

**FROM ARKANSAS TO AHMEDABAD: SITUATING THE POLITICS OF
TELEVISION IN THE 2002 GUJARAT RIOTS**

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Introduction¹

On 15 December, 2002, a few hours after sweeping back to power with a massive victory in the Gujarat assembly elections, Chief Minister Narendra Modi was questioned in an interview with the Star News channel about the feeling of insecurity and anxiety that still prevailed among Gujarat's minorities. Basking in the triumph, the chief minister minced no words in his reply to the news anchor: "What insecurity are you talking about? People like you should apologise to the 5 crore Gujaratis for asking such questions. Have you not learnt your lesson? If you continue like this, you will have to pay the price." A public threat, delivered on television, drew the curtain on a year of tension between the television networks and the BJP establishment right through the riots and the fractious electoral campaign that followed. Even as the chief minister's interview was being recorded at the BJP headquarters in Ahmedabad, other journalists in the building had to escape with the aid of water pipe at the back to avoid being confronted by a mob of Modi supporters outside.² Television crews from various channels were attacked elsewhere in the city that day as well, and an Outside Broadcast van

¹ This paper was presented to the 15th Biennial Conference of the Asian Studies Association of Australia in Canberra 29 July- July 2004. It has been peer-reviewed and appears on the Conference Proceedings website by permission of the author who retains copyright. The paper may be downloaded for fair use under the Copyright Act (1954), its later amendments and other relevant legislation.

² Star News's interview with Narendra Modi was conducted by New Delhi Television's Managing Editor, Rajdeep Sardesai, and I have borrowed the opening lines of this paper from his description of the event. See Rajdeep Sardesai, 'Drawing the Ram-Rekha', *Seminar*, 533, www.india-seminar/2004/533/533%20rajdeep%20sardesai.htm (15/06/2004).

belonging to the popular Hindi news channel Aaj Tak came out of one such encounter with a telling message crudely scrawled all over it - *TV waale sab chor hai* (All TV guys are thieves).³

Ever since their launch in the mid-90s, privately owned commercial 24-hour television networks have gradually come to occupy a key position in India's political process, and the riots of 2002 in Gujarat, along with the subsequent electoral campaign, proved to be a watershed in the evolving relationship between television and politics. The 2002 riots, with the deep societal fissures they engendered, were the first riots in the age of 24-hour television in India and this, and as this paper will demonstrate, changed the rules of the game. Television news became a new 'unknown' factor in the politics of the violence and its role proved central to the BJP's election campaign that followed.⁴

This paper will sketch out the nature of television coverage of Gujarat 2002 and attempt to understand it through a comparison with the television coverage of the civil rights disturbances in the United States which started gaining momentum in 1957 with the violence over racial desegregation of schools at Little Rock, Arkansas, and continued into the late 1960s.⁵ It will also draw comparisons with the British television coverage of the inner city disturbances in 1981, which initially began as racial violence and then engulfed a number of cities from London to Leeds in a torrent of anti-establishment anger.⁶ In all three countries, this was the first time television had covered serious civil disorder and violence – the first exposure for the political establishment and TV viewers to the new phenomenon of being confronted with large-scale rioting unfolding virtually in their drawing rooms. In all three countries, television coverage of the violence ignited contentious debates about its impact and its role in politics. Situating the politics of television during the Gujarat riots in this context and analysing the controversies that arose during this period through this global prism would,

³ I was a member of one of the Star News teams that was attacked outside the Ahmedabad BJP office on December 15, 2002.

⁴ It must be noted here that there is a 'pre-history' to the role of television in riots in India. In 1984, the Indian state broadcaster, Doordarshan, was attacked by some critics for its role during the anti-Sikh riots that followed the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguards. Doordarshan's live broadcast of the slain Prime Minister's body lying in state for three days showed anti-Sikh slogans shouted by some Congress supporters, and some commentators say this fuelled the anti-Sikh violence. I am thankful to Gyanesh Kudesiya for pointing this out. However, Doordarshan did not cover the violence per se and, in any case, was not an independent broadcaster.

⁵ For details on the Civil Rights movement see Henry Hampton, Steve Fayer and Sarah Flynn, *Voices of Freedom: An Oral History of the Civil Rights Movement from the 1950s through the 1980s*, New York, New York, Bantam Books, 1990.

⁶ For more on the British riots of 1981 and their TV coverage see Howard Tumber, *Television and the Riots: A Report for the Broadcasting Research Unit of the British Film Institute*, London, BFI Publishing, 1982.

in my view, be a useful tool for understanding not only the issues involved but also the nature of television itself and how it impacts on politics, especially in its nascent stages.

Of course, one must be careful not to exaggerate the influence of television. As Michael Schudson has pointed out, it is very difficult to measure media influence. Many instances of presumed media effects, such as the belief that television turned the American public against the Vietnam war, fade on closer examination. In fact, television news coverage had been largely supportive of the war until the Tet offensive of 1968 and when the networks became critical afterwards, opinion polls actually found a temporary increase in support of the conflict. Many studies have concluded that it was public opinion that influenced television coverage more than the other way around. It is easy to fall prey to the ‘myth’ of television power. However, I agree with Schudson when he says, “The greatest media effects may not be measurable influences on attitudes or beliefs produced by media slant but the range of information the media make available to individual human minds, the range of connections they bring to light, the particular social practices and collective rituals by which they organise our days and ways...The media organise not just information but audiences. They legitimise not just events and the sources that report them but readers and views. Their capacity *to publicly include* is perhaps their most important feature ... Moreover, visibility - public visibility - is of enormous importance even if few people bother to read or watch the news. So long as information is publicly available, political actors have to behave as if someone in the public is paying attention.... even if the public is absent, the assumption of the public presence makes all the difference.” It is in this context that television assumes an important role and regardless of its actual impact on the voting public, it becomes central to the political process.⁷

Framing the Debate: Arkansas to Ahmedabad via London

The comparison between the United States and India is particularly pertinent because in both cases at the time of these events, national television networks were at least by some indicators, at the same level of evolution. In the United States, television news had been in existence around for about 9 years when the violence first erupted and there were about 46 million TV sets in the country by 1960.⁸ In India, private television networks had been broadcasting around for about 7-8 years in 2002 and about 40 million of the country’s 81.6 million TV set owners had access to private news networks.⁹ Crucially however, while

⁷ Michael Schudson, *The Power of News*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1995, pp. 22-25.

⁸ Sig Mickelson, *The Decade that Shaped CBS News*, Westport, Praeger, 1998, pp. 1-2.

⁹ ‘IRS 2002 Key Findings’, reproduced in *The Hoot*, www.thehoot.org/story.asp?section=&lang=L1&storyid=webhootootL1K0101 (22/06/2004).

television news in the United States in those days remained a black-and-white 15-minute bulletin meshed in between entertainment programming, the Indian networks covering the violence were 24-hour news channels, where gruesome images of the violence were repeated round-the-clock. This obviously magnified their impact, making them even more potent.

In the United States, the violence at Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1957 was “the first running story of national importance that television fully covered” and most scholars agree that the coverage of the civil rights disorders over the next decade contributed immensely to the transformation of television into a serious news medium. Robert Schakne of CBS News, one of the first television reporters who covered the violence against African-American students trying to enter an all-White school at Little Rock went on to comment: “We had no idea that our form of journalism would essentially change the way the country thought...I think people saw things [on television] they didn’t quite comprehend if they had just read [about] them...television changed the rules somewhat...But we didn’t know that this was essentially a different medium in some very fundamental ways and that the impact of what we did was going to be very different.” Despite the small 15 minute news bulletins, the power of television was perceived to be such that when the first scenes of violence erupted on television screens in 1950s America, a *New York Times* journalist noted the power of television by wryly pointing out how police dogs looked like police dogs in newspaper and magazine photos, but on television, the dogs snarled. Another newspaper reporter in those first days of television observed how “...Even without commentary, a shot of a big white man spitting and cursing at black children did more to open up the national intellect than my stories ever could.”¹⁰ Most recently, in this context, Sasha Torres has directed attention towards what she calls a ‘historical alliance’ between the civil rights movement and the television industry to “forge a new, and newly *national*, consensus on the meanings and functions of racial difference” at a time when both were rapidly expanding.¹¹ Moreover, the American national networks that covered the disturbances - CBS, NBC and ABC - were privately owned commercial enterprises just like the major Indian national networks - Aaj Tak, Zee News and Star News – forty years later.

The case of Britain, however, is slightly different because television broadcasting had been well established by 1981, having started in the 1940s, and viewers had seen serious violence on their screens before from Northern Ireland. Moreover, while two major broadcasters, ITN

¹⁰ Robert J. Donovan and Ray Scherer, *Unslient Revolution: Television News and American Public Life, 1948-1991*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992, pp. 3-6.

¹¹ Sasha Torres, *Black, White and in Color: Television and Black Civil Rights*, Princeton University Press, 2003, p. 6.

and Grenada TV, were commercial enterprises, the BBC was not, being an autonomous public trust funded largely through license-fees. Despite this background, the impact of the television coverage was such that the British government's Scarman Enquiry that investigated the first phase of the 1981 disorders, the Brixton violence of 10-12 April, began with the following words: "During the week-end of 10-12 April (Friday, Saturday and Sunday) the British people watched with horror and incredulity an instant audio-visual presentation on their television sets of oceans of violence and disorder in the 'capital city' the like of which has not previously been seen in this century in Britain..."¹²

Television, Violence and Politics: Rewriting the Rules

The Gujarat violence began with an attack at Godhra on a train carrying *kar-sevaks* returning from Ayodhya.¹³ The Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) had issued an ultimatum that it would begin construction of a Ram temple at the disputed Ramjanmabhoomi-Babri Masjid site at Ayodhya by 15 March, 2002, and the *kar-sevaks* had been part of the VHP's mobilisation in the town. They were now returning home but after an altercation with some local Muslims at the Godhra railway station, 58 *kar-sevaks* were burnt alive on the morning of 27 February, 2002. By afternoon all three major television networks had the gruesome images on air - bodies burnt beyond recognition being taken out of train carriages by rescue workers as the embers still smouldered around them.¹⁴ Facing their first communal riot, India's young television networks had to deal with a serious problem that American networks had faced in 1957 in Arkansas during the first phase of rioting there. There were simply no pre-established norms or precedents for them to go by. In the words of Robert Schakne of CBS News: "We knew how to cover stories as newspapers covered stories, but we were inventing television..."¹⁵ This is pretty much what the Indian channels did in Gujarat - they simply created new rules of engagement in journalism as they went along and this, as we shall see, created a serious political problem. When the first pictures of the Godhra violence were telecast all three major television networks - Zee News, Aaj Tak and Star News - broke the

¹² Lord Scarman, *The Brixton Disorders, 10-12 April, 1981*, London, HMSO Cmnd 8427, House of Commons Parliamentary Papers 1981-82, Chadwyck-Healey Ltd., p. 1.

¹³ *Kar-seva* is a form of worship through work performed collectively, and *kar-sevaks*, are those who perform it. The term has been appropriated by the Hindu nationalist movement as a form of political activism aimed at building the Ram temple at Ayodhya. The term was adopted in a VHP meeting at Hardwar on 23-24 June, 1990. See Arvind Rajagopal, *Politics After Television: Religious Nationalism and the Reshaping of the Indian Public*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001, p. 317.

¹⁴ The exact sequence of events at Godhra and how the ill-fated S-6 coach of the Sabarmati Express was burnt is a highly contentious issue with a police forensic enquiry suggesting that the coach was burnt from inside rather than by an attacking mob from outside. The new Union Railways Minister Laloo Prasad Yadav has renewed the controversy by ordering a fresh enquiry in July 2004.

¹⁵ Robert J. Donovan and Ray Scherer, *Unslient Revolution: Television News and American Public Life, 1948-1991*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992, p. 4.

established print ‘convention’ of not naming the religion of the victims of a communal riot and all three channels carried blaring headlines about the killing of *Ram-sevaks*.¹⁶ The logic behind the old print convention had been that identifying the victims as Hindus or Muslims could inflame passions and lead to revenge attacks, so their identities were never mentioned. Television, with its visual images, made the old print convention more or less redundant.

However, though all three TV channels called the victims *Ram-sevaks* on 27 February, from the 28 February onwards, when Muslims were targeted in revenge killings, both Aaj Tak and Zee News reverted to the old print practice of not naming the religious community of the victims. Aaj Tak repeatedly advised its reporters to avoid terms like minority and majority. At Star News, however, a conscious editorial decision was taken – at least for the first few days of the violence- that the community of the victims is central to telling the story of the violence and Hindus and Muslims were constantly identified in its coverage. In the words of Barkha Dutt, one of the channel’s senior editors and news anchors intimately involved in the riot-coverage: “Naming the community under siege in Gujarat was moot to the story. In fact it was the story, revealing as it did a prejudiced administrative and political system that was happy to stand by and watch. Isn’t it a journalists’ job then to tell the story?”¹⁷ It must be stressed here that Aaj Tak’s editorial policy was not necessarily a case of anti-Muslim bias, as some commentators have suggested.¹⁸ At a seminar in March 2002, Aaj Tak’s then chief executive producer Uday Shankar, justified his channel’s policy of not naming the community of the victims but defended the right of other channels to identify communities, saying one man’s responsibility was another man’s censorship.¹⁹

By the second day of the violence, the constant images of continuing violence on television at a time when the government was claiming everything was under control, were clearly embarrassing for the ruling BJP establishment and therefore reining in the channels became a priority. Star News’s policy of pointing out the deliberate targeting of Muslim victims, along with the complicity of sections of the police force, made it the prime target. Then Union Law Minister Arun Jaitely, in a live interview with Zee News on March 1, 2002, accused some television networks of inflaming passions in a conspiracy to topple the government, at which point, the anchor assured the minister of his support and openly ‘celebrated’ the state government’s decision to censor or blackout the responsible channels. The pressure was

¹⁶ The term *Ram-sevaks* – literally, ‘servants of Ram’- is often used interchangeably with *kar-sevaks*.

¹⁷ Barkha Dutt, ‘Covert Riots and Media’, *Outlook*, 25 March 2002.

¹⁸ See Anil Chamaria, ‘Hindi TV and Gujarat Violence’, From *Kathadesh 2002*, reproduced in Siddharth Vardarajan (ed.), *Gujarat: The Making of a Tragedy*, New Delhi, Penguin Books India, 2002.

¹⁹ ‘TV News Gathering: Responsibility Issues’, 16 March 2002, www.indiantelevision.com/special/y2k2/ficci/ficsp18.htm (15/06/2004).

clearly beginning to tell. Channels were being forced to choose on how far they were prepared to go to take on the central government.

When Star News refused to toe the line, the Gujarat government banned its telecast in the state the next day. Chief Minister Modi justified the ban saying: “I blacked out one channel because of the provocative reporting methods used. Traditionally the print media has used its own methods of self-censorship not to mention the names of communities while reporting riots. If every half an hour names of communities are going to be mentioned, without any substantiation or any attribution, it inflames the situation instead of allaying it. It is not difficult to see what impact it will have.”²⁰ This argument was somewhat akin to the charge of encouraging *copycatting* laid at the door of the British TV channels during inner city disturbances of 1981 when the channels were accused of being responsible for the escalation of the violence and inflaming passions. The suggestion was that the riot was spreading from city to city because angry youth saw violence in other cities on TV, learnt the techniques from the images and then duplicated them on their own streets. Lord Scarman’s enquiry report was clear on this issue: “The media, particularly the broadcasting media, do in my view bear a responsibility for the escalation of the disorders (including looting) in Brixton on Saturday 11 April and for their continuation the following day, and for the imitative element in the later disorders elsewhere... I do urge editors and producers to accept that there is a responsibility to assess the likely impact on events of their own reporting of them, to ensure balance and coverage of disorder, and at all times to bear in mind that rioters, and others, in their exhibition of violence respond alarmingly to what they see (wrongly, but understandable) as the encouraging presence of the TV camera and the reporter.”²¹

As violence continued in Gujarat, then Home Minister L.K. Advani asked the media to take lessons from the American coverage of September 11 and suggested that ‘sometimes speaking the truth may not be an act of responsibility...’²² Again, this was a virtual repeat of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher’s argument during the British riots when she spoke of the need to draw a line between reporting events and providing so much publicity that those events got amplified.²³

²⁰ Interview to *Outlook*, March 18, 2002.

²¹ Lord Scarman, *The Brixton Disorders, 10-12 April, 1981*, London, HMSO Cmnd 8427, House of Commons Parliamentary Papers 1981-82, Chadwyck-Healey Ltd., p. 110

²² ‘BJP builds Bush shield for Modi,’ *The Telegraph*, 7 April, 2002

²³ Howard Tumber, *Television and the Riots: A Report for the Broadcasting Research Unit of the British Film Institute*, London, BFI Publishing, 1982, p. 8

At the heart of the government's criticism of media coverage of the Gujarat violence was the notion that reports about systematic killings of Muslims should have been balanced with accounts of the Godhra killings or incidents where Hindus had suffered. *The Times of India's* Siddharth Varadarajan counters this view: "There is no major newspaper or TV channel which did not extensively cover the Godhra incident when it happened, criticize the attack in the strongest possible terms, and interview the survivors and victims' families. Had the BJP not 'retaliated' for Godhra, it is likely that much of the media space devoted to the killings which ensued would have been and exclusively devoted to the Godhra tragedy. In any event, it is significant that Advani and other BJP leaders like Arun Jaitely criticized what they said was graphic TV coverage of the violence only when this coverage started reflecting badly on their party. They did not object when the Godhra victims were identified as 'Ram sevaks' and their burnt corpses were turned into an undignified, inflammatory public spectacle by the Modi government and shown repeatedly on TV channels, including Star News. And the fact is that after that one occasion when dead bodies were shown, no channel, not even Star News, showed viewers footage or photographs of the corpses of those who died in Gujarat subsequently...I am personally convinced that it was the accurate coverage of Gujarat by the Indian print and electronic media which forced the BJP to finally stop the violence. Some 2,000 people died but had the media not cried murder, perhaps many, many more would have fallen victim..."²⁴

Echoing the BBC's defence in 1981, Star News Editor Rajdeep Sardesai, at the height of the government pressure, responded by accusing the government of 'shooting the messenger' and laid out a strong case for journalists to report the facts and not see events through 'government binoculars'.²⁵ The BBC's John Humphrys in 1981 had outlined the same freedom of the press argument, though in a much more restrained tone: "That fact remains, if there is rioting on the streets of Britain we have an absolute duty to show what is happening. The public's right to be informed surely demands visual coverage..." However, it must be pointed out that in Britain, the editors of both, BBC and ITN, largely accepted that their coverage might have led to copycat imitations, while adding that there was no conclusive evidence to this effect.²⁶

²⁴ Siddharth Vardarajan, 'The Truth Hurts, Gujarat and the Role of the Media', in Siddharth Vardarajan (ed.) *Gujarat: The Making of a Tragedy*, New Delhi, Penguin Books India, 2002. p. 273-274

²⁵ Rajdeep Sardesai, The media did not ransack shops, takes lives, Mr Modi, *The Indian Express*, 7 March, 2002

²⁶ Howard Tumber, *Television and the Riots: A Report for the Broadcasting Research Unit of the British Film Institute*, London, BFI Publishing, 1982, p. 8, 29.

Gujarat, however, was not so much Britain 1981 as it was the American South in the late 50s and early 60s. Network reporters from CBS and NBC who were rushed to the scene – since none of the networks had Southern bureaus in those days - would often hear the chant ‘Nigger lover’ as they went about their business and were often roughed up by segregationist crowds who looked upon them as ‘Northern’ agents. The detestation of out-of-town television crews by many southerners was mirrored in segregationists’ names for the networks: NBC was Nigger Broadcasting Company, ABC was Afro Broadcasting Company and CBS was the Coon (or Communist) Broadcasting System.²⁷ In Gujarat too, TV crews from all three national channels were often threatened and beaten up, and accused by rioters of being ‘Muslim lovers’. Reporters from both Zee News and Aaj Tak were warned at various stages of dire consequences if they persisted with their coverage of the violence. In a case that was later raised in a Parliament debate, a Star News crew were attacked barely a kilometre outside the chief minister’s residence in Gandhinagar after filming an interview with Modi.

Interestingly, in both America and Gujarat the profiles of the reporters sent to cover the story by the national networks were virtually identical. None of the American networks had bureaus in the South when the disturbances first started and, according to Donovan and Scherer, the television reporters who were rushed in were unfamiliar with the terrain and relatively young and inexperienced, most of the around thirty years of age. In Gujarat, while all the Indian channels already had bureaus in Ahmedabad, more reporters were sent in after the violence started and my own calculations put the average age of television journalists covering the violence around the twenty eight year mark. This was because of the relatively young nature of the medium in both societies at the time these events occurred.

The role played by the local police in both cases was also similar. In Gujarat, the single biggest attack on television crews was the unprovoked assault by the Ahmedabad Police on 8 April, 2002, on two dozen photographers and reporters at the Gandhi Ashram while covering a peace meeting attended by Narmada Bachao Andolan leader Medha Patkar.²⁸ More than a dozen journalists were injured in this assault, two of them seriously. Compare this with the plight of American photographers during the civil rights disturbances through the eyes of Karl Fleming of *Newsweek*: “I saw these guys get beaten up so many times, helpless-totally helpless. They had no defences. It was always the cops who would beat them up, practically always. For, if it wasn’t them, they would stand aside and smirk while the local rednecks

²⁷ Robert J. Donovan and Ray Scherer, *Unslient Revolution: Television News and American Public Life, 1948-1991*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992, p. 9.

²⁸ Rajdeep Sardesai, ‘Drawing the Ram-Rekha’, *Seminar*, 533, www.india-seminar/2004/533/533%20rajdeep%20sardesai.htm (22/06/2004).

pounded the hell out of them.”²⁹ In 1962, a French reporter was shot dead at the University of Mississippi in Oxford and by 1964 reporters like Peter Jennings of the ABC could barely function without forcing local policemen, often against their will, to provide a security detail. Dan Rather of CBS has written about how many TV crews took to carrying handguns for self-defence though he completely forbade his crew to do so. However, his rule was disobeyed and this saved his life one night in Birmingham.³⁰ In Britain too, a number of TV crews were beaten up by the rioters, but the intensity of the violence never seems to have matched to Gujarat or the American South. In an echo of northern reporters shedding their coats and ties to remove their citified look to escape angry mobs in the South, many national TV reporters in Gujarat too would often remove the channel logos from their microphones before going into riot-hit areas.

In both Gujarat and the US south, local television channels were accused of playing an irresponsible role, pandering to what may be called the ‘majority sentiment’. Under India’s peculiar broadcasting system most homes get access to private networks, including news channels, through cable operators who charge a monthly fee. While there are big regional language channels in most states, many of these cable operators also run local news bulletins to attract customers by telling them what is happening in the locality. It is these local cable networks that have been accused of playing an inflammatory role. In Vadodara for instance, at least one survey was particularly scathing about the role of three local channels JTV, Deep and VNM. According to a report by the Editors Guild of India, the Police Commissioner of Vadodara felt the cable networks had “played havoc” by telecasting inflammatory statements by local leaders. After a warning, licences of two operators - News Plus and VNM - were suspended on March 17th and their owners arrested for showing live footage of rioting in the sensitive Macchipith area of the city. The licences were restored only after 48 hours and the channel operators released on bail.³¹ Similarly, it is widely documented that during the civil rights disturbances in the American south, most of the local press and television stations often reneged on their duty to report the news accurately because of their owners’ opposition to racial desegregation. They would often completely ignore coverage of the civil rights movement and sometimes black out – citing technical problems- telecasts by the national networks that focussed on the issue.³² The best example is a local television station WLBT in

²⁹ Robert J. Donovan and Ray Scherer, *Unslient Revolution: Television News and American Public Life, 1948-1991*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992, p. 5.

³⁰ Dan Rather with Mickey Herskowitz, *The Camera Never Blinks: Adventures of a TV Journalist*, New York, William Morrow, 1977, pp. 79-82.

³¹ Aakar Patel, Dileep Padgaonkar, B.G.,Verghese, *Rights and Wrongs, Ordeal by Fire in the Killing Fields of Gujarat, Editors Guild Fact Finding Mission Report*, 3 May 2002, p. 20.

³² Robert J. Donovan and Ray Scherer, *Unslient Revolution: Television News and American Public Life, 1948-1991*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992, pp. 7-9

Jackson which occasionally interrupted the NBC's flagship news programme, 'The Huntley-Brinkley' Report, when it was covering civil rights, and sometimes, prior to news reports on the Today Show, a WLBT announcer would warn, "What you are about to see is an example of biased, managed Northern news. Be sure to stay tuned at seven twenty-five to hear your local newscast."³³

TV as Force Multiplier

With television's role during the riots becoming such a contentious political issue, it was not surprising that the BJP converted the media coverage of the violence into a major campaign plank in the assembly elections. Equating criticism of his government's handling of the riots with an attack on 'fifty million Gujaratis' and Gujarati 'asmita' (pride) Chief Minister Narendra Modi, in speech after speech, constantly painted the national media as a villain out to 'besmirch Gujaratis as rapists and murderers'. As part of the 'asmita' theme, he constantly made a distinction of 'us versus them' between the Gujarati press, which he praised for reflecting popular anger against Muslims after the Godhra carnage, and the non-Gujarati press which was extremely critical of the government's handling of the riots. In fact, within hours of sweeping the polls Modi triumphantly declared on national television that the verdict was a reaction to the national media's 'false campaign of vilification' against him and reflected popular support for his government's handling of the riots.³⁴

As perhaps the only chief minister in India to have completed a TV management course in New York, Narendra Modi proved particularly adept at manipulating television. In fact, manipulating the media and using it as a 'force multiplier was a crucial element of his drive to paint himself as the 'Hindu Hridayasamrat' (King of Hindu Hearts). As Darshan Desai has pointed out, his strategy was simple: just remain in the news by constantly issuing controversial statements and in an emotionally charged campaign, the more the national press blamed him for the riots and highlighted his statements, the more heroic he appeared to his constituency. "Throughout his Gujarat Gaurav Yatra (Gujarat Pride journey), across towns and villages, across every nook and cranny of Gujarat, he ensured that the media chased him everywhere. Despite the fact that he repeated the same rhetoric: the media followed him – in case he said something controversial. And he did not disappoint them. It made news when he referred to Sonia Gandhi as 'Italy *ki beti*' (the daughter of Italy). It made news when he spoke of '*miya* Musharraf' to refer to Muslims in general. It made news when he called (Chief

³³ Fred W. Friendly, *The Good Guys, the Bad Guys and the First Amendment: Free Speech Versus Fairness in Broadcasting*, New York, Random House, 1975, p. 91

³⁴ Narendra Modi's interview with Rajdeep Sardesai first broadcast at 7 pm on Star News on 15 December, 2002.

Election Commissioner) ‘James Michael Lyngdoh’ by his full name to let people know that he (Lyngdoh) is a Christian, to insinuate that therefore he is close to Sonia Gandhi. It made news when he said, ‘*Hum paanch, hamare pacchis*’ (We are five, and we have twenty-five) [The insinuation being that Muslims who were allowed four wives are breeding fast and would soon swamp Hindus]. For those who had not heard it, he repeated, ‘*Hum panch, hamare pachis, paschis key chhe-sau pacchis*’ [We are five, we have twenty five and they another six hundred and twenty five] and told the reporters to note it properly”³⁵

When dealing with television throughout the campaign, Modi displayed a very clear understanding of the audience he was addressing and how his comments would play. For instance, when his Gaurav Yatra wound its way back to ground zero in Godhra, the BJP wanting to make full use of the symbolism of the event, made special arrangements for about thirty journalists from Delhi to be there for the coverage. With all the major TV networks set up for live coverage, Modi, who through the Yatra had given speeches in Gujarati, suddenly switched to Hindi. He began his speech by apologising to the crowd for not speaking in Gujarati but said he was doing so for the benefit of the TV channels “so the whole world should hear his speech” and learn how the media was tarnishing the name of fifty million Gujaratis. Modi understood television’s reach and was using its imagery not just to propagate his message in Gujarat but also to build a pan-Indian constituency as the new face of Hindutva.³⁶

When the Election Commission banned the use of images of the charred railway coach in which the kar-sevaks were killed at Godhra for electoral campaigning – an image that had become the BJP’s leit motif in the campaign, appearing on everything from T-shirts to posters – the ban was circumvented with a clever strategy. Video CDs were produced with dramatic soundtrack of an approaching train and then horrific sounds of people burning while the screen flashed animated images of a fire. A graphic in Gujarati then appeared exhorting the viewer to ‘remember the sacrifice’ and vote for the BJP. These video CDs were distributed all over Gujarat and often played on local Gujarati cable channels as political advertisements.

On polling day, with TV channels showing lines of Muslim voters casting their vote early in the morning, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad’s senior leader, Praveen Togadia, went live on the networks accusing the Election Commission and ‘James Michael Lyngdoh’ of deleting his name from the voters’ list. This was big news and hard-pressed to continue live coverage, all

³⁵ Darshan Desai, ‘Massacres and the Media, A Field Reporter Looks Back on Gujarat 2002’, *Sarai Reader 2004: Crisis/Media*, pp. 228-229

³⁶ The author covered Modi’s Godhra election meeting for the Star News channel.

the channels carried the allegation repeatedly through the day without cross-checking the allegation. As it turned out, his name was actually on the list. But by the time the drama played out, the attempt to influence voters by allegations of the Election Commission playing tricks on Gujaratis had proved effective. The media was manipulated to persuasively address apathetic and fence-sitting voters even on the day of the polling.³⁷

It wasn't just the BJP that cleverly used television. Touring Gujarat to assess first-hand whether the ground-situation was conducive to holding immediate elections as the BJP was demanding in July, Chief Election Commissioner JM Lyngdoh virtually became a folk-hero with the 'secular' establishment when in full gaze of the television cameras he accused senior police and administrative officers in Vadodara of 'not being worthy of their jobs' for letting the violence spiral out of control. The Election Commission subsequently postponed the elections to December after a bitter battle in the Supreme Court, thus transforming Lyngdoh into a pet-hate figure for the Gujarat BJP. But the crucial fact is that Lyngdoh chose to express his anger at local officials in front of TV cameras that he knew were filming him. Deputy Election Commissioner A.N. Jha later explained to an interviewer: "When we visited the riot camps, people were hesitant to come out because they didn't know who we were, whether we were part of the government. But when they saw the TV cameras and microphones, they started coming out. They thought they could use this opportunity to share their woes with the world. As a result, the response was overwhelming..."³⁸ Though Lyngdoh was no political worker and his outburst against the state government officials was probably a spontaneous reaction, a comparison with Martin Luther King and his use of television in the civil rights movement is tempting, though perhaps not warranted. King's biographer David J. Garrow has written about his determination to use television and radio to his advantage and indeed, his organisation during the agitation in Birmingham was apt to call off a demonstration if no mob turned up to attack the marchers or if no television cameras were in evidence. One of the most powerful television pictures of the civil rights movement were those of Birmingham's police commissioner Eugene 'Bull' Connors turning his police dogs and fire hoses on peaceful marchers. In fact, King and his helpers knew that firehoses, were in reality, their weapon, not his. They understood how the dogs and hoses looked on television and King nudged his helpers to "find some way to make Bull Connor tip his hand."³⁹

³⁷ Darshan Desai, 'Massacres and the Media, A Field Reporter Looks Back on Gujarat 2002', *Sarai Reader 2004: Crisis/Media* p. 229

³⁸ Interview with Shivam Vij, 'The Media's Role in the Electoral Process', *The Hoot*, 12/12/2003, www.thehoot.org/story.asp?section=&storyid=Web21021416617Hoot70711P (22/06/2004)

³⁹ David J. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference*, New York, Vintage Books, 1988, p. 239

CONCLUSION

Gujarat 2002 was a pivotal event in the history of Indian television and politics. For the first time, television became a major factor, some would say, even a catalyst for the events happening around it. The comparison with the television coverage of the Civil Rights disturbances in the American south in the 50s and the 60s is an obvious one with television occupying a roughly similar place in both societies at the time of the violence. We have seen how in both the United States and India, as indeed in Great Britain, much the same issues were raised when television focussed its lenses on civil violence. In terms of the pure nuts and bolts of broadcasting, the experiences of American, British and Indian broadcasters were remarkably similar. In all three cases, broadcasters reporting the violence were seen as adversaries by rioting mobs and there was a clear divide between the role of the national and local networks in both in Gujarat and the American South. In both cases, the reportage by the national TV reporters was remarkably similar as television came to occupy its place as a major political actor. However, the role of television in Gujarat proved to be much more contentious since unlike in American South where television faced only ‘hostile’ Governors, in Gujarat, the TV networks had to face a ‘hostile’ government at both the Centre and the State. Furthermore, the criticism of television by the BJP seems to come from the same school of thought that informed the criticism of television by the Conservative government in Britain during the 1981 disturbances – the charge of copycatting which the BJP was more direct in framing as ‘inflaming passions’. Gujarat stands out, because these arguments were taken much further by the BJP so much so that it managed to portray the media coverage of the violence as an attack on Gujarati ethnic pride, thus converting it into an emotive election issue. Furthermore, television coverage in Gujarat was much more controversial because of the nature of round-the-clock live coverage as opposed to the pre-recorded 15 minute news broadcasts on the American news networks. As the Editors Guild of India noted, observance of any code of broadcasting is clearly difficult for modern television, especially with regard to on-the-spot live coverage with little or no virtually no time for editing. Yet, we do know that the violence stretched into days and then weeks and then months, most national channels evolved internal codes and did hold back what they considered ‘inappropriate’ footage such as particularly lurid footage and the destruction of places of worship. Aaj Tak’s Executive Producer during the riots, Uday Shankar, Aaj Tak’s has pointed out that in covering events live, the news story is “built up incrementally” as it happens and gets pieced together, filled in, backgrounded and analysed as events unfolded.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Aakar Patel, Dileep Padgaonkar, B.G., Verghese, *Rights and Wrongs, Ordeal by Fire in the Killing Fields of Gujarat, Editors Guild Fact Finding Mission Report*, 3 May 2002, p. 27.

While the nature of the Gujarat violence and its media coverage will be continue to be debated for years, it is clear that television in India is now as an influential factor in the Indian polity and there are clear similarities in its growth with the path it has followed in America. The difference however, is that in India this process is happening at a furious pace and natural cycles of growth in the evolution of television in America have all been compressed in India to much smaller time periods. Moreover, the penetration of television is happening at the same time as the regional-language press is expanding at an exponential rate. While this brings in an unknown factor, the fact remains that the study of television in India, and its impact, can only be enhanced through comparative studies with more developed television markets elsewhere.

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