

A Colossal Irony: Exploring The Role Of Media During “Fall Of Dhaka 1971”

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Abstract

December 16, 1971 is remembered as a darkest day in the history of Pakistan because on that day Pakistani troops surrendered to India and met a humiliated defeat resulting in dismemberment of Pakistan into two different states i.e., newly formed Bangladesh leaving only West Pakistan as Pakistan. This war was followed by years of Indo-Pakistan conflicts, political unrests, differences between Bengalis and West Pakistanis on the basis of language and ethnicity. There is a disagreement on who was actually behind that violent conflict between three nations because Pakistan, India and Bangladesh view this event through the lens of their own media and socio-political perspectives. This paper is an attempt to explore the role of media during that tragic period of war, bloodshed, hatred and interplay of many national and international actors in South Asian region to change the whole regional dynamics. For this paper, previous knowledge and literature is synthesized into a new context to develop a logical understanding of the role played by media during 1971 war. After doing a systematic literature review, this paper concludes that media of East Pakistan and West Pakistan was divided into entirely different and poles apart wings. Media essentially played a negative role during that conflict by playing as a puppet in the hands of government. Media did not show the real picture of the issue instead kept on highlighting the negativities and atrocities that gave air to the conflict ultimately resulting in dismemberment of Pakistan.

Key Words: *Dismemberment, Indo-Pak Conflicts, Political Unrest, Media, Conflict, Ethnicity, socio-political perspectives.*

Introduction

On December 16, 1971, Pakistan faced the most dreadful shock of its history by losing East Pakistan and the unfortunately the reasons are not properly understood yet. Some blame political leadership of that time for showing inflexible attitude whereas few believe it to be an outcome of conspiracies of army. Moreover, there were certain socio-cultural differences alongwith geographical issues between East and West Pakistan that are pointed out by scholars to be the hidden reasons of that incident. Thus it is very clear that Bengali nationalism did not emerge overnight instead it is deeply rooted in so many factors that were quite evident since the Birth of Pakistan.

There were language issues, exploitation claims against West Pakistan by East Pakistan, economic centralism, differences in civil and military services and conflicts over constitution making combined with some other factors like death of Quaid-e-Azan and degeneration of All India Muslim League that lead to rise of ethnic Bengali parties. All of these political,

geographical, social and cultural grievances led to alienation of East Pakistan and disintegration of the country (Iqbal, 2008).

This dismemberment of Pakistan posed so many serious questions like what happened in war of 1971 that left Pakistan bifurcated (Hossain, 2013)? how many people lost their lives during that incident (Bose, 2011)? and who was actually behind that painful tragedy in the history of Pakistan (Bhutto, 1971)? However a little attention is paid to find out the answer of the question “why was Pakistan dismembered in 1971 (Mastoor, 2015)?” There are certain pertinent questions related to the flaws in structural, political and military systems that eventually led to the incident of 1971 which are yet to be answered.

Most of the accounts of that incident describe how a sense of deprivation was inculcated among Bengali people because the ruling elites of East Pakistan were unable to understand the Bengali perspective. In 1971, Pakistan’s major share of foreign exchange was because of export of jute (the golden fiber) and tea and both of them were East Pakistan’s products. Therefore, East Pakistan was justified in a sense that it wanted to have a handsome share in foreign exchange of Pakistan. Moreover, Bengalis were in majority but their representation in civil military service was not according to their population ultimately leading towards many grievances in their hearts (Hassan, 2018).

However, role of India cannot be ignored in giving air to Bengali’s grievances and taking the benefit of opportunity by establishing hundreds of training camps to provide arms and training to Bengali youngsters that led to the formation of “Mukti Bahini”: The Liberation Army. By mid of November 1971, situation in border areas kept on getting worse as fighters of Bengali Liberation Force kept on arriving from Indian Bengal. This alarming situation eventually led to a violent conflict involving in form of 1971 war of India and Pakistan ultimately resulting in separation of East and West Pakistan (Khan, 2019).

Indian government put its maximum effort to disintegrate Pakistan not only by providing support to Bengali Mukti Bahini but also by using its media as a propaganda tool. Pakistan government made an utter mistake by censoring the war coverage on local media and expelling international media as well during the war of 1971 because it ultimately led to hiding of Pakistan’s perspective about the ground realities of wartime. History proved that the mistake of censoring media put Pakistan at a serious disadvantage because international and national community couldn’t see the sufferings of Pakistan army by Bengali freedom fighters that were actually backed by India. International media was not allowed to operate in Pakistan; however, India welcomed it to support Indian narrative and hide Indian and Bengali atrocities against West Pakistan (Shad, 2021).

The above mentioned scenario, it is actually very important to understand how did media of that time played its role in shaping the narratives of the three nations involved in the war and of the whole world that actually viewed this event through the lens of media. International media along with media of East Pakistan, West Pakistan and India covered the incident. This is so because media is one of the most important pillar of any society and its role at times of conflicts and crisis becomes more crucial.

Broad Based Questions

This paper is an attempt to explore how the previous researchers found the role of media during Fall of Dhaka and how the existing literature views the contribution of media towards dismemberment of Pakistan? What was the political scenario at that time and media was operating in which system of operations/ regulations? How the narrative built by Pakistani media was different from that of international media and media of other actors of war of 1971?

For this paper, a synthesis is developed by reviewing existing body of literature available related to role played by media in that national tragedy. The paper will give a bird’s eye view of the roles played by media of all the actors of that war i.e., Bangladesh, India and the narrative build by international media of that time. Although a trilateral or multilateral mediated narrative can be explored for a study but keeping in mind the limitations and time constrains for this study, only the role of Pakistani media is analyzed in detail.

Objectives of the Study

The paper will try to meet following objectives by the end of this study:

- 1) To briefly explore the dynamics of 1971 war leading to Fall of Dhaka
- 2) To understand the role of media at the time of conflict/ crisis
- 3) To examine the role played by Pakistani media during Fall of Dhaka 1971

Methods

The study is conducted to find out answers of some very obvious questions related to 1971 war. These broad based questions are mentioned in the last part of introduction and to find the answer of these questions systematic review of literature is adopted as a method because of accessibility issue to primary data. Secondary data in forms of books, journal articles, news and magazine articles etc. related to role of media during war of 1971 to develop a synthesis on the basis of previous studies about how the role played by media in Fall of Dhaka is viewed by previous scholars and researchers. The content related to the topic is identified, collected and critically evaluated to answer the broad based questions and to meet the objectives of the study. Hence, a comprehensive and transparent search for information/ data and grey literature is conducted strategically under a well thought out plan with special focus on our research questions for this paper.

Converging the Data of Systematic Literature Review

Although at the time of 1971, electronic media was not that much flourished to serve the role of opinion building of the nation; however, still radio was listened in many far off corners of the country and Pakistan Television was also making in place in the society. Moreover, print media was at its boom and newspapers were read by majority of the people to be well-aware of political and economic upheavals, developing a linkage between sub-systems of authorities, political, civil and military leadership and to understand the interests of various social groups in the society. Media is viewed to be an important matrix to create social awareness, host debates on political issues and highlight criticism on various societal problems. This is why it has been a subject of undemocratic actions and political tyranny from ruling elites and pressure groups (Choudhury, 2019).

Same was the case at the time of 1971 war when a very complex situation that was a result of manifold reasons and ties with colonial structures was compressed into a “good versus bad” narrative by media. This war is actually considered to be rule changer in conflict journalism that highlighted focus of media is on the hot news only and this hot news becomes cold very early when media find another hot spot (Mohaiemen, 2008). At that time, every move of media was ruthlessly monitored by government and secret agencies because that was a time of embedded autocracy in Pakistan. This was not the case for media only but all the political actors, media persons and journalists were under the strict observation of army and secret agencies and anything said against government or army was considered to be a heinous offence (Mastoor, 2015).

In short, it was a period of oppression during which media could not communicate the whole information to the national and international audience related to war of 1971. However, media in Pakistan has institutionalised a distinct reminiscence of that event as third Indo-Pak war minimizing the element of Bengali people who view it as their war of struggle against system of oppression of West Pakistan. There is a point of contention that who was the central character of that war because there are many stories giving a unique meaning to it in the whole sub-continent (Zakaria, 2019).

Bengali nationalists facilitated Indian media in its propaganda against Pakistan's government and military to achieve their strategic goals. There were many unsubstantiated media narratives against Pakistan based upon conspiracies and stories meant to selectively target Pakistan's military ignoring the brutalities and atrocities of Bangalis and Indians against Pakistan army and Pakistani nationals in East Pakistan (Shad, 2021). Yahya Khan ordered not to publish news of atrocities of Bangalis against Pakistan. Press releases related to killing of many Pakistani nationals by Bangalis could not be published because of Yahya's orders. He is cursed for massacre of Bangalis; however, he was a friend of them in disguise (Ansari, 2019).

Due to Yahya's strict control on Pakistani media, the 1971 debacle was driven by a biased press. There have been continuity of grand lies and dishonesties of Indian and international media that perpetuated through continuous repetitions leading to a distorted and subjective vision in both the wings. The self-imposed censorship on Pakistani media was the actual reason behind propaganda of western and Indian media against Pakistan. The responsible press and investigative media persons exposed the propaganda against Pakistan by claiming that it is impossible to commit one million rapes by an army of sixty thousand soldiers in a two years span. Even if the rapes carried out by Mukti Bahini fighters are also included, still it is impossible to reach a figure of one million. International media never highlighted the rapes committed by Indian army and rebel militia. However, some Bengali investigators later realized that both their hands are soiled (Ansari, 2019).

Therefore, the defensive strategies of Pakistani media created problems in true depiction of war of 1971 because media misguided the people throughout the time of war. Initially, after the escalation of conflict, it kept on giving information that Pakistan is winning against the enemy that has lost its senses after plunging itself into war with an unexpectedly strong neighbor. Moreover, media of West Pakistan also tried to use religion and ideology against Indian offensive expansionist strategy. Finally, when the defeat of Pakistan was quite imminent, media avoided to portray it instead started preaching about self-control, self-discipline and moderation in dealing the new landscape (Iqbal & Hussain, 2018).

Moreover, expulsion of international journalists from Pakistan in the midst of Operation Search Light also hindered in the way of first hand reporting of news stories. Ultimately they had to rely on the information from India shaping the conflict in two ways. Firstly, it became very difficult for international media to get the actual situation ground resulting in the perception that Pakistani establishment is trying to hide something abnormal in East Pakistan. Secondly, international media had to rely on Indian news sources because it got stationed in India and the neutrality of these sources are still a question mark. Therefore, it may be argued that strict media control by Pakistani government was actually a wrong decision leading to propagation of one-sided information only. Objective facts could not reach the audience and Pakistan was held responsible for massacre and genocide of Bangalis in 1971 war that is no doubt a huge failure of Pakistani media (Bose, 2012).

Although many independent studies indicate that Indian and Bengali claims of genocide are based upon propaganda against Pakistan. They claim the death of three million Bengalis during that war. However, as per the Pakistani figures there were 2600 hundred casualties. Although the claim of 2600 is significantly low but the claim of three million is also absurd and over-exaggerated (Drummond, 1972, as cited in Shad, et al. 2021). Moreover, Bengali nationalists also killed almost the same number of non-Bengalis especially military men of Pakistan army (Mascarenhas, 1986). Pakistani media was under strict government control at that time but international media also didn't covert the conflict in an unbiased manner. They continued to target Pakistan military but did not mention the brutalities and atrocities committed by Mukti Bahini (D'Costa, 2001). Nevertheless, it is actually the failure of media that was unable to objective reporting of the war to bring the neutral facts in front of the whole world.

Conclusion

Finally concluding the discussion, the study finds out that media coverage of 1971 war was very complex because wrong decision of hiding correct information to the public made it a disaster. Media is expected to report the event in a neutral and objective manner but it actually served government in setting agenda for the public n government's favor. Inaccessibility of information from Pakistan's side gave an opportunity to Indian and International media to manipulate the facts in order to strengthen their propaganda against Pakistan.

However, what Pakistan learned from 1971 war has left very strong imprints on the minds of people. It is considered to the defining moment in the history of Pakistan in terms of national identity and regional politics. The loss of East Pakistan has left very important lessons for Pakistani government that media should not be kept under strict control instead it must be allowed to perform its role as a socially responsible media in the time of conflict or crisis. Pakistani media has now enough freedom to portray Pakistan's perspective on every forum to never let this thing happen again. Pakistan is not only working on its military and defense fronts but it is also working on giving strength to media as well to counter any propaganda against it in order to avoid misrepresentation of Pakistan on any forum.

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