

A Mediatised Half-decade

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Prime Minister Narendra Modi launched his “Main Bhi Chowkidar” campaign to kick-start his 2019 election campaign, which, while attracting criticism, was already trending on Twitter globally with over 1.4 lakh tweets on 17 March, with many of his followers calling themselves chowkidar to pledge support. This is a change from the earlier 2014 campaign line of “Ab ki Bar Modi Sarkar” signifying his humility and keenness to serve the nation again, which was already reflected in labelling himself “pradhan sevak.”

One of the features of social media platforms is the intensely personal nature of communication and the instant response they can provoke. This would be as good a time as any to read Pamela Philipose’s new book that takes us through the “mediatised half decade,” from 2011 to 2015, and her analysis of select events covered by the media in a world that has dramatically changed in the way it communicates and the forms of social media platforms available.

Agenda Setting

Other than the prescient analysis of the media and its diverse avatars during 2011–15, the most significant takeaway from Philipose’s new book is how the media, through its agenda setting, made corruption a major issue in India. This was an important precursor to the “media’s shifting terrain” that the author analyses in the course of six chapters. By exclusively focusing on corruption and wantonly ignoring other crucial issues that have an impact on the poor and lower middle class, the media in a way manufactured a new, all-encompassing grouse and it was an easy one to focus on. Almost anyone in India has had to deal with corruption in some form or the other and it struck a chord immediately with the middle class in the country. Political parties latched on to corruption campaigns and several important elections were won based on this single theme.

Media’s Shifting Terrain: Five Years That Transformed the Way India Communicates

by Pamela Philipose, *New Delhi: Orient BlackSwan, 2019; pp 302, ₹575.*

Social movements came up to demand the right to information (RTI) and organisations like the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan spearheaded campaigns that enabled people to fight for their rights and entitlements. However, Philipose points out,

It was the mediatised middle class which developed a more intimate feeling of being denied their due entitlements as citizens, consumers, voters and were quick to take ownership of anti-corruption activism, spurred by the perception (furthered by mainstream media editorialising) that corruption was an attempt to steal the assets of the tax paying public. (p 36)

It is not as if the media had not covered corruption before. The author looks back to post-independence scams, including one involving the government-run Life Insurance Corporation, the Nagarwala scandal, and the Antulay cement scam. The attention newspapers of the day paid to the issue was undeniably one of the reasons why the post-independent Indian state was under constant pressure to be seen to address the issue. The 2011 mobilisation against corruption drew on earlier campaigns built up by the media.

The making of corruption as a political cause through the India against Corruption (IAC) campaign of 2011 was undergirded by network communication and media convergence on a scale never before deployed in the country for a single focus crusade. It held significant sociopolitical consequences for the country, both at the juncture when it took place and in the years that followed (p 28).

These lines set the tone for the chapter, “Framing Corruption in Today’s Times,” which unpacks the reasons why the Indian media came to train its energies once again on this issue.

The book tries to explain the role of the media, which she calls an “empathetic sutradhar” in propelling Modi to the centre stage of national politics, and the impacts of mediatisation with its social and political consequences. Starting with a scrutiny of the Anna Hazare fast, the author goes on to dwell on the public protests against the gang-rape of Nirbhaya in 2012, the Delhi elections of 2013 and 2015, and the general elections of 2014. These five developments taken together constitute what the book terms as the “mediatised half decade.”

Each of these five developments featured in the book as a “mediatised” event. Modi’s emergence from a leader universally condemned for the Gujarat riots in 2002 to an acceptable public leader and, eventually, Prime Minister, would not have been possible without media framing. Similarly, the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) could not have captured Delhi electorally, not once but twice in succession, without deliberate communication strategies and micro-management of voter sentiments through media messaging. Similarly, the spontaneous public outrage over the Delhi rape case and the huge mobilisation in support of the assaulted woman would have been unthinkable without widespread media engagement.

Expanding Digital Media

To understand the phenomenon a little better, Philipose cites sociologist John B Thompson’s definition of mediatisation as a general process by which transmission of symbolic forms and public discourse “becomes increasingly mediated by the technical and institutional apparatus of the media industries” (p 19). The years 2011–15 saw heavy investment in the media as well as the expansion of global giants like Google, Facebook and Twitter, and private consolidation of media empires, according to her. “Path-breaking communication technologies and social media platforms” invaded new geographical spaces, and “new discourses seeped in communal rhetoric emerged.”

In India, according to Philipose, 2010 could be considered as the year that served as a springboard for the mediatised

half-decade. The rapid expansion of different kinds of media was reflected in the data thrown up in the 2011 Census, which showed how, while less than 47% households had toilets within the premises, 47.2% of them had television sets and 63.2% had telephones. Newspapers were also growing at this point but, as she says, the real transformations were taking place in mobile telephony and digital media. Media content, practices, and technologies were coalescing in innumerable ways.

India was now witnessing media convergence, which was bringing together older and newer media in various ways on a scale never hitherto imagined. The rapid spread of communication technology in a disparate, heterogeneous, unequal country like India over the first decade of the 21st century allowed it to join the ranks of the most mediatised societies in the world. It is the mobile telephone and the internet that acted as the enablers of this leap (p 15).

A range of corruption issues, including the 2G licence allocation scam and Commonwealth Games frauds, many of them exposed by the government's own audit mechanisms, segued into the IAC protests in 2011. The information built upon these cases stayed in the limelight for a long period thanks to sustained media coverage. The author quotes a study by the Centre for Media Studies which found that the time TV channels gave to news stories on corruption in 2010 had increased by over four times from 2005, with the focus on state, rather than the private sector, corruption. Most important was the finding that people's perception that corruption was rising more sharply than ever, drew more directly from the media's coverage rather than their own experience of it.

India against Corruption

The IAC protest drew on a widespread perception that corruption was denying people their rights and robbing taxpayers of their dues. Citing John Mason, Philipose says that this politics of anti-politics came out of a feeling among the urban middle class that those in power cannot resolve the crises and it was they themselves who could change

the system by coming together. The IAC protests reflected the public mood against corruption like few others had, feeding directly into the strategic plans of the opposition parties which used it to attack the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA). The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) notably grabbed the chance "presented by the anti-corruption mood in the country to present itself as the moral arbiter of the country's politics." Hazare's fast against corruption became a wake-up call to political parties but it also gave them a stick to beat the ruling alliance with and set the stage for a future victory based on promises of returning black money, ending corruption and the like.

The author finds that the social media's coverage of the IAC protests attracted mainstream media attention. "In that sense," she observes that "social media acted as a catalyst to achieve the impressive convergence of media presence that marked the IAC protests." For the mainstream media, engaging with the campaign was also a way to shore up their own image which had been battered after the Radia tapes episode (which exposed the media's affinity to business houses and their emergence as mediators in political appointments).

In 2011, Modi took to Twitter, the first among politicians to tweet on the IAC fast. He attacked the Congress and gave Hazare's fast an almost Gandhian stature by saying that the nation was concerned about his health. Industrialists too issued letters in favour of the mobilisation. Television anchors like Arnab Goswami on Times Now changed track to focus solely on Hazare's fast and it was the visual medium that came to provide it with a larger-than-life aura. According to one study cited in the book, from 3 to 11 April 2011 there were 655 hours of coverage and of the 5,657 news clips reviewed, only 65 had negative undertones. The coverage also netted ₹175.86 crore for the channels. However, "Anna fatigue" did set in soon, and when Hazare went on fast in the third phase of the protest held in Mumbai, it drew very thin crowds, with the Jan Lokpal Bill that was one of the demands, coming in for strong public criticism.

The coverage of the fast was a case of mainstream media following social media, and the person who realised the effectiveness of social media was Arvind Kejriwal, then a little known RTI activist. Innovative techniques like the dispatch of bulk messages to 1,00,000 at a time using International Business Machines Corporation (IBM) technology bumped up the presence and visibility of the protest. An exclusive Facebook page ("the mothership of the campaign") bringing together diverse protestors located in different parts of the country, Twitter hashtags, and even an app to take the fight against corruption to the next level, were among the pantheon of devices used.

Yet, as Philipose concludes, while the media can act as a force multiplier to build support for a campaign, it can just as easily contribute to its dissipation. While being able to expedite agenda setting on a national scale, they do not wish to disrupt power relations within society because they emerge from those very same structures of power themselves.

Coverage of Rape Case

In the case of the coverage of the Nirbhaya rape case, however, it was the media coverage and the spontaneous outrage on the streets that led to a government-appointed committee headed by Justice JS Verma. This also fed into subsequent election discourse, where violence against women became an important issue in the elections that followed, for the first time in the country's history, as Philipose notes. Incidents of rape, even brutal rape, did not usually figure so prominently in mainstream media, but this time it did. Television channels devoted 125 hours of prime time and information from traditional media was posted on social media leading to a "circularity of media content."

Analysing media messages, she finds that the crowds came in response to the push and pull of what they read and the desire to do something. The media played the role of a catalyst in these protests in a way. Some protestors felt the need for offline action, and online and offline protests coalesced with "media consumers becoming media producers and vice versa." Tweeting rose rapidly

during this period averaging 5,781 tweets per day and rising up to 15,421 on 23 December, the second day of the India Gate protests.

When Nirbhaya's death was announced, some 12,000 tweets came in within a few hours. Why did this case get so much attention? Philipose attributes it again to the middle-class appeal it held, given the victim's background and the urban location of the crime. The media generally tends to ignore crimes committed against women of poorer and lower-caste backgrounds. In this case, according to Philipose, the young woman's desire to change her life for the better resonated with many urbanites, and the extensive and emotional media coverage, often carrying intimate details, rendered her into someone everyone felt they knew closely.

The flip side of this was a trial by the media and the demands for the public execution of her rapists, including the juvenile offender. It was after this case that the law, lowering the age at which juvenile delinquents could be tried as adults from 18 to 16, came into force. The question that Philipose asks is very pertinent: Did the media coverage make "adequate use of the power of journalism to understand a brutal criminal act and interpret it for large and diverse audiences in a manner that meaningfully confronts endemic violence?" According to her, it did not. The media coverage also, in a way, gave rise to a coarseness in public response, with the demand for retribution emerging loud and clear. Many crass videos which attracted millions of viewers appeared at this time. The media also failed to call out the misogynist, communal and casteist ways in which violence against women manifested itself. There were many gaps in the media coverage, not the least of which was the presumption that only "deviants" commit rape. The coverage exploited the incident without any far-reaching consequences.

The Remaking of Modi

It is in the section on the 2014 elections that Philipose analyses how the digital media came to define Modi's communication strategy. Modi took a leaf out of

former United States President Barack Obama's election campaigns of 2008 and 2012, which used the entire range of communication technologies and social media to carve out victories. With a detailed analysis of each social media used and the media convergence achieved, Philipose traces how Modi successfully controlled the public perception about him. While the BJP has always used media extensively, the 2014 elections saw a "quantum leap" in the use of social media platforms.

While much of the information presented here is not all new, what emerges from her analysis is the Goebbelsian way the media was used by the BJP and Modi, to lend credibility to the Hindutva project. The Gujarat growth story and "Vibrant Gujarat" gained prominence at the expense of the Gujarat riots story, for instance. However, on a different note, in the case of the two AAP elections, the emphatic use of the social media to counter the hostility of the mainstream media helped Kejriwal reinvent himself as a leader in whom the people of Delhi could repose their trust.

The book contrasts the social media use and projections of each event and tries to briefly understand the reality behind them. The extent to which the various forms of media can influence and manipulate public minds is evident and by evoking the instant engagement and intimacy enabled by social media, political parties particularly can use it at will. One tends to forget that the "fourth

estate" has a responsibility to portray the truth and it has to be ethical while doing so. The multiple media platforms gave it the opportunity to either go with the tide and succumb to agenda setting, or stand back and analyse the sweep of events. Sadly not many chose the latter option as is evident in the coverage of the Nirbhaya rape case where the media passed up the chance it had for more nuanced debate. In the case of the Modi makeover, the media was a willing participant. Impressions and opinions dominated facts and fake news thrived.

But, for the few media which are doggedly exposing fake news, it would be hard to tell the truth of all the viral messages passing off as news. This book brings to light the high-tech con game across diverse media where reality is obfuscated in the flurry of constant sharing of information, often with a deliberate agenda, either by tweeting, Facebooking, or through WhatsApp, etc, which may not always be true or have any balance. "News" is a cover for views, propaganda and uncritical information which is lapped up. In the end, Philipose strikes a note of caution: We may be living in mediatised times, but sustainable social change requires real struggles on the ground, not just the use of technology. It must also not be allowed to work against the possibilities of achieving such an outcome.

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EPWRF India Time Series Expansion of Banking Statistics Module (State-wise Data)

The Economic and Political Weekly Research Foundation (EPWRF) has added state-wise data to the existing Banking Statistics module of its online India Time Series (ITS) database. State-wise and region-wise (north, north-east, east, central, west and south) time series data are provided for deposits, credit (sanction and utilisation), credit-deposit (CD) ratio, and number of bank offices and employees.

Data on bank credit are given for a wide range of sectors and sub-sectors (occupation) such as agriculture, industry, transport operators, professional services, personal loans (housing, vehicle, education, etc), trade and finance. These state-wise data are also presented by bank group and by population group (rural, semi-urban, urban and metropolitan).

The data series are available from December 1972; half-yearly basis till June 1989 and annual basis thereafter. These data have been sourced from the Reserve Bank of India's publication, *Basic Statistical Returns of Scheduled Commercial Banks in India*.

Including the Banking Statistics module, the EPWRF ITS has 18 modules covering a range of macroeconomic and financial data on the Indian economy. For more details, visit www.epwrfits.in or e-mail to: its@epwrf.in