

VERNACULAR DAILIES AND THE ETHNIC AND/OR RELIGIOUS STEREOTYPES IN THE TIME OF VIOLENCE

Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury

Despite India being a plural society with free media, we see many instances when media tend to play to the gallery, at least to some extent, and particularly in the times of violence. During these sensitive times of ethnic or communal violence and tensions, a section of the vernacular dailies and sometimes the English-language dailies publish reports, editorials, post-editorials and features of different kinds containing ethnic or religious stereotypes. The English-language dailies may have limited access to the common people who prefer to speak and use their mother tongue in the main and many are still unable to read English too. But, the vernacular dailies with larger circulation can reach every nook and corner of a city, town or locality and create havoc to inflame more tensions among the differing groups in an already surcharged atmosphere and thus incite violence to make the entire situation worse.

The free media have every right to disseminate information in an objective manner and without any bias. But, these stereotypical references to certain communities, usually the minority religious or ethnic community in a particular locality, can cause long-term, serious, and occasionally irreparable damages to the social fabric. This may be totally uncalled for in a plural society, but this seems to be quite common in the violent times.

Against this backdrop, the present study focuses on the nature of reporting in the print media on the eve of and during violence. For understanding the issue, we have selected two different incidents of violence – one in Assam in 1983 and the other in Gujarat in 2002. In the first incident, the non-Assamese speaking people were gruesomely massacred in Nellie of Assam in India's Northeast in the wake of the anti-foreigners' agitation. And, in the other and more recent incident, several parts of Gujarat in India's West were in flames following a fire in the Sabarmati Express at Godhra railway station when the Muslims were selectively targeted by a section of the religious majority community. These two apparently disconnected incidents separated by about twenty years' time help us to examine the nature of reporting by the print media in the time of violence in India.