

Indian Media and the Formation of Climate Change Discourse: Strengths and Challenges

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Abstract

Climate Change has surfaced to be one of the most crucial global challenges which in turn demands public awareness and participation along with effective policymaking. Media can be located in this context as it plays a central role in disseminating the critical information about climate change issues which forms a strong base on how societies understand and react to these climate change concerns. This article studies the role of national media in India towards the climate change issues and how it becomes a vital tool in the formation of climate change discourse and how it shapes the public opinion. The article will highlight both the strengths and challenges to study the power of media in making the public aware and engage them in such environmental issues and the limited development of environmental journalism in India along with insufficient representation respectively. Future outlook will also be taken into consideration where the recommendations will be explored on how the Indian media could be strengthened to expand their role as a communicator, enhance climate literacy and assist informed societal engagement with which they can improve their practice in the domain of environment.

Keywords: Climate Change Discourse, Indian Media, Public Opinion, Climate Awareness, Citizens Behavior.

Introduction

Climate change is one of the greatest challenges facing the humanity in the 21st century. It is a chronic change in the weather arrangement which includes the regional and global climates of the Earth. Since the mid- 20th century, a lot of changes have been noticed in the Earth's climate that are said to be steered by human activities such as burning of fossil fuels which shoots up the levels of greenhouse gases in the Earth's atmosphere which ultimately increases the surface temperature of Earth. Scientists have done extensive studies on climate change and recorded some key factors of climate change like the increase in land and ocean temperatures, increase in sea levels, melting of glaciers and extreme variations in weather such as cyclones, droughts and floods¹.

Climate Change impacts the lives of people in ways that often go unnoticed which makes it very important for the public to know about climate science otherwise they won't be able to handle the dangerous effects brought by these extreme events². The public becomes aware about these environmental concerns through one of the most significant modes, i.e. the Media. A proper examination of the role of media shows how media could be seen as a strong vantage point from which the discourse of climate change is framed, even in the Indian society context, mostly the public becomes aware of such serious issues through the Indian media. The media is responsible for the perception of climate change and how citizens thus behave. In contemporary times, the digital and social media revolution has been engaged in the coverage of environmental issues.

There have been many studies on the media coverage in other countries like the US and Australia and limited studies on the role of media in covering climate change issues in a developing nation like India which ironically is a significant player

in the politics of climate change which makes it equally important to understand the role of national media in India because of the crucial stand it takes in the international negotiations due to the growth in its economy.

Over the years there has been a rise in the studies done in this field where climate change has caught more attention of the media since 2007 in general with a specific focus on the sub theme of ‘Impacts of Climate Change’³, but is the media coverage adequate? This article will critically examine both the strengths and limitations of the Indian media in the formation of climate change discourse, along with a discussion of a case study on Delhi’s air pollution and its media representation. It would also highlight the ways in which the media coverage could be improved and strengthened in terms of climate change issues.

Background

In today’s times, climate change is at rise and becoming a great issue for the entire humankind leading to the increasing demand of climate responsible behavior of the citizens. Government plans and policies should definitely emerge on climate action but the participation of society is also crucial. The government has initiated certain renewable energy programs and has also taken leadership stand in the global commitments which includes the climate agreements and the goals for sustainable development, which shows India’s dedication to address the environmental challenges at both national and global levels.

However, it is also vital to understand that there are other forces that drive the shape of climate change discourse and form how the people understand about these environmental issues which leads to the formation of the environmental policies, with one such major force being the media. Media plays a crucial role in raising awareness, framing the narratives and directing the public opinion on climate-related matters. Through news coverage on televisions, documentaries, editorials and social media platforms, the media can surface the urgent need of climate action, reveal policy loopholes and also hold the governments accountable for the mismanagement of environmental policies.

There are other forces beyond the media acting on the scene as well, such as the ruling political parties with the leadership that comes with it and technical capacity of India⁴ that impacts the climate narrative but, in this article, focus would be primarily on the role played by the media, examining its positive contributions which are the means for shaping the policy decisions in an indirect manner and also embracing societal engagement.

Role of Media in framing the discourse of climate change

Strengths: Indian society comprises different forms of media, such as the mainstream media and social media. The nature of media coverage has experienced some shifts in the last few years which could be seen as a shift from the point of ‘looking out’ where climate action is seen from the viewpoint of international developments to the point of ‘looking in’ where the local efforts are seen as means to understand the climate action in India⁵. Earlier, climate change was seen as a global challenge but this trend has gradually shifted where climate change is also seen from the perspective of local action.

Indian media acts like a link between the scientific findings and the public comprehension of the climate change issues. It makes a lot of positive contributions when it comes to the presentation of climate change issues, some of them are-

- Usually, the general public is not much aware about such issues but the crises reporting done by media during the times of floods or hurricanes brings this serious topic into consideration and in the forefront that catches the public

eye. Through documentaries, news narratives and interesting storytelling methods, media helps in making the difficult concept of climate science understandable with examples for the people. By doing so, it not only spreads the information but also actively educates the people about causes, impacts and solutions to the great challenge of climate change.

- The media is at a leading position to bring these environmental problems like climate change into national discussions which in turn become policies. It makes the government more accountable by questioning them on these matters.
- Media by continuously portraying and covering these issues, makes the citizens aware and motivates them to be involved in sustainable behavior which puts some kind of pressure on the governments.
- Nowadays, social media is a good platform for raising issues, and the same is evident in the framework of climate change where many influencers have engaged citizens by making a good use of these platforms, especially the youth, with climate change content and have been quite successful in promoting a culture of environmental responsibility. Some great initiatives such as The Times of India's campaign of 'Green Drive' further highlight how such media campaigns can truly inspire community action, illustrating that both old and modern forms of media can complementarily play roles in creating a proactive and informed society with the same motive of climate-consciousness.

Case Study- Delhi's Air Pollution and media coverage

Delhi being one of the metropolitan cities, has experienced a lot of growth rate in the last few years without appropriate infrastructure and resources to uphold the population. Delhi has registered significant PM 2.5 and AQI levels with air quality considered as 'poor' and 'very poor'⁶.

The media coverage has focused more on short term causes of air pollution such as vehicular pollution or on event reporting instead of highlighting long term structural causes with their solutions such as declining vegetation cover and mismanagement of the land use. Seasonable events such as burning of stubble remains in the front headlines that dominate and overshadow the contributors that are present throughout the year in deteriorating the air quality.

Transport is the most discussed aspect in the newspapers drawing its link to terms such as government and authority. The existing studies discuss the major reasons, solutions and influences of air pollution but what is limited is how media represents it⁷ and even if they do engage in the coverage which could be seen recently as media being more involved in reporting the Delhi's air pollution crises, the representation sometimes risks spreading misinformation which makes it difficult for the public to comprehend the chronic nature of Delhi's environmental deterioration.

This pattern can create strong images and beliefs in the mind of citizens that air pollution is a temporary challenge rather than a systemic problem demanding concrete policy intervention and enhanced engagement of the society.

Limitations: Indian media, as already discussed, has played a significant role in the coverage of climate change issues but there still are some challenges that need to be discussed to get a complete understanding, some of them are-

- Usually, the media highlights these issues only when a disaster occurs, the continuous long-term climate change problems that exist do not get a proper platform to be addressed.
- There is interference caused by some big corporate houses at times which leads to the media going forward with uneven coverage and lesser transparency.

- There is an urban-rural divide which could be noticed as the media disproportionately reports the events of urban cities more as compared to the reporting of events in the rural areas.
- The regional media that ranges across 80% of the population, faces challenges of technical comprehensibility which causes a lot of gaps between the states⁸.
- There are limited environmental journalists in India that have the expertise in understanding climate change and the scientific process behind it.

Way Forward

To move ahead, it is necessary to strengthen the ways in which climate change is understood and represented in the media, some of the recommendations which could be incorporated are-

- There is an urgent need to enhance environmental journalism in India through training programs which will improve the quality of coverage.
- The regional language media should be given more attention which will reach out to the poor and vulnerable communities and lead to the strengthening of local narratives.
- Digital platforms and independent climate journalists should be authorized to reach out to the marginalized groups whose real climate narratives often remain unseen in the national discussions
- Partnerships of media practitioners could be done with scientists and research institutions to get authentic results.
- If one's roots are not strong, moving ahead becomes valueless; this features the relevance of education in a person's life. In the context of climate change, climate literacy could be developed that can foster climate-friendly and sustainable behavior.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the discussion above highlights that climate change is not only an environmental issue but a multifaceted challenge that needs to be addressed properly. In the Indian context, there is an interplay of various forces such as the media representation, institutional priorities and the expectations of society, as this article has explained, the Indian media takes a pivotal stand in framing and influencing the understanding of climate change issues, not only in terms of citizens behavior but also in shaping the direction of the national discussions on the climate change problems.

While the media has been successful in making progress in widening the coverage, bringing in more narratives and incorporating the reporting of climate change in the mainstream reporting, its performance overall, has been uneven and somewhat restricted by political, social and economic challenges.

One of the eminent strengths of Indian media is in its realization of climate change as a broader development matter rather than an environmental one only. This trend has led to enhanced public engagement and has led to the understanding of climate change as a concrete phenomenon.

Moreover, social media platforms and community driven programs have refined the system of information, facilitating the awareness and acceptance of the coverage of diverse opinions. Nevertheless, these strengths coexist with considerable limitations. The media often prioritize event-based coverage and short-term issues, causing disproportionate reporting of climate change issues. Therefore, long-term matters are sidelined than the immediate crises. The inadequate training among the journalists limits the potential of the media to cover climate matters and form a well-framed public opinion.

Furthermore, the influence of corporate houses sometimes shapes how the climate narratives are formed, leading to selective attention to the events. For a country as diverse as India, such aspects can impact the principle of democratic participation in environmental management.

Moving ahead, strengthening of the framework of climate change discourse in Indian media requires some strategies that have already been discussed in the previous section. Conclusively, the formation of climate change discourse in Indian society does not only rely on the quantity of media representation or on the frequency of their coverage but also on the depth, quality, accuracy and the magnitude of the narratives being presented. Media can prioritize inclusive storytelling and scientific reporting which will be beneficial in bridging the gap between complexities of such issues and increasing public understanding.

By encompassing its role as a major communicator in a rapidly changing society, the Indian media can play a transformational role in promoting climate change awareness, shaping policy discussions and policy accountability, increasing the citizen participation and engagement, and creating a sustainable future for India.

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