

Narratives of Marginalization



Reporting Religious Minorities in Pakistani Media

Muhammad Aftab Alam
Adnan Rehmat
Emilie Lehmann-Jacobsen

Narratives of Marginalization: Reporting Religious Minorities in Pakistani Media

A quantitative and qualitative analysis of television, radio, print and online news media content

AUTHORS: This research was jointly conducted by **Muhammad Aftab Alam**, lawyer, rights campaigner, and media law and digital rights activist; **Adnan Rehmat**, freelance journalist, Political analyst and media development expert, and **Emilie Lehmann-Jacobsen**, research specialist and media development expert.

Disclaimer: This research study was conducted by the Institute for Research, Advocacy and Development (**IRADA**), a registered Pakistan-based civil society organization focusing on social development and promotion of civil liberties with technical assistance of the International Media Support (**IMS**). However, neither IMS nor IRADA have to necessarily be in agreement with the findings of this report, which is produced in good faith based on monitoring and evaluation of the content of a pre-selected sample of media during a pre-selected limited time duration (October 8-21, 2018). None of the media content produced was by either these two organizations or by any of the researchers and analysts.

Table of Contents

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	1
INTRODUCTION.....	04
The purpose of this study	04
Background.....	04
RM's and overall Pakistani demography in numbers	04
RM's and Pakistan's media landscape in numbers.....	05
RM's and representation in media coverage	05
METHODOLOGY	06
Hypotheses.....	06
Research questions	07
Method	07
Monitoring sample	08
ANALYSIS	10
Key characteristics of the analysis and monitoring cycle	10
Analysis – basic review of news quantum by media composition	14
1. The most RM's-conscious media in Pakistan.....	13
2. The most frequently focused RM's in Pakistani media	16
3. News coverage of RM's – principal or incidental?.....	18
Analysis – key overall findings on trends	21
4. Representation of themes and sources in media coverage of RM's in Pakistan	21
5. Portrayal of RM's in Pakistani media – stereotypes and marginalization.....	26
CONCLUSIONS and RECOMMENDATIONS.....	36

List of Tables

Table 1: Overview of media outlets included in the content analysis	11
Table 2: Overview of the quantum of news stories	13
Table 3: Overview of quantum of news images	14
Table 4: Overview of quantum of news stories	16
Table 5: Overview of RMs highlighted in news images.....	17
Table 6: News storied with principal focus on Rm	19
Table 7: Themes of news stories during monitoring period	22
Table 8: Sources of news stories - content sources	24
Table 9: Representation of RMs in news stories	26
Table 10: Representation of RMs in gender terms	28
Table 11: Framing of RMs in news stories	31
Table 12: Representation of RMs in images and visuals	33
Table 13: Tone of news stories toward RMS	35

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Pakistan is a country in transition. A general election was held in 2018 after five years with a rare transfer of power from one civilian dispensation to another. A national census was held for the first time in nearly two decades in 2017 that reveals that the overall population of religious minorities has declined. The country's media landscape has transformed in recent years from a mostly state-controlled regime to a thriving private industry. Online spaces have grown with online-only news media and use of social media expanding rapidly. The general media narratives are shifting from an elitist obsession around power politics to a discourse centered on human rights. Pakistan's political, religious, ethnic, linguist and cultural pluralisms are a subject ripe for deeper examination.

It is in this context that this study on how Pakistan's diverse array of religious minorities (RMs), which is small percentage-wise but which runs into millions in numbers, is finding itself in terms of representation in media coverage about the overall society and polity in transition. To analyze this, this study employs two research questions that reveal the following answers:

Research Question (RQ) 1:

What characterizes the coverage of religious minorities in Pakistan?

The answer to this research question was determined as a review of the general quantum of news and images related to RMs and which media carry how much coverage of them; the frequency of various RMs featured in the media coverage and whether the focus on RMs in the coverage if central to it or incidental. The conclusive findings to this question:

The overall media coverage of RMs in quantum terms is generally low and the most widely available media – TV and radio – carry very little or no coverage of them at all. Hindus and Christian communities are the focus of almost all of what little coverage of RMs is available with other minorities such as Ahmedis, Sikhs, Buddhists, Kailash, etc., get almost no coverage. Most coverage of RMs has a principal focus on them but nearly a third don't.

Research Question (RQ) 2:

How are religious minorities represented in the media in Pakistan?

The answer to this question was determined through a review of the most dominant themes characterizing the coverage of RMs, the news sources used in the coverage, the gender diversity in perspectives to this coverage, the stereotypes and frames in which they were portrayed and the tone of the coverage towards them. The conclusive findings to this question:

The overall media coverage of RMs in qualitative terms is generally stereotypical linked to sensitive themes such as blasphemy. The minorities are generally painted in a victimhood framework. Most coverage about them does not even include their views, opinions or perspectives, rendering them voiceless to their own cause. While tonally a significant size of the coverage about RMs is inclusive and non-hostile toward them, most news stories and images are about them, not for them – most coverage is neutral, not sympathetic towards them. Almost all news coverage about RMs is reactionary or event-related, rarely stories about them because there are millions of them and deserve coverage regardless of their minority status.

Overall conclusion on quality of coverage of religious minorities in Pakistan

1. There is generally very low interest within the media on coverage of RMs-specific issues, keeping RMs generally off the news radar.
2. There is little or no interest in perspectives of RMs even in news stories and images related to them, keeping RMs generally voiceless and silent to their own cause.
3. Most media coverage of RMs portrays them in a victimhood framework or as a neutral subject requiring no action or follow-up reducing their ability to influence media narratives.
4. Most media coverage of RMs-specific issues is reactionary or event-based reporting with little or no analysis, limiting a rights-based approach to their interests.
5. Whatever little coverage is available about RMs is mostly on print media, which is only a fraction of the media landscape in Pakistan with TV and radio, constituting three-fifths of media, mostly ignoring them.

Recommendations on improving the quality of media coverage and profile of religious minorities

To countenance the challenges to the quantitative and qualitative media coverage of religious minorities and to promote greater media professionalism on the subject, the following actions need to be taken, among others:

1. Raise public awareness about news diversity landscape of Pakistani media and its challenges.
2. Sensitize and train the media on religious pluralisms and more nuanced coverage of religious minorities.

3. Promote interface between representatives of religious minorities and media to improve mutual understanding and to curb their stereotyping.
4. Train journalists and online information practitioners with religious minorities backgrounds on professional approaches to a rights-based civic activism.

This study was conducted by the Institute for Research, Advocacy and Development (IRADA), a registered Pakistan-based civil society organization focusing on social development and promotion of civil liberties, on behalf of and with technical assistance of the International Media Support (IMS).

Islamabad – October 2018

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study

The primary purpose of this study is to provide a baseline assessment on the quantity and quality of coverage of RMs in Pakistani media. The findings and recommendations herein can potentially serve to inform strategy for any subsequent intervention to improve media professionalisms related to the coverage of RMs in Pakistani media. The overall objective of this study, therefore, is to potentially improve capacities of media, including journalists, bloggers and social media actors, to better cover human rights and minority rights-related issues and perspectives. Baseline studies like these can aid the process of capacity development of media and minority media practitioners and enhanced societal understanding of the predicament for RMs.

Background

RMs and overall Pakistani demography in numbers

Pakistan is a Muslim-majority state. According to the national population census conducted in 2017, the total population of the country is 207.68m of which Muslims comprise 96.47% and RMs 3.53%. In the previous census in 1998, Muslims comprised 96.28% and RMs 3.72%. So, there is an overall 0.19% drop in the population of RMs between the two headcounts. In the 2017 census only five categories of RMs were identified to proclaim their faiths and the population of RMs in each category was given as follows:

- Hindus: from 1.61% in 1998 to 1.73% in 2017 (Now total population 3.59m)
- Christians: from 1.59% in 1998 to 1.27% in 2017
- Ahmedis: from 0.22% 1998 to 0.09% in 2017
- Scheduled Castes: from 0.08% in 1998 to 0.07% in 2017
- Other minorities: from 0.07% in 1998 to 0.02% in 2017

It appears that except for Hindus, the overall population of each of the rest of RMs has gone down in percentage terms between the last two census exercises. No reasons are officially recorded for the drop in these numbers. There has been no media investigation of this phenomena. Other than the three specific RMs included for identity in the census columns, RMs in Pakistan also include Sikhs, Bahais, Zoroastrians/Parsis, Kailash and Jews. All these RMs are included in the headcount for 'Other minorities' column in the census form.

RMs and Pakistan's media landscape in numbers

According to unofficial statistics from various representative associations of media sector stakeholders in the country, Pakistan's overall media industry employs close to 250,000 people of which the total number of journalists is around 20,000. Of this, the total number of women journalists is around 850 (or 4.2%) while the number of journalists with RM backgrounds are estimated at 270 (or 1.3%). So even in comparison with the overall demographics, the RM population in Pakistan is 3.5% while the number of journalists with RM background in media is 1.3%, which is only a third of the comparative percentages.

The number of Pakistani TV channels licensed by the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority by the fall of 2018 was 96 of which current affairs (news) TV channels were 37 (including 14 in vernacular languages); the number of FM radio stations was 143 of which 35 were non-commercial and print media journals accredited to the All Pakistan Newspaper Society included 137 daily newspapers, 13 weeklies, two fortnightlies and 45 monthly magazines. According to unofficial figures on media consumers from the media industry, by the fall of 2018 there were 160m TV viewers, 80m FM radio listeners and seven million print media circulation figures.

RMs and representation in media coverage

Pakistan often fares poorly in international rankings on religious freedoms with even minority sects within the Muslim faith facing discrimination. The country is a constitutionally declared Islamic state with laws discriminating among its citizens on their faith. However, Pakistan has a strong background in public movements on civil and political rights. The development sector is strong on advocacy for equal rights including voicing support for RMs. According to anecdotal evidence, the RMs in Pakistan often get little or no media coverage and whatever little coverage emerges, it often lacks representative or robust voices of the RMs themselves. With an overwhelming number of media practitioners themselves being Muslims, there is little sensitization toward minority voices, opinions and perspectives. This is why a baseline study like this can help sharpen the evidence on the scat nature, scope and scale of the coverage of RMs in media.

METHODOLOGY

Content analysis is a widely recognized analytical method within media studies. Scrutinizing media content to uncover hidden messages, intentions, and motivations has been one of the field's main interests since the 1920s when the method was first introduced by Harold Lasswell to study propaganda¹. Since then several different tools and approaches have been developed to strengthen the methodology and create transparency regarding coding and conclusions. Typically, a distinction is made between quantitative and qualitative approaches to content analysis. Whereas the quantitative approaches tackle large amounts of data in a systematized way based on predetermined codes, the qualitative approaches look at smaller samples from a more bottom-up perspective. Although more difficult in terms of ensuring scientific reliability, qualitative approaches are generally seen as better suited to scrutinize texts in-depth and form theories on likely interpretations of audiences².

For the purposes of this study, a qualitative approach was selected. As International Media Support (IMS) wanted to better understand how the media in Pakistan covers RMs, it was necessary to look at the content from several different angles and analyze the material in-depth. More specifically, it was decided to analyze the collected media content by looking at the representation of sources and the framing of stories.

Hypotheses

In view of the above context and rationale, this study used some operative assumptions, or hypotheses, to guide the research. These included:

- **H1:** Media coverage of RMs in Pakistan is generally biased and one-sided
- **H2:** RMs in Pakistani media are generally stigmatized
- **H3:** The voices of RMs are rarely represented in the Pakistani news and media images

¹ Macnamera, Jim, 2005, "Media content analysis: its uses, benefits and best practice methodology", *Asia Pacific Public Relations Journal* 6(1), p. 1-34.

² *Ibid.*, p. 5.

To test these hypotheses, the following two research questions were framed for determination through a list of indicators which were measured in the monitoring process and analyzed:

Research questions

- **RQ1: What characterizes the coverage of RMs in Pakistan?**
The answer to this question will determine the scale of coverage about RMs – the quantum and composition of media that focuses on RMs.