrowly focused on sexual violence against middle-class and upper-caste women and it avoids discussion of violence against poor, rural, low-caste and otherwise marginalised women'.

Drèze and Sen (2013, p. 107) explain that India's English language media houses tend to be staffed by upper class and upper caste workers. Furthermore, it is widely believed that 'for a crime to have resonance with the staff and the readership of the paper, the victim or the perpetrator must also match this status' (Jolly & Khan, 2016). And a common practice in the newsrooms to ascertain whether a story qualifies to be reported or not is that of 'PLU'- a term used to denote 'People Like Us' (Ibid). One of the journalists from Jolly and Khan's (2016) study remarks, '*Whenever there is a murder or rape case involving a female, in your head you have a checklist as to whether the story qualifies to be reported or not. You have to think whether the victim is a PLU,*' which in essence, means someone who is from India's upper or middle classes, who can speak English, and who might be similar to the audiences that the media outlet is catering to. Victims who do not fit this profile tend to generate little coverage'.

Majority of the journalists that were interviewed for their study 'vigorously critiqued the ethics of their news organizations habit of unquestioned dependence on what sells' (Jolly & Khan, 2016). The study also shows that Indian journalists are highly guided by a market logic- where what sells is deemed newsworthy. News reports about sexual assault and harassment in India bear a regrettable resemblance to banal crime briefs or sensational stories rather than demonstrating any deep engagement with the subject of sexual violence as an enduring social phenomenon (Joseph 2005).

This is also supported by Jolly & Khan (2016) who find that a marked characteristic of the 2012 gang rape case was the focus of the press and media on giving out gory and sensational details about the crime. The race for more eyeballs went so far that some journalists took information from leaked police reports and used this as the basis of fictitious reporting. To highlight this, Jolly & Khan (2016) quote an article from India Today- a weekly English language news magazine, which states "*The high point of his life was when he thrust his tightly clenched right fist into the womb of the bruised and battered 23-year-old on the night of December 16. Nothing beat the excitement he felt when he heard her muzzled screams, saw her writhe in extreme pain and watched the blood spurting from her young body*". And although many reporters firmly stated that they found this focus on the explicit details of the rape unpalatable, they resign to the fact that if they do not comply to what the editors and owners demand to boost sales, someone else would do it for them (Jolly & Khan, 2016).

A woman reporter in Rao's study (2014) states that "*newsrooms have been dominated by men and these men have never seen rape as news that sells*" (p. 159). This is telling of the fact that gender and newsrooms are deeply interlinked with the kind of content that is churned by the media.

In a study conducted by the International Women's Media Foundation in 2011 to examine the status of women in newsrooms worldwide, it was estimated that women make up only 12 percent of the total media workforce in India (Joseph, 2011). Even if we consider a spike in the number of women in Indian newsrooms in the last seven years since this report was published, we can still safely say that it is a below-average gender ratio.

A lot of literature has implored researchers to look at the way gendered structures of newsrooms affect the production of news (Byerly 2013; van Zoonen 1998; De Bruin & Karen, 2004). Gender makes up an important consideration in newsrooms because it not only influences the beats that reporters are assigned to but also the final output of the news piece (Fadnis, 2017). According to the study conducted by Fadnis, Indian women journalists are

often discouraged from engaging in certain beats like crime and there is a patriarchal, misogynistic culture in Indian newsrooms. Her study on the influence of a patriarchal value system in Indian newsrooms on the way male and female reporters cover rape cases shows that female reporters filed 37 percent more human-interest stories than the male reporters. Furthermore, female reporters are more prone to humanize the issue by talking to victims' families and bringing in a more policy oriented discussion than their male counterparts who rarely go beyond official documents and police reports to report on rapes. The rhetoric of male reporters was essentially consistent with the historically conducted reporting of cases of rape and sexual violence (Fadnis, 2017) and stuck to rape myths.

One of the less talked about reasons for this historically negligent reporting on rape in India is that of 'honour' and 'shame culture' explains Rao (2014). Rape is considered to be a shameful thing more for the victim than for the perpetrator as a raped woman is considered to have dishonoured her family. The media's portrayal of rape victim is more often than not as a shamed woman (Rao, 2014). The images associated with such stories almost inevitably include grainy visuals of a woman sitting in a corner with her face covered, or a woman covering her face with her hands or a scarf. These images depict a shamed woman and put the focus on the victim by showing her as something damaged or broken and who has tarnished the family's honour (Rao, 2014).

However, a point to be underlined from Rao's study is that the media refrained from engaging in this shame culture during its coverage of the 2012 gang rape case. This could be a sign of change where journalists are becoming more cautious and introspective of how they depict and denote sexual harassment.

Overall Findings and Discussion

In light of the above discussion, this part of the paper will underscore the five broad themes that emerge from the literature on media ethics and journalism culture in reporting about rape and sexual violence in India. These themes are definitely not exhaustive but merely intend to make sense of the multiple reasons and causalities that have led to the existing reporting culture on rape and sexual violence in the country.

Gendered Nature of Indian Newsrooms

A study of the literature points to the fact that gender is, without doubt a defining element in Indian newsrooms. Be it in terms of the composition of the male and female ratio of journalists or in the way beats and stories get allocated to reporters, gender plays a big role.

Fadnis (2017) shows through her study the ways in which newsrooms in India are essentially patriarchal in their structures and culture. And although both men and women are aware of the existence of these misogynistic forces, there is not much that is done to change it (Fadnis, 2017).

Weaver (1997) states that gender can influence and help to shape new perspectives and ways of presenting the news. Fadnis (2017), Weaver (1997, 39) and others also show that women reporters are observed to use a less formal tone, which is often referred to as the “feminizing of news”. They are also known to infuse a human element and bring in new story angles. Indian newsrooms certainly need a gendered upheaval in their structure and composition and it would be a good change to have more women cover stories related to crime and women’s issues.

Media, Market, and Audiences

As discussed in the previous part of the paper, Indian media is at a point of high saturation. There are too many television and radio channels, print newspapers and the number is only growing considering the spur in regional language media. This has led to a media landscape where cutthroat competition and audience ratings govern news content to keep the business up and running (Rao, 2008; Mushtaq & Baig, 2016).

What is interesting is that the media in India largely caters to the growing middle-class and the minority affluent class, which in turn affects the content that is deemed newsworthy for the audiences (Rao, 2014). Such a market and audience dependence on the news production has sidelined in-depth coverage regarding the root-causes of social evils like sexual violence and rape in the society.

Class, Caste and Gender Bias

Several studies that have been referred to in the literature review including Rao (2014), Nagar (2016) and Jolly & Khan (2016) highlight the way class, caste and gender plays out in the different stages of news production. The class and caste barricade starts right from the composition of newsrooms- with most of the English and large news media staff belonging to an upper class and caste background. Add to it the fact that news selection depends on audiences, stories of crime against women and the marginalised sections of the society rarely make it to the media. As clearly seen in all the studies we referred to above, although the 2012 gang rape case in Delhi changed the dynamics of rape coverage in India, it was still because of the pro-affluent, middle-class bias that the story garnered so much attention.

Sadly, the bulk of crimes like rape and sexual violence are committed against marginalised women from rural areas and lower castes (CNN, 2016). These stories do not get attention in national news media and even in the rare case that they do get picked up, the coverage focuses more on caste and class of the victim than the perpetrators or the violence of the crime. This issue points to the fact that even today, caste remains entrenched in the Indian society and the media is no exception.

Honour, Victim blaming and Shame Culture in the Media

The analysis of news articles that covered stories of rape in India clearly shows that the media directly or indirectly engage in victim blaming frames and also perpetuate the existing shame culture (Rao, 2014). Victim blaming occurs when the victim of a crime or any wrongful act is held entirely or partially at fault for the harm that befell them. This becomes problematic on two levels in cases related to sexual assault and rape- firstly, it takes the blame away from the perpetrator of the crime, and secondly, it further traumatizes the victim by holding her responsible for tarnishing her family's name. Up until the 2012 gang rape case, Indian media's coverage of rape and sexual assault cases largely engaged in victim blaming (Rao, 2014) by describing the way the woman was dressed or whether she was in a public space alone and so on.

Findings from Rao's study (2014) shows that the majority of journalists interviewed agreed, "shame and honour remains powerful emotions that pervade the discourse and rhetoric of rape and influences the kind of media reportage the crime receives."

PCI and the Lack of Guidelines

Last but probably the most important part of the discussion which has the power to bring about change in the way media reports and covers rape cases in India is that of the legal and ethical guidelines for journalists. It is clear from our previous discussion that Indian media needs a specific and stringent ethics council that monitors coverage of sensitive issues. The Press Council of India should have more power to not only fine publications if they violate section 228A of the Indian Penal Code, but they should also be authorized to hold them accountable for reporting that is unnecessarily sensational, graphic and distressing to the victim or their family.

Until individual journalists, news organizations, the press council and other statutory bodies work together to build a holistic framework and guidelines with specific dos and don'ts for

journalists, little change can be expected in the way rape and sexual violence cases are covered.

Conclusion

In conclusion we can say that a study of literature on the issue of ethics and media reportage of rape and sexual violence in India bring out five major themes as highlighted in the above discussion. The gendered nature of newsrooms, a strong adherence to market logic, an ingrained class, caste and gender bias and a tendency to engage in shame culture by propagating victim blaming ideas are the main factors that lead to Indian media's disappointing coverage on issues related to rape and sexual violence. Furthermore, the lack of power given to the Press Council of India and the unclear ethical guidelines and code of conduct for journalists makes it even more difficult to hold anyone accountable for the injustice met out to rape and sexual harassment victims in the Indian society.

Additionally these very factors are instrumental in perpetuating media reportage that goes against the fundamental media ethics understood and accepted by the world media. Human dignity, plurality of voices, the recognition and inclusion of differences form the basis of global media ethics (Ward, 2013) and the Indian media needs to take a hard look at its newsroom structures, production processes and the underlying ethical principles that guide their work.

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