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## **Agenda-setting function and Assam violence case: A study of four national dailies**

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### **Abstract**

This paper examines the role of the agenda-setting function in the Assam violence case. In July 2012, violence in the Indian state of Assam took place with riots between indigenous Bodos and Bengali-speaking Muslims. The riots were reported to have taken place on 20 July 2012. At least 108 people died, and over 400,000 people were forced to live in 250 relief camps, after being affected by violence in almost 400 villages. Many people have been reported missing. The ethnic tensions followed by the violence of 2012 between the indigenous Bodo people and Bengali-speaking Muslims left a permanent wound in the region. The Bengali-speaking Muslims claim to be descendants of East Bengali Muslims brought to Assam by the Britishers for labor work, whereas Bodo indigenous communities allege the Muslim population has gone up after the refugees rushed from the erstwhile East Pakistan where civil war and human rights violations broke out in 1971.

How 4 Indian National dailies dealt with the issue while covering the same. It is observed that all the Four national dailies paid attention as expected from the media. The data is collected for the quantitative and qualitative analysis.

**Keywords:** Agenda setting, UPA, DJ (Dainik Jagran) DB (Dainik Bhaskar)

### **Introduction**

It's the media who contribute to making aware citizens, not the puppet of ruling political masters. So, in the case of citizens whose duty lies with them to develop good media habits. Media scholars arguably suggest that neither media nor citizens are capable of being handy to the political ecosystem. That's why the debate has been started from limited effects to agenda-setting functions. The limited effects approach argues that people may be influenced by media but the influence is probably very minimal. Agenda-setting research indicates that media not only tells people what to think, but it also tells the people to whom to think.

Communication scientists found that there is a covert relationship between what people read, watch, and hear and how they use that information. The development of measuring the effects of media on audience inspired some scholars to theorize the concept which tells that media not only informs us but also filters the information in such a way that we consider it as important as the salience assigned by media. Many studies suggest that media create an agenda for our attention and play a very important role in influencing the audience to varying degrees. When the given priority to any issue or event becomes the priority of the public is known as agenda setting function of the media. Even researchers found that dependency on the media of the individual, and society increases the chances of agenda-setting function. It will depend on the media and how the issue or event was emphasized.

The agenda-setting function requires a scientific qualitative and quantitative investigation. It has taken 40 years to come to this stage. The agenda-setting research has contributed a lot in increasing the understanding of how media formed public opinion and influenced the public by the media. But in the Indian context, agenda-setting research has been scarce. Few studies try to assess the relationship between the media system and the public.

The current study is another effort in this field. How agenda setting came into being depends upon the news, a process of converting events or issues into news. The processed items become the foundation where the agenda-setting and public opinion research stands.

### **Objective of the study**

The current study aims to focus on the role of four national dailies in agenda-setting functions while covering the Assam violence case from the date when the 1<sup>st</sup> news was published in the various newspapers. The period of the study was one-month coverage of said issue.

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## Review of Literature

Keeping in view the theme of the current research, a review of related literature has been done as follows.

A panel study that was conducted by (Weaver *et al.* 1981)<sup>[14]</sup> in the 1976 election year investigated the influence of television and newspapers. The major finding of the study was the time frame for agenda-setting correlation ranged from 0 to 9 months. It is also noted that agenda-setting effects seem to be shifted in the political.

The study of Machuen and Coombs, 1981 investigated that media agendas are to those who are interested in politics. In other words, we can have this type of opinion that interest in politics makes somebody else rely on media to gain political knowledge increases the chance of agenda setting in case of lack of proper orientation.

Funk Houser (1973)<sup>[15]</sup> conducted a longitudinal study of public agenda setting. He studied 14 major issues. His study discovered an association between the media agenda and the public agenda and a weak association between the public agenda and the media agenda.

Funkhouser also pointed out that the press is constrained by what is happening in the real world.

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Tichenor *et al.* (1975)<sup>[16]</sup> throws light on the necessary action for a successful agenda-setting function. The study shows that the more media coverage about a topic the more the chance of public education/knowledge. The study showed the relationship between media coverage and education learned. Spanning around 17 years in another study (1960.77) they found that those who are interested in politics have similar agendas to the various media agendas.

McCombs (1976)<sup>[17]</sup> noted that "the basic primitive notion of agenda-setting is a truism". The media tells us nothing about a topic or event, then in most cases, it simply will not exist on our agenda or in our life space. One of the strongest examples of agenda setting is that the issues or events that are ignored by the media do not register on the public agenda. It is also found that although media sets agenda it does not affect all people equally. Where the public lacks information alternatives there is a greater possibility of agenda setting as there is a direct link between media agenda and public agenda.

Zucker (1978)<sup>[18]</sup> found in their study that Unobtrusive issues which are direct and personal experiences by most individuals' salience on the media agenda led to public agendasalience for that item. Obtrusive issues mean with which people or audiences have greater familiarity and salience on the public agenda led to salience on the media agenda.

(Roberts & Maccoby, 1985)<sup>[19]</sup> It is found in the said study that media agenda at the individual level leads to casual influence for at least some issues under some conditions. It also noted that variables like perceived source credibility, media habits, degree of competition social and political beliefs and other contingent conditions either constrain or enhance therole of agenda-setting of media and the public.

**Research Design:** while studying the media content, the content analysis method is employed. The study is

conducted on four national dailies, two from Hindi, and two from English. The period for conducting the study is one month of continuous coverage of each daily from the date of happening of said event. The researcher has studied 9 variables which are as under.

1. Total column.
2. Editorial
3. Placements on 1st page
4. Placements on the 2nd page
5. Treatment as 1st lead
6. Treatment as 2<sup>nd</sup> lead
7. Anchor stories
8. Letter to Editor
9. Article published

**Table 1:** Showing the coverage of Assam violence case in four national dailies

	The Hindu	TOI	DB	DJ
Total columns	144	147	60	61
Editorials	3	4	2	3
Placement 1 <sup>st</sup> Page	12	13	5	0
Placement 2 <sup>nd</sup> Page	2	0	1	10
Treatment 1 <sup>st</sup> Lead	6	5	5	6
Treatment 2 <sup>nd</sup> Lead	3	1	2	1
Anchor Stories	0	0	0	0
Letters to Editor	29	0	0	0
Articles	2	3	1	1

## Results and Discussion

**Total columns:** when it comes to counting the number of columns published regarding the said issue, the data clearly shows that English media has given utmost importance to this issue by giving more space as compared to Hindi newspapers. The TOI published 147 columns during a tenure of one month followed by The Hindu144, Dainik Jagran 61, and the DB had given 60 columns space.

**Editorials:** Editorials reflect the policy of any media house, likewise the opinion page reflects the opinion of any individual. All of the newspapers covered this issue in a balanced way. The Times of India has published 4 editorials, followed by TOI and DJ each published 3editorials, whereas DB considers it worth publishing 2 editorials in this regard. The interesting thing was that the Hindi newspapers were keen to propagate right-wing politics.

**Placement on 1<sup>st</sup> page:** As the data given in the table shows, TOI, gave 13 news stories on the 1<sup>st</sup> page followed by The Hindu has published 12 news stories on the 1<sup>st</sup> page, and DB gave 5 news. DJ gave no space to this on the front page.

**Placement on 2<sup>nd</sup> page:** As per the data shown in the table DJ published 10 news on the second page, followed by The Hindu 2, DB gave only 1 news whereas TOI gave no space on the 2<sup>nd</sup> page to this issue.

**Treatment as 1<sup>st</sup> Lead:** The table indicates that The Hindu and DJ each published 6 news stories as 1<sup>st</sup> lead, whereas DB and TOI each had given 5 news stories as 1<sup>st</sup> lead.

**Treatment as 2<sup>nd</sup> Lead:** The data under this category indicates that 3 news stories appeared as 2<sup>nd</sup> lead in The

Hindu, followed by DB 2, whereas TOI and Dainik Jagran each gave 1 news as 2<sup>nd</sup> lead to this issue.

**Anchor Stories:** The table given above indicates the data about Anchor stories. In the print media context, Anchor stories have special importance as they appear in boxes, that catch attention. But all the newspapers have no stories about the coal block scam.

**Letters to Editor:** The data in the table is quite interesting that out of 4 national daily newspapers only The Hindu published 29 letters to the editor. The other 3 newspapers have not published any letters to the editor. The Hindu adopted an almost balanced approach while publishing letters from their readers.

**Articles:** Although articles are considered personal opinions. They too carry at least inclination towards any ideology. Either favoring or opposing any event/issue, a flow of information affects the people's perception. TOI has published 2 opinion pieces (Articles) on the said issue, followed by The Hindu 2. DJ and DB each have also published 1 article on the said issue.

### Conclusion

A common tendency embedded in the Indian media is that it starts a trial without having any logical facts and proof. The most important thing is that it publishes or broadcasts all objectionable content which carries the nature of spreading rumors among the people. If we look at the history of coverage of communal tension, it is evident that Hindi newspapers always fueled communal riots. The study shows that at the time of the Babri mosque conflict a vernacular daily has published more than 1000 news stories in a short period of 20 days, most of them were inclined towards the Hindu fundamentalist. (Jagdishwar Chaturvedi) Can anybody imagine that after such bombarding information which has a one-sided nature has mobilized the people in such a way that, it would culminate in destructive form? The outcome was the demolition of the Babri Mosque. In the same period, just 17 news stories were published by Dainik Jagran, from the Muslim side. Incidents like this motivated many scholars to dive deep into media effects research. The Assam violence case has not been untouched. The coverage by the Hindi newspaper is quite notable. More than half of the published news of DB and DJ negatively portrayed Muslims. Both the Hindi newspapers published exaggerated data about Muslim migrants often we see similar claims by the BJP and other allied ring-wing outfits. Even two dozen headlines were inflammatory in nature given by VHP, Bajrang Dal, etc. Another aspect regarding the coverage of north east is deliberate trivialization or ignoring the happenings. Either the Hindi news media give provocative information that boosts communal tension or choose to ignore the same. Both stances cannot be taken for granted, because chosen ignorance is also an agenda. If any leader state, will repeat Nellie (1984 massacre) he or she knows the power of media to shape opinion. Hence not only the media but politicians too set the agenda of media. Here comes the role of issue unobtrusiveness, people's perceived salience of issues or events has been found strong by the content of news media for unobtrusiveness. Communal violence and its reporting by Hindi media will always be under question, as in the case of Assam violence.

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