

Indian Media's Coverage of  
Communal Riots:  
A Comparison of 2002 and 1984

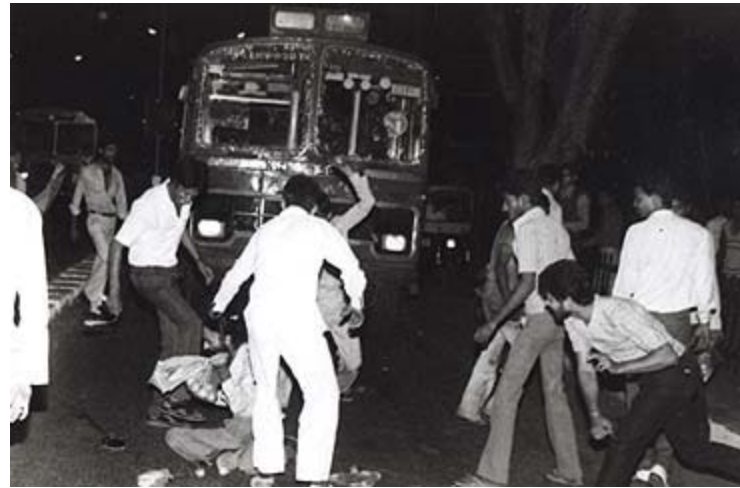
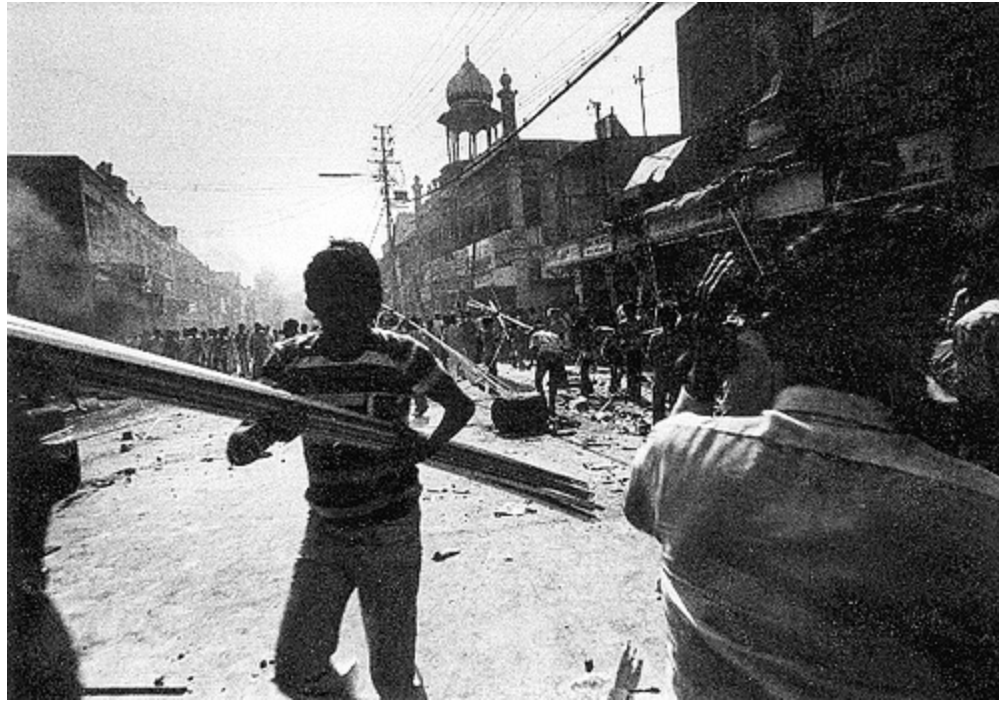
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# Background to the riots

- Before beginning my presentation, I would like to give a brief background to the riots. The 1984 Anti-Sikh pogrom which began on October 31, a few hours after Mrs Gandhi's assassination, by her Sikh body guards, carried on for four days.



- The Gujarat riots, which targeted Muslims, carried on from February 2002 to May 2002, took place in the immediate aftermath of the Godhra episode, in which a bogey with 58 Hindus was allegedly burnt by a Muslim mob.
- BJP Leaders and some Hindu hardline groups justified the riots as a spontaneous outburst of anger against Godhra.



# Thrust of the presentation

- This paper seeks to look at the basic differences in coverage between the 1984 riots and Gujarat, 2002.
- Seek the reasons for differences; Is it the circumstances? Presence of electronic media? Any change in the government's attitude towards media?

# Thrust of the paper, continued

- Many, especially BJP supporters feel that the media has given undue attention to the 2002 riots, while ignoring 1984 is this true, in anyway?

# Methodology

- Interviews with journalists and activists who witnessed both events (Rahul Bedi, HS Phoolka)  
The author of a book on the Gujarat riots, “Gujarat the making of a tragedy” Siddhartha Varadarajan  
Newspaper reports, clippings and articles from both periods
- Comparisons with similar situations in other parts of the world, like the Civil Rights disturbances in the US (beginning with the violence at Little Rock Arkansas in 1957).

# Reason for choosing case studies

- While in 1984, there was only one tv channel, state owned Doordarshan. In 2002, in stark contrast to 1984, there were a plethora of television channels which were there on the spot to cover the riots.
- The 2002 riots have in fact been called the 'first television riots' (Rajdeep Sardesai, The Hindustan Times) like the civil rights disturbances in the US

# Reasons for choosing case studies contd.

- *Gujarat was India's first television riot. There was remarkable journalism done in the 1980s (as also after Ayodhya), but somehow, the power and sanctity of the written word cannot match the impact and immediacy of the television image. Whether it was the visuals of street carnage five years ago or the voices of Sangh parivar footsoldiers bragging about their 'achievements' with chilling candour, the audio-visual image has the ability to confirm, even magnify, the gravity of the crime in a way that, at times, even the finest prose cannot...*

(Rajdeep Sardesai, The Hindustan Times, November 8, 2007)

# Comparing the coverage of 1984 and 2002

- While in 1984, it was only after a full day of rioting that there was any media coverage of the rioting which was taking place. The initial coverage in fact which took place was not through any media agency, but word of mouth. Rahul Bedi a correspondent working with the Indian Express was informed on November 1st about massive rioting which was taking place in a locality by the name of Trilokpuri. Bedi's story 'When terror stalked Trilokpuri' appeared in *The Indian Express* on November 2, 1984.
- "I was working with the Indian Express. A resident of Block 32, Mohan Singh, managed to reach our office. He had cut his hair to save his life. I happened to be around at that time and heard his story. On November 2, I went to Block 32 with two of my colleagues to come upon this horrible massacre". (The Times of India, Purva Khandelwal, 2004)

# Differences in coverage

- In 2002, private tv channels were providing live coverage of the riots, much to the chagrin of both the Gujarat and Central Government.
- Barkha Dutt, currently Associate editor of NDTV, during her reporting drew attention to “a 90-kilometre rural stretch where she said violence was taking place and there was not even a single constable in sight along the entire stretch” (The Hindu, Sevanti Ninan, 2002).

# Differences in Coverage

NDTV was bold in exposing the inaction of the police and the delay in deployment of the army (Rights and Wrongs: Ordeal by Fire in the Killing Fields of Gujarat , Editors Guild Fact Finding Mission Report Padgaonkar, Verghese, 2002)

Journalists from both the print and electronic media were harassed as their coverage was perceived to be one-sided and Anti-Hindu by rioting mobs (The Telegraph, Sujan Dutta, March 5, 2002)

# Identification of communities

- Another significant area in which there was a major departure from coverage of the 1984 riots, was the fact that news channels such as NDTV which were accused of inflaming the atmosphere, identified communities and did not go by the traditional convention of not naming communities. In the words of Barkha Dutt (March 25, 2002) ' Naming the community under siege in Gujarat was moot to the story..

# A combination of reasons for more coverage of 2002 than 1984



- The media was shocked by the assassination of Mrs. Gandhi, many otherwise most correspondents were deputed to cover her funeral and the visits of state dignitaries. In fact some of the editors even stoked the fires

# Electronic Media's role

- Unlike 1984, there were many more tv channels in 2002 and they were all privately owned. With news flowing in freely...

*The television camera reduced the mental and geographical distance between the Gujarat riots and a national viewership in a manner that the newspaper in 1984 could not. It also, especially in the context of a paralysed political class, became the 'real' opposition, questioning and challenging the Gujarat government's claims to be a non-partisan upholder of the Constitution. (Sardesai)*

# Importance of electronic media

- During the civil rights disturbances in the US, a news reporter while reiterating the significance of the electronic media had remarked “ Even without commentary, the shot of a big white man spitting and cursing at black children did more to open up national intellect than my stories ever could”.  
(Donovan, Robert and Scherer, Ray, 1992  
“Unsilent Revolution: Television News and American Public Life 1948-1991”, p.3-6)

# 1984, no electronic media

- The only television channel which existed, Doordarshan, played a negative role by telecasting scenes outside the prime minister's residence of crowds shouting slogans like '*khoon ka badla khoon*'. According to Desai (1991) showing such scenes repeatedly during such a volatile situation paved the way for the ensuing riots in Kanpur and other cities of India

# Government's approach towards media

- 'On March 1, two days after the violence began, the state government sought to ban the Star News channel because the Modi government claimed that the channel was guilty of "incitement" ( Drawing The Ram-Rekha, Seminar 2004)
- In an interview to the Outlook (March 18, 2002) remarked:

# Restrictions on TV Channels

- “ I blacked out one tv channel because of the provocative methods used..If every half an hour names of communities are going to be mentioned, without any substantiation or attribution, it inflames the situation instead of allaying it. It is not difficult to see what impact it will have”.
- Union Law Minister, Arun Jaitley was unequivocal in his defence of Modi, saying that certain sections of the media were ‘inflaming passions’ and this was part of a larger conspiracy to bring down the government.

# Double standards

- Interestingly, when the Godhra episode took place, the Government did not ask the media to exercise any sort of restraint, neither did it object to the identification of the Hindu victims and Muslim rioters.

# Same policy followed in Britain

- In 1981, during inner city disturbances in Britain, the Government had followed a similar approach blaming the media channels for inflammatory coverage which was one of the causal factors for escalation of violence (Nalin Mehta, *From Arkansas to Ahmedabad: Situating the Politics of Television in the 2002 Gujarat Riots*, 2004)

# Conclusions

- *Presence of electronic media was one of the important reasons as news was actually emanating from a source free of government influence.*
- “...Compared to the information glut of 2002, the Indian electorate in 1984 was a prisoner of a pretty primitive media grid. The state-owned Doordarshan and All India Radio had every single household in their monopolistic grip; this format facilitated the nation's emotional blackmail in the aftermath of Indira Gandhi's assassination. Today the state's monopoly is gone; the cable/satellite revolution has changed the rules of the game. The private television channels — apart from a vastly growing print media — ensure level playing fields for all. .As a country we are more media-savvy and image-resistant; we are more alert and more demanding consumers of information than we were in 1984”. (Harish Khare)

## *Government's role*

- It would be incorrect to assume that the political leadership in India, has become more liberal as the governments tried their hardest to control the media coverage, on the pre-text of social responsibility.
- The Government exhorted the media to exercise social responsibility, Home Minister, LK Advani said that 'sometimes speaking the truth may not be an act of responsibility' (*The Telegraph, April 7, 2002*)

# Media's Dilemma

- Margaret Thatcher had made the same argument during the British riots. Saying that naming of communities was exacerbating the tensions ( Nalin Mehta,2004)

# Media's dilemma

- When politicians ask the media to exercise restraint, they conveniently ignore the fact that:
  1. Media should ‘...contribute to the cohesion of society and the representation and expression of its diversity’ (McQuail, 2003)
  2. When electronic media channels were accused of acting irresponsibly, John Humphrys of the BBC made the point that

- The media has to confront this dilemma and ensure that it refrains from irresponsible reporting, which fuels tensions. At the same time, if it fails to report facts and

# Media curbs not the answer

- Potter Stewart (Associate Justice of the US Supreme Court):

*“Newspapers, television networks and magazines have sometimes been outrageously abusive, untruthful, arrogant and hypocritical. But it hardly follows that elimination of a strong and independent press is the way to eliminate abusiveness”.*

# More importance to 2002?

- It would be extremely unfair to accuse the media for giving wider coverage to the Gujarat Riots and ignoring the 1984 riots. In fact, by its continuous coverage of the Nanavati Commission and the CBI's clean chit to the accused in the 1984 riots – Jagdish Tytler and Sajjan Kumar – it put the Congress party in an embarrassing position.

# Tytler 'shooed out'

In April 2009, after a journalist Jarnail Singh threw a shoe on Home Minister P.Chidambaram, after a clean chit was given by the CBI – India's primary investigation agency -- to Jagdish Tytler and Sajjan Kumar of the Congress party, Tytler who was a Lok Sabha Candidate from Sadar constituency, was forced to withdraw his candidature along with Sajjan Kumar. Before withdrawing his candidature, Tytler according to a newspaper report blamed the opposition for maligning him and was especially harsh on the media saying ' you have destroyed me, my family and my children. Whatever may be the reasons for vengeance.. I have got justice but I have not got justice from you..' (The Times of India, April 9, 2009)

# Tytler 'shooed out'

